

THE ANGEL CULLEN

My father has had a long career as an angel. Over the centuries, he often has been mistaken for a messenger from God when he's been unable to prevent a human from observing him do extraordinary things—usually to save lives. He was known as the Angel Sawbones during the American Civil War, when he was famous for being the fastest amputating surgeon ever seen in the battlefields. An angel, indeed, in a time when no anesthetics for surgery were available.

Even in the last ninety years since I have known him, Carlisle's been called an angel by those who worked with him during the Spanish flu epidemic in Chicago and the yellow fever outbreak in New Orleans, and even in modern-day hospitals where he continually performs surgical procedures thought to be beyond the capability of human hands. Perhaps the most dramatic of Carlisle's life-saving feats, though, occurred early in his vampire life when he became an angel of deliverance for a village in Great Britain.

My father was born in England at a time when one's choice of religion could mean the difference between life and death. Religious beliefs have always been a source of human antagonisms, of course, but the history of conflicts between adherents of one or another form of Christianity in Great Britain has been especially long and bloody.

During the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the kingdoms of England and Scotland each broke with the Roman Catholics to establish their own churches. While England formed an Anglo-Catholic church administered by bishops beholden to the English king, Scotland formed a Protestant Presbyterian church controlled by elected elders independent of their monarchy.

When Carlisle became a vampire in the early 1660s, Charles II, King of England and Scotland¹, outlawed Presbyterianism and tried to force

¹And Ireland, which doesn't figure into this particular story

the Scots to accept the religious hierarchy and liturgy of the Anglo-Catholic Church of England². It was a time of great persecution of the Scottish Protestants³ when the King sent soldiers northward to force their religious compliance.

During this period, Carlisle was wandering around Great Britain, struggling with the dramatic turn his life had taken. From the son of a religious man dedicated to destroying vampires (whom he regarded as Satan's creatures), Carlisle had been transformed into such a creature himself. Determined not to be evil, a slave to his new nature, my father left London and kept to the countryside for many years in order to avoid humans while he learned how to survive by drinking animal blood.

Though we've only known Carlisle as he is now, invulnerable to the lure of human blood, he was no different than any other newborn vampire. It took a great deal of agonizing effort to learn the self-control which has kept him from attacking a human when he is thirsty. After he was changed, he spent forty years avoiding human settlements to help himself resist the temptation.

In 1679 when Carlisle was sixteen years into his new life, he found himself roaming the northeastern coast of Scotland, drawn there by the beauty of the sea and the sparseness of the human population.

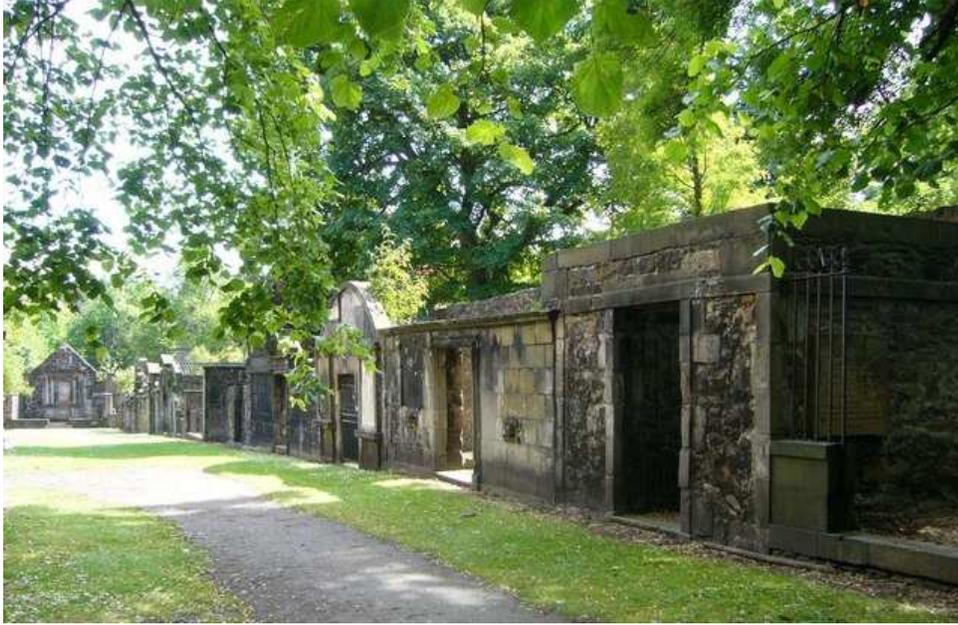
²Also known as the Anglican Church

³Known as "Covenanters," adherents to two 16th century covenants declaring Scotland to be a Protestant kingdom



Following the coastline, he became aware of a black haze of smoke in the distance and as he grew closer, saw that it rose from the smoldering remains of one large fire after another at the centers of which were decimated dwellings and animal shelters. Moving along, Carlisle saw the occasional haggard cluster of humans—mostly women, children, and the elderly—with a few possessions slung on their backs. Not wishing to be tempted by their blood, he remained at a distance, but as he came upon more and more of them, refugees from some human tragedy, and heard their muttered conversations, he began to piece together what was happening.

The King had issued a decree that the Presbyterians in Scotland must give up their practices of worship and adopt those of the Church of England. They must turn over their churches to the Anglicans and pledge their loyalty to the King. Charles II had sent mounted soldiers to enforce the decree and they were traveling from village to village and farm to farm, turning out all Presbyterian ministers and punishing dissenters. Scots who resisted were killed outright, their homes burned and their goods confiscated. Some were taken as prisoners to be tortured in Edinburgh before being hanged.



Covenanters' Prison, Edinburgh

Late in the evening, Carlisle observed a great fire in the village of Inverglas⁴, a place considered to be a hub of religious dissidence. As he approached, he saw desperate people running in every direction trying to escape mounted soldiers who chased them down and ran them through with swords, one by one. On the far side of the village, armed only with pitchforks, clubs, and the odd ax, local men and boys had formed a defensive line in front of the ancient stone church (formerly Catholic, now Presbyterian), putting up a fierce resistance against the horsemen's muskets and swords.

The people who could not fight had abandoned their homes and taken refuge in the church in the fervent hope that no one, not even the King's soldiers, would attack a house of God. After a bravely fought battle, the Scots defenders lay in bloody heaps in the village streets.

Carlisle remembers the scent of the massacre, a mixture of acrid smoke and the enticing smell of human blood. Through the burning torment of it, he racked his brain for some way to save the noncombatants huddling in the church, for he did not believe the

⁴Inbhar Glass in Gaelic, "the mouth of the river Glas"

soldiers would halt their aggression until the Presbyterian village was empty of souls. He knew he was right when the soldiers surrounded the church and began barricading the exits. Carlisle quickly realized that they intended to burn the church with the helpless citizens of Inverglas inside.

Through smashed windows, the soldiers thrust torches to set alight the church's flammable contents. As the wooden furnishings and cloth dressings burned, they would ignite the interior wall and roof beams, which would cause the structure to collapse on those who had not already burned to death.



As Carlisle watched, smoke began to pour out of the broken windows amidst the sounds of terrified screams and wails. Soldiers guarded all possible exits, running through or setting on fire anyone who tried to escape. My empathic father could not stand by and do nothing, though he himself was greatly endangered by fire.

Rather than attack the soldiers directly, for he would no more prefer to kill a soldier than a civilian, he raced unseen around the building

searching for any part of the structure that had been neglected by the guards, a jut-out or hidden area where he might break through a wall and lead the humans to safety. Unfortunately, no such place was to be found.

Retreating to a nearby copse of trees, Carlisle remembered that long before the persecution of these northern Presbyterians, King Henry VIII had decried Roman Catholicism, expelling and killing priests, and confiscating or destroying churches and abbeys. As a result of that oppression, many old (formerly Catholic) churches, including his father's church in London, had underground tunnels through which priests could escape if their church was attacked. Perhaps such tunnels existed in the north as well.

Carlisle dashed around in search of an escape hatch hidden amidst the trees, but found nothing. He suspected that any old tunnels which might have existed a hundred years before had not been maintained or had even been destroyed after they were no longer needed. Perhaps modern parishioners didn't even know about them.

As he hurriedly scoured the area, Carlisle noticed a strange vibration in the ground beneath his feet. He stilled and detected the muffled sound of human voices and the scent of human blood, both subtle, but nevertheless present. He knew immediately what it meant—the trapped humans had found a tunnel where escaping priests would have shed their religious garments and then emerged hidden amongst the trees.

Carlisle tracked the underground sounds and scent to their most perceptible location. Why was no one emerging? They would suffocate if they remained underground. He searched again for an exit in the area, but found nothing. It was likely that time had destroyed it or filled the tunnel with debris.

Carlisle became aware that the underground noise was becoming louder and more urgent. Muffled screams and the cries of children could be heard. With no other option, he simply began to dig a short

ways beyond the frantic voices. His swift and powerful hands scooped and tossed duff and dirt, tore and yanked roots, and broke and scattered rock until he saw a wisp of smoke rise from the hole. There was no time to waste. Redoubling his efforts, he soon uncovered a horizontal wooden beam and saw a cavity beneath it. It was part of the roof structure of the tunnel—flat beams laid across stone supports. He tore off the first plank and then another and another and before long, unearthed a low corridor leading in the direction of the church. He jumped to its floor and raced forward until he found the blockage, a compacted pile of stones, dirt, and rotted wood.

At vampire speed, Carlisle began clearing dirt and debris from the tunnel, creating a hole large enough to crawl through, without breaking all the way through. Knowing fire, he realized that supplying oxygen at this end of the tunnel likely would pull the fire through it. He would have only a short time to get the humans out before they were burned alive. He began to speak to the people on the other side of the barrier, who he soon realized could hear his voice, yet not decipher his words.

Knowing he was there, no one panicked when he finally thrust his pale, cold hand through the last bit of dirt into the larger cavity. A shout of joy went up and chased backwards through the tunnel. Looking into the opening, Carlisle saw three old men who'd been trying heroically to clear the blockage with their inadequate human fingers.

"This way to safety," Carlisle called softly, quickly widening the opening.

"Mothers with children first," one of the men called as people began shuffling forward to crawl through the hole... mothers pushing their babies into Carlisle's waiting arms before crawling after them, old women assisting disabled husbands, children urging each other on. One after another reached for, and were lifted to, freedom until the three elder rescuers were the only people left. Carlisle helped them through and urged them to lead the others to safety while he ran back into the tunnel in search of survivors.

He found a few... mothers whose children had succumbed to the smoke and wouldn't leave them, others who were injured or unconscious. He scooped them into his arms and raced to the end of the tunnel where one of the men had remained to pull them through. Carlisle ran back again and again until none but the dead remained.

Exiting the tunnel, Carlisle quickly filled in the hole with wood, rocks, and dirt to hide the exit point as best he could. Then he helped carry the remaining injured to a hidden refuge in the trees. He breathed life into some, but others could not be saved.

As dawn approached, he knew that he must leave the people to fend for themselves. He had pushed himself to the limits of his tolerance and began to be afraid he would lose control of his thirst and drink. He also could not risk being seen in the rising daylight, even though his otherworldly capabilities already had been noted by the rescued. Some whispered "saving angel" and were giving thanks to God, but others whispered "demon" or "witch" and were conspiring to attack him. He did not try to explain himself. As he turned to leave, one of the heroic old men held out his hand and asked his name and Carlisle responded truthfully—Cullen.

The King's soldiers had departed after the town lay in ashes and the screaming from inside the church had ceased. They didn't have to examine the gutted stone structure to know that their job was done. They moved east to their next destination, having accomplished their deadly mission in Inverglas.

Out of curiosity, Carlisle returned to the village twenty years later and discovered that people who had survived the massacre, especially as children, had told lingering tales of a pale white angel sent from Heaven to rescue them. He discovered a shrine had been built in the churchyard to the Aingeal Culaíne, Gaelic for "Angel Cullen."

Within a few decades, the village of Inverglas was rebuilt, though the homes were moved to higher ground to reduce flooding problems. The old stone church was reconstructed and then expanded as the

Presbyterian community grew, the Scots having outlasted the English authorities in their long, bitter battle to worship as they chose. Colloquially, the old church became known as Aíngeal Culáine Kírk⁵ after the shrine where people often came to pray. Over time, the town adopted the name of the famous church, dropping the Aíngeal prefix. Memories of the heroic Scots of Cullen and their “Heaven-sent” angel remain.

On maps today, you can find the town of Cullen in northeast Scotland and if you visit—which I intend to do one day—you can see the Cullen Auld Kírk and the shrine to the Angel Cullen where visitors light candles and whisper prayers for God’s deliverance and mercy. If you wander among the ancient gravestones in the churchyard, I’ve been told that you can find one or two dated 1679 and engraved with the words An Teíne Mor” (A Great Fire).

Edward

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⁵Angel Cullen Church