



Unmarried with Child

Getting pregnant before marriage was not uncommon in rural Scotland in the 1800s. In fact, it often was deliberate.

John Wasson and Jemima Russell were married December 17, 1841 in Riccarton Parish, Ayrshire Scotland. The following spring, they emigrated to the United States, John for the second time, Jemima for the first.

While they were on the Atlantic, Jemima gave birth to the first of their eight children, John C. Wasson, on May 16, 1842. He was baptized on June 19 after they reach the Grosse Île Quarantine Station in Québec. From there, it was onto New York where their story continues.

Except for a bit of arithmetic. May 16, 1842 is one day shy of five months after John and Jemima got married. And yet, it generally takes about nine months from conception for a child to be born. It is possible, of course, that John, Jr. was born seriously prematurely, but that was highly unlikely given the limited medical services available at sea in those days.

But then, John was actually the third one of his siblings to have a child born well short of nine months after getting married – his sisters Helen and Janet beat him to it. As did Jemima's brother Samuel. I actually found this a lot among our Scottish aunts, uncles and cousins in the 1800s. This seemed to be at odds with the central role that the church continued to play in Scottish communities at that time.

Anthony Adolf's [The Problem with Illegitimacy in Scotland Magazine](#) (2021) looked into this. Adolf reported that a study of Scottish parish registries showed that in the mid-1800s, no fewer than 10% of births were out of wedlock. But he also reported that in the countryside, having an illegitimate child was sometimes deliberate.

“Hinds”, or farm laborers, were often hired on the basis that their children would work alongside them on the land – basically, when you hired a man, you hired his family. Marrying a woman who was not able to bear children hurt a man's employment prospects. Keep in mind that child

labor was rather routine back in those days, so a newborn was often suitable for some kind of work within a few years after being born.

Thus, having a child together often was a condition to be met before a couple would get married. It provided obvious evidence that the parents were capable of having children. This was also so acceptable that the names of both parents were typically found as the child's parents in the church registries, usually with the child taking the father's name, typical for children born in wedlock.

The church still frowned on sex outside of marriage, especially when it resulted in an illegitimate birth. Fornication was generally the most frequent type of case that kirk sessions had to deal with through the church's courts.

There were children conceived and born out of wedlock for other reasons, such as the consequence of a one-night stand or rape, where either the mother did not know the name of the father or chose to not disclose it. In the cases of John, Jemima and their siblings, the fathers of the children were the same men who married their mothers, suggesting that these pregnancies were deliberate.

Key word: "suggesting". After all, knowing that Scottish couples often deliberately conceived a child before getting married doesn't guarantee that our line of the family tree wasn't the result of a happy accident.

Produced by Mark David Wasson
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