

HeRD #23 - Kawilorot's Threat

In September 1869, Chao Kawilorot, the Prince of C'Mai, moved forcefully to nip the Christian movement in the bud. Two Christians died at the hands of his agents, and the rest of the small Christian community fled his anger. C'Mai in those days was a semi-autonomous client state of Siam, and Chao Kawilorot wielded the powers of life and death within its boundaries. For some time after that the two missionary families in C'Mai, the McGilvays and Wilsons, feared for their own lives. In the meantime, the King of Siam sent a special representative up to C'Mai to investigate the situation. That representative met with Chao Kawilorot and the missionaries on the morning of 28 December 1869. In the course of the interview, McGilvary challenged the Prince with the murder of two Christians for no reason other than their religion. Chao Kawilorot had previously denied that religion had anything to do with the executions, but he was so upset with McGilvary that in a fit of rage he shouted, "Siam is one government. Chiang Mai is another. The King at Bangkok may permit his subjects to become Christians. I will kill every one of mine who forsakes Buddhism for the religion of Jesus. Those who embrace Christianity are rebels against me & will be treated as such. If the missionaries teach their religion & continue to make Christians I will banish them from the country." He then stormed from the audience hall. He soon left on a trip for Bangkok. He became seriously ill while in Bangkok and died on the last leg of his return trip.

The moment of Chao Kawilorot's rage is a moment etched in the history of northern Thai Christianity. Two missionaries who had traveled north with the King's representative were appalled at McGilvary's temerity. The representative himself felt compelled to urge the mission families to leave. Chao Kawilorot soon calmed down, but he had a fixed determination to squash the up-start Christian movement before it could threaten his own power. That power was based on religious pillars, and he felt Christianity undermined those pillars. The source of McGilvary's courage? He was absolutely convinced that God intended the Christianization of northern Siam. Chao Kawilorot and all his actions were within divine providence, a providence that McGilvary trusted with full faith. For McGilvary the issue was not courage but faithfulness.