

Among The Western Isles

Saint Columba of Iona : a study of his life, his times, & his influence

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Behold Iona !
A blessing on each eye that see-eth it.

IN the month of May, in the year 563, Columba and his twelve disciples sailed away from Ireland “ In the forty-second year of his age,” writes Adamnan, “ Columba, resolving to seek a foreign country for the love of Christ, sailed from Scotia to Britain, where he lived for thirty-four years, an island soldier.” His twelve disciples were all blood relations, most of them indeed had followed Columba for many years in his wanderings over Ireland. One of the number, young Mochonna, was the son of an Irish King, and Columba spoke earnestly with him of his duty to his father and mother and his native land. But Mochonna was determined to follow his Master “ It is thou who art my father !” he replied hotly, “ the Church is my mother, and my country is where I can gather the largest harvest for Christ. I swear to follow thee wheresoever thou goest, until thou hast led me to Christ, to whom thou hast consecrated me.”

Of the other eleven disciples, Baithene, who succeeded Columba as Abbot of Iona, was his cousin and foster-son : Cobthach was Baithene’s brother : Ernan was Columba’s uncle and became superior of the monastery on Hinba island of which we shall hear again : Diarmid was Columba’s “ minister” or attendant, he was constantly with his Master and supported him in his old age even to the end. The names of the other disciples of whom we know nothing individually, were Rus and Fechno, Scandal, Echoid, Tochannu, Cairnaan and Grilaan. Columba, like most of the saints, took twelve disciples because he liked in all things to follow the Gospel tradition.

It was on the 12th of May, 563, the eve of Whitsunday, that Columba landed at Iona. Tradition claims that soon after coming there he burned a heap of Druidical books he had found, but we hear of no contests with Druids on Iona, such as we will meet with further north. O’Donnell tells us that Columba and his monks were met by two Bishops who were in the island “ and came to lead Columba by the hand out of it. But God revealed to Colum Cille that they were not true Bishops, whereupon they left the island to him when he told them of their history and their true adventures.” These Bishops may have been Druid dignitaries, or they may have been the remaining two of the seven Bishops we read of before, and the story has been considered an additional argument in favour of the view that Christianity had come to Iona before Columba. Hints of this are not wanting ; one of the old Irish *Lives* of St Brigid relates how as she lay dying, she received the last offices of the Church from an Irishman who was a priest in Mull, Ninidh by name. And we know that two Irish bishops, Brendan and Comgall, fellow-students of Columba’s, had been in Scotland before him : they had founded churches on islands near Iona, but they were isolated churches, not centres of Christian activity as Columba’s foundation was to be. Iona had undoubtedly a reputation as a seat of Christian effort before Columba came there : it was already set apart as holy ground, for the burial of the chiefs and had the character of a religious settlement.

The island was known in Gaelic as Hi, Y or I, pronounced as E in English. Adamnan refers to it as Ioua, because he makes the name an adjective to agree with *insula*, *Ioua insula*. Now the early scribes made little difference between the letters *u* and *n* and so by a slip of the pen the island came to be known as Iona. That at least is one of the explanations of its name, but there are many more. Adamnan regarded the name Columba as being the same as Jonah, “ what in Hebrew is Iona, in the Greek language is called Peristera and in the Latin Columba.” Iona may also be the Gaelic for the Isle of Saints, *I-Shona*, as the *sh* is not sounded and the word is pronounced I-ona. There is a tradition that the island used to be called *Innis-nan-Druidneach* or Isle of the Druids, also, with the omission of one letter, *Innis-nan-Druineach*, Isle of the Sculptors, which would refer to the skilful stone carvers who have left so many beautiful examples of their art on the island, but who were of a much later date than Columba, probably not before the tenth century. After Columba settled at Iona it was generally called *I-Colum-Cille* or *Icolmkill*, the Island-of-Columba-of-the-Church, and Gaelic-speaking people still call it by that name. An other traditional name was the Isle of Dreams, but by whatever name it was known, Iona was always associated with the things of the spirit.

Iona is a small island, 3½ miles long by 1½ broad, although it is so varied and the pilgrimages on it so circuitous by reason of its hills and marshes and the deep indentations of its shores, that it is difficult to realize its comparative smallness. Lying out in the Atlantic among the Hebrides, islands surround it to North and South, while to the West nothing but the vast waters of the ocean lie between Iona and America more than 2000 miles away. On the East, Iona is separated by a narrow but often impassable Sound from Mull, a large island of wild mountains, romantic glens and great sea lochs.

When the traveller ascends Dun-I (400 feet) on a clear day, the whole of the Inner Hebrides lie spread before him. Looking south across the Sound, the treacherous Torren Rocks the *Merry Men* of R. L. Stevenson lead away to Colonsay with the three great Paps of Jura beyond, towering above the low shores of Islay. To the East, over the red granite rocks of the Ross of Mull, the terraced Bourg leads up to the mass of Ben More (3170) the highest peak in Mull. Further north Staffa, famous for its basalt columns and for Fingal’s cave, lies in the foreground about 8 miles from Iona ; beyond it Rum and the rocky Sgurr of Eigg rise above Canna, north again the dim blue of the Coolin Hills of Skye is seen on the horizon. To the north-west the long islands of Coll and Tiree—the *Ethica Insula* of Columba—lie low in the sea with the Dutchman’s Cap and the other uninhabited islands of the Treshnish group nearer at hand. The beauty of that view has to be seen to be realized, for it is difficult to explain the fascination of Iona the quiet beauty of the place, its feeling of apartness from the world, in the world but not of it, set like a jewel in the waters of the Atlantic. Goodness and beauty seem everywhere to abound : in and through them an in describable atmosphere of holiness and peace lifts the mind from mundane thoughts and floods it with light and freedom.

So fresh and green is the Iona of to-day that it is difficult to realize the island dates from the creation of the earth, before life was known on our planet. Iona is older than any of the islands which surround her—“ When our planet from a glowing mass of combustion like the sun, shrivelled into a globe with a solid crust and the first oceans condensed in the hollows of its hot surface—then it was that the Archæan rocks, of which Iona and the Outer Hebrides consist, were formed on the sea bottom. They contain no fossils, for so far as is known, no living creature as yet existed in the desolate waste of waters or on the primeval land. They are hard, rugged, and twisted, and in Iona as elsewhere marble has been developed by the vast heat and pressure they have undergone.” The surrounding islands were formed many ages

later than Iona. It was in the Tertiary epoch that the “ granite of Mull and the basalt of Staffa and the Dutchman s Cap and the Treshnish Islands burst in molten eruption out of the earth. The basalt islands are all that is left above water of an enormous plain of hardened lava, the rest of which has been broken up and engulfed by the devouring sea.”

Ocean Blessing

*Sain us and shield us and sanctify us,
Be thou, King of the elements, seated at our helm
And lead us in peace to the end of our journey.*

*With winds mild, kindly, benign, pleasant,
Without swirl, without whirl, without eddy,
That would do no harmful deed to us.
We ask all things of Thee, God,
According to Thine own will and word.*

Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica, I., 333.

To anyone who has sailed the Hebridean seas in a small boat, the fascination of Columba’s method of travelling lends additional romance to his life. To sail from Iona, as Columba must often have done, out to Staffa, or Gometra, or Tiree, or even to his Isle of Saints : to conquer winds and tides, to harness the elements to carry him “ against the wind,” to sail close-hauled into a stiff breeze, or to race over the waters before a following wind all these would be as the salt of life to the hardy Gael. No one who has not sailed a boat and felt it pull and quiver at the helm, can quite appreciate the romance of Columba’s life as Apostle of the Western Isles.

The old Hebridean manner of blessing the ship is probably an heirloom from the days when Columba and his monks sailed these seas. After the ship had put to sea and the “ sail-yards” had been raised in the form of a cross and the sails spread upon them, the following Litany was chanted by Steersman and crew :

Steersman. Let us bless our ship !
Crew. God the Father bless her.
Steersman. Let us bless our ship !
Crew. Jesus Christ bless her.
Steersman. Let us bless our ship !
Crew. The Holy Ghost bless her. Etc.

Though that Litany was heard by Martin when he visited the Hebrides about 1695, it seems now unfortunately to have died out.

When Columba sailed away with his monks to visit some distant island, he did not sit idle in the boat as the Abbot might conceivably have done, On still days when no breath of wind rippled the water and the boat lay becalmed, the monks toiling at rowing, Columba took his turn at the oars, and on stormy days he helped with the working of the boat as manfully as the rest of the crew. Though the monks were themselves daring mariners, they also had “ sailors,” men of the island probably, who knew the rocks and currents of that dangerous coast. Columba himself was a skilful sailor as we see from the legends of how he foretold favourable winds for the voyages of his friends. Though this seems miraculous to the landsman, to the sailor it speaks only of a life lived beside the sea, when sky and wind and weather are the objects of daily and hourly study, and when he who has studied them can forecast the weather with a precision little short of miraculous.

There are innumerable stories of escape from death by wind and wave as well as by the vortices of the whirlpool which threatened the monks on their frequent voyages between Ireland and Scotland. Columba saw symbolized in this whirlpool the torments of Purgatory suffered by Breacan, grandson of Niall of the Nine Hostages, a cousin of his own who had perished there and given the place its name. And so while he prayed that his monks might escape the dangers of Corryvreckan, he prayed also that the soul of his cousin might be released from its whirling torments.

One day while Columba was praying in the church at Iona, he cried out with a smile, “ Columbanus has just now set out on a voyage to us and is in great danger in the rolling tides of Breacan’s whirlpool : he is sitting at the prow and raising both his hands to Heaven : he is also blessing that angry and dreadful sea : yet in this the Lord only frightens him, for the ship in which he is shall not be wrecked in the storm : but this is rather to excite him to pray more fervently, that by God’s favour he may escape the danger of his voyage and reach us in safety.” (1., v.) This story throws a curious light on Columba’s conception of God, that He deliberately frightened a man—even a holy bishop—in order to make him turn the more eagerly to God and throw himself on the divine mercy. Columba’s mind had evidently not yet shaken itself free from the ancient beliefs about pagan gods, who were supposed to take a malicious delight in tormenting their followers.

Columba’s monks followed a practice common among their Irish brethren, of setting out to find a desert in the ocean, some barren rock where nothing could disturb their meditations. That was not perhaps a brave way of facing life, but it was a feature of the early religious customs of every country and it found a place also in the life of the family of Iona. The monks sailed the seas incessantly in search of this *desert*, whence they never meant to return. And in these early days before scientists or explorers had plumbed the depths of the ocean or charted its unknown seas, the monks who set sail from Iona, laying their course out over the boundless sea where, so far as they knew, no land existed, must have faced terrors of imagination, of unknown monsters who might at any moment rise out of the deep and devour them. About 580 Columba’s friend, Cormac-of-the-Sea, afterwards Bishop of Durrow, had a dreadful experience. It was probably after visiting the Orkney and Shetland Islands which he evangelized, that he sailed away from land for fourteen summer days and nights, till his voyage seemed to go beyond the limit of human experience, and return seemed impossible. Then awful terrors arose on every side, “ for certain loathsome and dangerous creatures. . . came into sight, covering the sea, and with a terrible rush they smote the keel and sides, the stern and prow, so heavily that it seemed as though they would break through the leather sheathing of the boat. These creatures were about the size of frogs, with very terrible stings, and more like swimming than flying creatures, and they swarmed over the blades of the oars.” [1] It was in this strait that Columba, in his cell at Iona, became aware that Cormac was in danger and summoned the monks to the church to pray for him. When they were assembled he addressed them, “ ‘ Brethren’ said he, ‘ pray with all your usual fervour for Cormac, who by sailing too far hath passed the bounds of human enterprise and is exposed at this moment to dreadful alarm and fright. . . . Let us assist by our prayers that God may take compassion on us and cause the wind, which for the past fourteen days has blown from the south, to blow from the north, and this north wind will deliver Cormac’s vessel out of all danger.’ Having said this he knelt before the altar, and in a plaintive voice poured forth his prayers to the Almighty power of God who governeth the winds and all things. After having prayed he rose quickly, and wiping away his tears, joyfully gave thanks to God, saying, ‘ Now, brethren, let us congratulate our dear friends . . . for God will now change the south into a north wind which will free our associates from their perils and bring them to us here again.’ As he spoke, the south wind ceased and a north wind blew for many days after, so that Cormac’s ship was enabled to gain the land. And Cormac hastened to visit Columba, and in

God's bounty they looked upon each other face to face, to the extreme joy and wonder of all." (II., xliii.) There is a long Dialogue in Old Irish which is supposed to have passed between Columba and Cormac at their meeting.

Colum first spoke.

Thou art welcome, O comely Cormac,
From over the all-teeming sea :
What sent thee forth : where hast thou been,
Since the time we were on the same path ?
Two years and a month to this night
Is the time thou hast been wandering from port to port,
From wave to wave : resolute the energy,
To traverse the wide ocean !
Since the sea hath sent thee hither,
Thou shalt have friendship and counsel :
Were it not for Christ's sake, Lord of the fair world,
Thou hast merited satire and reproach !

Cormac. Let there be no reproach now,
O descendant of Niall, for we are a noble race :
The sun shines in the west as in the east :
A righteous guest is entitled to reception.

Columcille. Thou art welcome, since thou hast come
From the waves of the mighty sea . . .
Though thou travel the world over,
East, west, south, ebb, flood,
Thou noble son of high-born Dima,
It is in Durrow thy resurrection shall be ...

Cormac. O Columcille of a hundred graces,
For thou art a prophet, thou art a true poet,
Thou art learned, a scribe, happy, perfect,
And a devout, accomplished priest :
Thou art a king's son of reddened valour,
Thou art a virgin, thou art a pilgrim,
We shall abide in the West if thou desire it :
Christ will unfold his mysterious intentions. [2]

But though Cormac returned " from the waves of the mighty sea," many of the intrepid mariners who sailed away never came back. In the seventh century the wreck of a boat and monks belonging to the family of Hi is chronicled, and in the eighth, " the drowning of the family of Io." The monks never found the *disert* of their dreams, though they scoured the seas right round the north of Scotland. The Orkney Islands knew them and the Shetlands. Iceland itself was visited by these brave men who even sailed north till they came to the frozen sea. Celtic remains have been found on the Faroe Islands ; on St Kilda there are ruins of early religious buildings and a church dedicated to Columba, whose feast-day is still kept by the inhabitants.

It was not only from winds and whirlpools that Columba had to protect his monks : the seas round Iona were visited occasionally by whales and sharks, and the monks believed that nothing but faith and the prayers of their Abbot could save them from these monsters. There

is a story that when Berach, one of the brothers, was about to set off one day for Tiree, which lies twenty miles north-west of Iona, Columba said to him, “ O my son, take very great care this day not to attempt sailing direct over the open sea to Tiree, but rather take a circuit and sail round by the smaller islands, for this reason, that thou be not thrown into great terror by a huge monster and hardly be able to escape.” But Berach was young or heedless. At any rate, going down to the shore he jumped into his boat and hoisted his sail, forgetting or ignoring Columba’s warning. When he was well out on the open sea, “ a whale of huge and amazing size raised itself like a mountain, and as it floated on the surface it opened its mouth which, as it gaped, was bristling with teeth. Then the rowers, hauling in their sail, pulled back in the utmost terror and had a very narrow escape from the agitation of the waves caused by the motion of the monster.” (I., xiii.)

On another occasion Baithene was sailing over to Tiree, and on going to Columba for his farewell blessing, the Saint told him about a whale which had been seen in the neighbourhood. But Baithene was not alarmed. “ The beast and I,” he replied, “ are under the power of God.” “ Go in peace then,” Columba concluded, “ thy faith in Christ shall defend thee from this danger.” And so Baithene set sail, and after they were well over on their way to Tiree, he and his brother monks saw the whale. The others were “ much terrified,” but Baithene was without fear. Standing up in the prow of the boat he raised his hands and blessed the sea and the whale.

A final story of aquatic monsters shows what absolute faith Columba’s monks had in him. He was crossing the River Ness on one of his journeys, when he saw the natives burying the body of a man who had been seized and bitten by a “ shark” in the river (it may have been an otter or a whiskered seal : the people probably thought it one of the water-kelpies they dreaded so much). Columba wanted to cross the river, but the boat lay on the other side. He commanded one of his monks to swim over and fetch it, and the man at once jumped into the river and began swimming across. “ But the monster, far from being satiated, was only roused for more prey, and was lying at the bottom of the stream. When it felt the water disturbed above by the man swimming, it suddenly rushed out, and giving an awful roar, darted after him with its mouth wide open. . . . Then the blessed man observing this, raised his holy hand, while all the rest were stupified with terror, and invoking the name of God he formed the saving sign of the Cross in the air and commanded the ferocious monster saying, ‘ Thou shalt go no further, nor touch the man ! Go back with all speed ! ’ ” At the voice of the Saint, the shark was terrified, and rushed down the river, although it had been so near the swimmer that “ there was not more than the length of a spear-staff between the man and the beast. Even the barbarous heathens who were present,” writes Adamnan, “ were forced by the greatness of this miracle . . . to magnify the God of the Christians.”

This is Adamnan’s constant refrain after relating the miracles of Columba. And it is an important point, for it was as much by these miracles that he converted the people, as by his preaching, probably even more. It is strange that Adamnan gives us no example at all of Columba’s preaching : all the utterances of Columba’s that we have, are spoken on some such occasion as this, when in a practical way he has shown forth the greatness of God. That appealed to the people of those days far more than any preaching could have done, for they saw what Columba’s God could do for those who believed in Him.

Of the islands which lay near Iona, Columba had most to do with Tiree, known in his time as *Ethica Terra*, or the *Low-Lying Land of Barley*, a long low island about twenty miles north-west of Iona. The light of Christianity had shone on Tiree even before Columba’s day : a monastery had been founded there by Comgall of Bangor, who after being repeatedly

assailed by Pictish enemies, left the island in despair. And Brendan of Clonfert, the Sailor Monk, had laid out a church and village on Tiree, but his foundation, too, had vanished.

Tiree is about eleven miles long and from one to three broad. As its ancient name, *The Land of Barley* implied, it was a fertile island from which the monastery of Iona drew much of its grain and other food. An old Gaelic saying bears witness to its fertility :

Tiree would give the two crops
Were it not for fear of the two rents.

When Columba founded his first monastery there, a penitential establishment called *Campus Lunge*, Baithene was sent to take charge of it. (The modern name, *Soroby* is of Scandinavian origin.) We hear of Columba sending penitents to Tiree to work out their sentence ; as, for instance, in the case of a certain man who had fallen into a great crime, and had arrived at Iona with tears of repentance : after making open confession of his sins, he was comforted by Columba and sent over to Baithene in Tiree with the assurance that his sincere repentance was accepted by Christ. Columba could be very gentle to sinners who really repented : on this occasion he shed tears over the penitent and encouraged him : “ Arise, my son,” he said, “ be comforted ! The sins thou hast committed are forgiven thee because it is written, a humble and a contrite heart God doth not despise.’ ” (L, xxiv.)

There is mention of Tiree in an account of a thunder storm Columba watched from Iona and saw pass over to *Ethica*. It is in accordance with the times in which he lived that he regarded the black, menacing thunderclouds and the flashes of lightning as “ a very black host of demons righting against him with iron darts. These wicked demons wished ... to attack his monastery and kill with the same spears many of the brethren. But he, single-handed against innumerable foes fought with the utmost bravery, having received the armour of the Apostle Paul. ...” When the Saint was returning to his monastery weary with his labours in driving the devils from his island, he spoke to his companion about these hostile legions. “ Those deadly foes,” he said, “ who this day have been put to flight from this small tract of land, have fled to Tiree, and there as savage invaders they will attack the monasteries of the brethren and cause pestilential diseases of which many will be grievously ill and die.” Two days later he announced, “ Baithene hath managed wisely with God s help : that the congregation over which he hath been appointed by God to preside in the plain of Lunge, should be defended by fasts and prayers against the attacks of the demons, and but one person shall die on this occasion.”

This story is a good example of how pagan superstition still dominated the mind of Columba : he could not get away from the beliefs held for centuries by his ancestors, that storms and tempests were manifestations of the Evil One, but he attributed his deliverance and that of Baithene and his monks, to the hand of God, whose aid they had implored both by prayer and fasting. These early saints lived near to God : every good they ascribed to Him, no situation in which they found themselves was thought hopeless when they could ask Him to deliver them. Believing in the efficacy of prayer, they prayed in no half-hearted fashion ; finding themselves in difficulty, they instinctively asked the help of the Almighty, not omitting at the same time to help themselves.

Another island which Columba often visited was Hinba or Eilean-na-Naoimh, the Isle of Saints. Hinba is now identified with Elachnave, the most southerly of the Garvelloch Islands which lie in the Firth of Lome, off Argyllshire. Elachnave is about a mile in length and has remains of a very early monastic settlement which may have been founded even before Columba’s time, perhaps by the famous Brendan, who had sailed these seas before Columba

came to Iona and had founded a church on Cul Brandon, another island of the Garvelloch group.

Columba used Hinba as a refuge for those who wished to live a more retired life than that offered by the larger settlement of Iona, and his uncle, Ernan, was Abbot of Hinba for a short time. There were no inhabitants on the rocky islet except the inmates of the monastery, and owing to its remoteness and inaccessibility, the drystone buildings there are in a better state of preservation than those of more frequented places. It is possible that one of the beehive cells still to be seen entire, may be the actual hermitage occupied by Columba : it is at any rate one of the earliest known examples of that style of building. The spring on the island is called Columcille's Well, and a great pile of stones is said to be the tomb of Eithne, Columba's mother. He loved the solitude of Elachnave and often went there when his mind was harassed and wearied, and he had problems to think out. The absolute quiet of his lonely island refreshed him ; the voyage itself was invigorating, all the more if the elements were in turbulent mood and the sail a trial of skill against them. The voyage to Elachnave can still be made from Iona in an open boat as Columba made it, when conditions are favourable, but it is a long sail and often an adventurous one. It was while staying at Elachnave that Columba had the dream commanding him to crown Aidan king of the Scots, and it was to Elachnave—called for that reason the Isle of Saints—that his four friends, Comgall, Cainnech, Brendan, and Cormac came from Ireland to seek him.

Columba was twice in the island of Skye, where there are traces of his visit in Church dedications and in place names. " Of the exact itinerary of the Saint's wanderings in Skye ... we know nothing. But the influence of this wonderful man of the gentle nature and the strong persuasive will, must have affected the Skyemen of that day deeply. He and his monks were

true Celts. Their holy rites replaced those of the Druids. Their chants made the magic runes die away. They held out a true hope to those whose light, in religious matters, had been so largely darkness. And in Skye, as in all the Western Isles, the echoes of their holy liturgies sounded in many a green glen and mingled with the noise of dashing waves and the long wash of Hebridean seas." [3]

The Bay of Portree used to be called Loch Columkille, and there is a small island in the bay also called after the Saint, which still shows traces of a church probably founded by Columba himself. There are two other churches dedicated to him, one at the head of Loch Snizort and another near Monkstadt, where there was formerly a shallow loch with a little island in the centre of it. The loch has now been drained and the monastery buildings can easily be reached. It was a large settlement that Columba founded there. The island on which the ruins stood is nearly three acres in extent, and its whole surface is covered with rough blocks of grey lichen-covered stones, remains of monastic cells. There are a few traces of buildings—which may be of any age, so old do they appear, so covered with moss—as well as of a cashel or surrounding wall. . . . The place where the loch was, seems a deserted solitude, dotted only with rough Highland cattle and rendered still more solitary by the ruined heaps of stone. . . . The matin bell rings no longer : the monks no more go forth to pray or to work : time and change have made a solitude and called it peace. The sea is moaning far below, the ruins of an ancient Christianity are unspeakably sad : did Columba and his monks labour only for this ? But a lark is carolling high in the air : it suggests more cheerful thoughts, and one remembers that Columba's work lives on in the hearts of men and did not fail when the monastery became a ruin." [4]

There is an interesting story about Columba baptizing an aged heathen chieftain in Skye. This man was a Pict called Artbranan, who, although he was a heathen, had lived a blameless

life ; hearing of Columba and his Gospel of Peace, he wished to embrace that faith before he died. Adamnan puts the picture clearly before us : the aged chieftain arriving in his boat, sitting up at the prow as his men row him into the harbour. Two of them carry him up the shore to where Columba stands, and lay their chief down before him. Columba was not able to speak to him in his native tongue, whether he spoke a special dialect, or whether Columba had not yet mastered the Gaelic of the Isles, we do not know. At any rate Columba instructs him through an interpreter, the old man believes and is baptized. Then when the rite is administered and his mind is at rest, the aged chief passes peacefully away. (I., xxvii.) “ Here,” writes Professor Watson, “ we have the keynote of the attitude of the Church to a whole department of pagan beliefs. . . . The rite of baptism turns the pagan natural goodness into Christian goodness.” [5] There was nothing narrow in Columba’s creed ; he was willing to recognize this old man although he did not belong to the particular branch of the Church to which Columba belonged—although he did not belong to any Church at all, simply because he was a good man.

We have one more story to tell of Columba’s intercourse with the islands which surrounded his head quarters, a story which shows the Saint in a delightful aspect. One day while living at Iona, Columba called two of his monks to him : “ Sail over now to Mull,” he said, “ and on the open ground near the sea-shore, look for Erc, a robber who came alone last night in secret from Colonsay. He tries to hide himself among the sandhills during the day-time, under his boat . . . that he may sail across at night to the little island where our young seals are brought forth and nurtured. When this furious robber has stealthily killed as many as he can, he then fills his boat and goes back to his hiding-place.”

The monks did as they were told. They found the robber at the very place indicated, and sailing across to Iona, took him at once before the Saint. Columba looked at him gravely. “ Why dost thou transgress the commandment of God so often by stealing the property of others ?” he asked. “ If thou art in want at any time, come to us, and thy needs shall be supplied.” And out of the kindness of his heart Columba ordered that some fat sheep should be killed and given to the thief instead of the seals he had slain, in order that he might not return home empty. To those who think of Columba as a fierce, vindictive character, a man of strife, a soldier rather than a monk, this example of his generous forgiveness will be welcome. And that was not all. Soon after, when it was revealed to Columba that Erc was about to die, he sent a message to Baithene in Tiree, the storehouse of Iona, telling him to send a fat sheep and six pecks of corn as a last gift to the dying man. (I., xxxiii.)

We cannot go into the ecclesiastical history of all the islands round Iona, but they were all visited by Columba and his monks. They had been the strongholds of the Christian Scots before the battle between Gabhran and Brude in 560, when the victorious Picts wrested the islands from them and waged a continual warfare against them, till with the coming of Columba and his friendship with Brude, a peace was built up between the two peoples. Columba and his monks founded monasteries on practically all the islands of that coast, and there were other founders at work too in the same district. St Moluoc “ the pure, the bright, the pleasant, the Sun of Lismore,” founded a church on that island. St Cathan founded one on the island of Bute at a place now called Kilchattan ; and Donnan founded a church on the island of Eigg. These three men were not disciples of St Columba, but they worked in conjunction with him, as the great figure in the ecclesiastical life of the time. They were either descendants of the Church of the Picts, which Ninian had founded in Galloway and which was still sending forth missionaries, or else they were of Irish origin.

Columba predicted “ red martyrdom” for Donnan and his monks, and that fate did indeed befall them. They had displeased the Pictish queen of the island—a provincial queen—by sleeping in her sheepfold, and she ordered that they should all be put to death. It is a dreadful story. The monks were celebrating the holy mysteries on Easter Sunday (617) when the queen’s bloodthirsty messengers appeared at the church door. The monks were calm and brave ; they asked only that they might be allowed to finish the service in which they were engaged. Something in their gentle aspect moved the murderers to acquiesce, but when the sacrament was over, all the brothers were slain. That happened after Columba’s death, but it shows what times he lived in, and how often he and his monks must have risked their lives at the hands of the people among whom they worked.

Columba had a happy way of dealing with his monks, whom he sometimes taught by parables. Once when he was visiting a monastery on the island of Eigg he came upon two monks who had been preaching in a spirit of rivalry, the one claiming to be a better preacher than the other.

“ Stretch out both of you the right hand towards Heaven,” said Columba. The monks did as he told them and the Saint went on :

“ One of you is slightly taller than the other, but neither can come within reach of yon white cloud floating above us. To your knees, O men ! Pray for one another and for the folk, and both of you will reach higher than the clouds !” Both monks fell on their knees, and their prayers “ which used to stick in the thatch, mounted now like sparks of fire into the heavens. Ever after there was brotherhood between the two monks, and the brotherhood of the monks made brothers of the folk.” [6]

Columba’s love of the sea made his voyages among the Western Isles one of the great pleasures of his life. He loved to stand on the shore and watch the waves break on the white sands of Iona : he loved to feel the lift of the wave under his keel, to listen to the ripple of the water along the sides of his boat, to watch the showers of spray flung high into the sunshine as the prow of his coracle cut through the waves. He understood the call of the sea, as he understood its dangers. His feeling for it had perhaps something of the old pagan notion, which regarded the sea as a power to be worshipped and also to be feared. But Columba knew his God could quell its fiercest moods, and so in embarking himself or in sending out his monks, he consecrated the voyage always to the mercy of God, in whose hands he knew there was safety whatever might befall. He followed his monks on their voyages in his thoughts and prayers, and as the time drew near when they might be expected to return, he would go up to the highest point of Dun-I to watch for the first speck of their sail on the horizon.

The wideness of the sea, its grandeur, its freedom, its freshness, and its strength seem to have entered into the very being of Columba and to characterize his life. For centuries after his death, the mariners of the Hebrides called on kind Columcille to protect them in all their dangers and difficulties, and we can trace his influence in the Ocean Blessing recovered from oral tradition :

*Thou who pervadest the heights
Imprint on us Thy gracious blessing,
Carry us over the surface of the sea,
Carry us safely to the haven of peace,
Bless our boatmen and our boat,
Bless our anchors and our oars,*

*Each stay and halyard and traveller,
Our mainsails to our tall masts
Keep, O King of the Elements, in their place,
That we may return home in peace.
I myself will sit down at the helm,
It is God's own Son who will give me guidance,
As He gave to Columba the mild,
What time he set stay to sails. [7]*

Columba's Writings

ALTHOUGH Columba was famed as a scribe, and most of his "diligence in writing" was occupied in copying the Sacred Books, yet he was a poet at heart, and when anything greatly moved him he sought outlet for his feelings in poetry. He wrote both in Latin and in Irish, and his Irish poems, being wrung from him at times of great emotion, show his love of country and of nature and his absolute trust in God. They probably came down through several centuries by oral tradition, as Columcille's words were held to guard those who recited them against many kinds of evil—"The devil would not know their path to waylay them: their enemies would fail to find them: angels would attend them as they sung the poem: it was a protection against sudden death: peace would reign in the house where it was chanted, and plenty and prosperity would wait on the singers." [8] This was of course carrying on the pagan superstition of Druid incantations, but in a Christian form: Columba's disciples and their converts learnt his poems by heart and recited them when in any danger. Although these Irish poems are not now in the form in which he left them, they undoubtedly represent Columba's thoughts and feelings. Twenty-six have been edited, there are many more in manuscript in the Bodleian Library and a few in the Burgundian Library at Brussels, but the authenticity of these is not assured.

Of his Latin writings, only three have come down to us. They are cast in a more serious vein than the Irish poems, and partake rather of the nature of studied theological treatises, than of Celtic poetry. The first hymn, the *Altus Prosator*, is a dignified and poetic statement of the Creation, the Fall, the Judgment and the Future State. It is sometimes said to have been written as reparation for the battles fought on Columba's behalf, or at least under his protection, but O'Donnell gives another legend that when Gregory's envoys visited Iona bringing Columba a great cross from the Pope, and there was in the monastery no food or drink to put before these distinguished visitors, Columba wrote the *Altus* in thanks to God for miraculously providing food and drink, and thus saving Iona's wide spread reputation for hospitality. This legend is another instance of how O'Donnell and the other early writers, in their anxiety to glorify their hero, translated dreams and visions into actual incidents. O'Donnell felt the dignity of the *Altus* which he describes as a "composition passing lofty and passing noble, but passing hard of understanding," and he adds that, "whosoever should recite the *Altus* daily should not be damned forever." [9] Authorities do not question that the *Altus* is the genuine work of Columba, and the late Marquess of Bute, who edited it with a prose translation, considered its intrinsic merits to be very great, especially the last verses which he thought "would not suffer by comparison with the *Dies Iræ*." [10]

An interesting point about Columba's Latin poems is that he attempted rhyme in them, probably in order that his disciples might find them easier to remember, so that he was ahead of his time in poetry as well as in learning and practical things, for rhyme was new, if not unknown, in Europe at that time. The following lines show the attempt at rhyme:

Altus Prosator Vetustus

Dierum et Ingenitus
Erat Absque origine
Primordio et crepidine

As well as being rhymed, the *Altus* has the first letter of every verse arranged in alphabetical succession as a further aid to memory.

According to O'Donnell's legend, the was taken to Rome by Gregory's messengers to Columba, and while it was being read to the Pope, he saw a vision as of angels listening. But he thought one verse alone insufficient to pay due homage to the Redeemer, and so, tradition says, Columba wrote the second of his Latin hymns, *In Te, Christe*. It is a slighter effort, and its authenticity is not assured. The third hymn, the *Noli Pater* was composed during a thunderstorm to protect an oak-wood which was being burnt down by a lightning-kindled fire, and so the poem was credited with protecting whosoever recited it from fire or thunderstorms or lightning.

Columba's poems were written with a double purpose : they were to act as charms against evil, as well as to express the poet's thoughts and feelings. In reading them we feel that the Gael craved no small blessing when he asked, in the words of the old Gaelic couplet, for

*The tongue of Columba in my head,
The eloquence of Columba in my speech.*

[1] Probably the common jelly-fish, which have powerful stinging threads.

[2] Quoted from Reeves' *Adamnan*.

[3] MacCulloch, *Misty Isle of Skye*, p. 288.

[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

[5] Watson, "The Celtic Church and its relations with Paganism," *Celtic Review*. Nov. 1915.

[6] This story was recently recovered from an old man in the island of Eigg by Rev. Kenneth MacLeod of Colonsay, who has kindly allowed me to quote it.

[7] Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, I., 329.

[8] Dowden, *Celtic Church in Scotland*, 322.

[9] O'Donnell, § 216.

[10] Bute, *Altus of St Columba*, iv.

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