

## THE CONTINUING LEGACY

From out the Hebridean mists

appears a vivid star:

‘Bethlehem of the Isles’;

small in stature,

yet

for the Wild Goose

a nurturing place;

from whence,

by Columba

and other faithful followers,

Christ’s message soared afar.

*Bethlehem of the Isles: Iona, by the Scottish poet Kenneth Steven.*

The heyday of Celtic Christianity was from the fifth to the eighth centuries, monasteries were springing up in all the insular Celtic countries (Ireland was literally awash with them) and as more and more of the local populations were converted to Christianity pilgrimage became almost a rite of passage. As part of their faith journey pilgrims brought money and gifts, kings and wealthy nobles gifted land and provided endowments, and many of the monasteries became very wealthy. The tradition of *peregrinatio* was very strong with mainly Irish monks founding monasteries around Britain and across Europe. Finnian at Clonard, Brendan at Clonfert, Columba at Derry, Durrow and Iona, Comgall at Bangor and Tiree, Aiden at Lindisfarne, Columbanus at Luxeuil in France and Bobbio in Italy, and Gallus at St Gallen in Switzerland.

There was constant to-ing and fro-ing between the countries of the insular Celts – there were many Irish monks in Wales, Cornwall and Scotland, and substantial numbers of migrants moved and settled in these other countries. The Irish *Scotti* from Dal Riata migrated to Dalriada in the Western Isles, giving their name to what is now Scotland.

In Columba’s early monastery on Iona daily life was withdrawn and austere, its primary purpose was the contemplation of God through prayer and learning. Holy texts from around Europe were copied and poetry flourished, the monastery’s intellectual horizons stretched right across Christendom. As a consequence Iona amassed one of the greatest libraries in Western Europe and became a powerhouse of Dark Age learning. Over time the monastery came to be known as a centre for healing and hospitality as well as for learning and Columba and his monks pursued an active missionary outreach of Celtic Christianity throughout the

Western Isles and up into the north eastern parts of Scotland. Communities of Culdees (Spouses of God) were established in, primarily, Ireland and Scotland during the eighth century, they were attached to cathedral or collegiate churches and lived in monastic fashion though not taking monastic vows.

Among the insular Celts, the impact of Roman ecclesiastical strictures came to be felt following the establishment of Augustine at Canterbury in 597. Pope Gregory the Great had granted Augustine authority over all the Christians of Britain, but the contrast between the suave religious diplomat from Rome and the unworldly leaders of the Celtic Church was great. Tradition maintains that Augustine greeted the British bishops with arrogance and, in addition, submission to Canterbury. The loosely structured Celtic Church was ill-placed to resist the strong centralising authority of Rome, especially as Rome's pontiff was successor to St Peter, the holder of the keys of heaven.

Long before the Viking Age which started in the late eighth Century, the pressure of the population of Scandinavia exceeded the capacity of its soils to feed them and waves of mainly Norwegians flooded south, joining the many 'barbarians' pressing on the Roman Empire. Around 750 the restless people of the north had developed new technology that opened up the possibility of long sea voyages. The Viking ship with its strong, flexible construction, shallow draught, and improved sails was fast, safe and robust, equally suited to the open sea and inland waterways. Regular voyages into the Atlantic, Iceland, Greenland and eventually North America, now became practical. The early Vikings were on the hunt for portable valuables and slaves but they would also take advantage of food supplies on their way, and their onslaught was particularly frightening because of its novelty. What was most chilling to the early Celtic Christians was that the pagan Vikings showed no respect for the church; in fact, because of their endowments like fine metalwork, jewelled bindings and illuminated manuscripts, the undefended monasteries were a favourite target. In the words of one Celtic historian 'rich monasteries were the Dark Age equivalent of drive-in banks to the Vikings'.

Before he died in 735 Bede had worried a great deal about whether the Christian tree of belief had been planted deeply enough to survive the threats he saw coming from both pagan resurgence in the shape of the Norsemen and the new militant religion of Islam, which had thrust deep into the heart of Christian Spain and France. But even Bede's pessimism couldn't begin to imagine the scale of devastation the Vikings would inflict on Northumbria, not only on Lindisfarne, but on his own monastery at Jarrow and at Monkwearmouth and Iona, the capture of York and, most painful of all, the burning of the great libraries of the monasteries.

The first recorded attacks on a region with Celtic connections took place in 793 when the monastery at Lindisfarne was sacked. In the same year the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reported: 'dire potents appeared over Northumbria... immense whirlwinds and flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen flying through the air. A great famine followed and a little after that, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, the ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church at Lindisfarne'. Columba's monastery on Iona was attacked in 794 and again in 806 when 68 monks were slain. The monks withdrew to Ireland taking with them the *Book of Kells*.

Although the attack upon Lindisfarne was among the first recorded Viking attacks upon Britain, Norse infiltration into the islands of Scotland had probably begun much earlier, for Scottish Gaelic had, by 800, absorbed many words of Scandinavian origin. By the mid-ninth century Sodor, the Southern Isles was under Norse government extending from the Hebrides to the Isle of Man. It provided the base for the establishment at Dublin, Cork, Limerick and elsewhere of Norse seaport towns which became miniature kingdoms. In addition the Scottish islands and the Isle of Man were springboards for Viking attacks upon Iona and the island and coastal monasteries of Ireland. So great were the deprivations of the Norsemen that they gave rise to the last wave of that great Celtic tradition of *peregrine* – the Irish monks who established *Schottenkloester* at Regensburg, Wurtzburg, and even in Kiev. The Irish Sea, once the ‘Mediterranean’ of the Celts, became that of the Norsemen, causing an Irish poet to welcome the storms at sea, which meant that the Irish did not have to fear ‘the fierce warriors of Norway/Coming over the smooth sea’.

The Welsh also suffered maraudings, with Anglesey a favourite target. In 987 the Norsemen carried off 2,000 of the island’s inhabitants to sell as slaves and, in the following year, they plundered most of Wales’s coastal monasteries. In 999 they attacked St David’s, killing the bishop. Cornwall’s monasteries also suffered, and a chronicler recorded in 920 that ‘the Northmen devastated all Brittany’.

The Viking attacks, although a devastating blow to the centres of Celtic Christianity, were not wholly negative in their effects. They led to the expansion of trade, the circulation of money and the establishment of urban centres. The threat they represented created the need for stronger organisations, probably the chief factor in the urge for unity so apparent in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany from the ninth century onwards. The artefacts created in the era of Norse aggression are among the finest achievements of Celtic Christianity, indeed, some of them may have been made as a reaction to that aggression. The magnificent high crosses which dot the landscapes of the insular Celtic countries and which still bear witness to the conviction and tenacity of the Celtic Church, perhaps came to be favoured because they were less portable works of art than the fine metalwork of previous centuries

Among the chief developments in the history of Celtic-speaking peoples from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries was the process whereby they became full members of Latin Europe, a process which ensured that the Celtic Church as an intelligible entity ceased to exist.

In Scotland the deCelticisation of the Church is usually associated with Margaret, second wife of Malcolm III (Malcolm Canmore) whom he married in 1069, a Saxon-Hungarian princess and daughter of Edward Atheling of England, she was pious, devout and even saintly. Malcolm is described as a fiery Celtic ruffian, already married to an older princess, Ingibjorg the widow of Thorfinn, Jarl of Orkney, who conveniently disappears from history about this time. Margaret’s pleas to retire to live in cloistered seclusion did not greatly impress her advisers and she seems to have realised that here was a God-given chance to influence Malcolm and at the same time bring his nation into full acceptance of the western Catholic Church of which she was such a devout protagonist. What Margaret actually did was persuade her illiterate husband to undermine Celtic traditions: he Romanised the Celtic

Church, substituted Saxon for Gaelic as the court language, and replaced the clan system with a form of feudalism. She rebuilt her home church of Dunfermline, leaving no trace of the original Culdee church on the site, and also introduced into Scotland for the first time, the monastic order of Benedictines, making Dunfermline a daughter house from Canterbury. Under the rule of her sons and great-grandsons between 1097-1214 'peculiar' practices came under increasing attack, initially in Fife and Lothian, and then throughout Scotland. Monastic orders of French origin, such as the Cistercians displaced the ancient monasteries of the Celtic Church, and the centres of the Culdees were reorganised as Augustinian priories.

In Wales the deCelticisation of the Church occurred under the direct auspices of the kingdom of England. The Norman invasions ushered in the total reconstruction of the Church in Wales and its bishops were made subject to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The churches of the Celtic tradition were either suppressed or turned into Augustinian priories, and much of the Church's income was syphoned off to abbeys in England and Normandy.

In Ireland, there was a fuller awareness of developments in the heartland of Roman Europe than there was in the other Celtic-speaking countries. The *peregrine* were in contact with their homeland, and Irish monks maintained a presence, the *Sancta Trinitas Scottorum*, in Rome itself. The island retained its reputation for learning, but links with England were cultivated, especially by the Norse communities. Yet traditional values and customary attitudes proved deep-seated. In 1156 Pope Adrian IV called on King Henry II of England to invade Ireland 'to correct evil habits and introduce virtue'. In 1167 the island was invaded by Cambro-Norman knights from south-west Wales, and in 1171 Henry II proclaimed himself Lord of Ireland. Thereafter the Irish Church was progressively Romanised and Anglicised and although Irish Christianity still retains highly distinctive features, it had, by the end of the twelfth century, ceased to be what it once had been – the heartland of the Celtic Church.

Hostility towards many of the practices of the Roman Church had been simmering for many years led by 'radicals' like Luther, Wycliffe and Tyndale but it came to a head in Henry VIII's obsession to produce a male heir. Since the Pope had refused to grant Henry a divorce from Catherine of Aragon he declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England and, therefore, no longer subject to papal authority. Thomas Cromwell, Henry's strong-arm enforcer, initiated the 'visitations' to the monasteries, carried out with lightning speed, during 1535 and early 1536. The uprooting of nearly 15,000 monks and nuns and the destruction of an entire, ancient way of life had little to do with reforming zeal. The monasteries and abbeys were to be plundered to establish a war chest for the conflict with Catholic Europe that now seemed inevitable. In Scotland many of the nobles had converted to Protestantism, and, fired up by the Calvinist righteousness provided by John Knox and his fellow preachers, in 1557 they made a covenant among themselves with the aim of the irreversible establishment of a reformed Scottish Kirk. The Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries dealt a crippling blow to what remained of the Celtic Church and it was forced out to the fringes of society where worship moved to oratories and home settings. One historian writing about the church at this time said, 'No religion has ever been destroyed by persecution if the people confessing it were not destroyed'. In the Hebridean Islands of Scotland some church services are still conducted in the Gaelic language and there is a

reverence towards early Celtic saints. In the Shetland and Orkney Islands shortbread is known as Bride's Bonn. In Ireland the annual Croagh Patrick pilgrimage is a celebration of Celtic Christianity which involves a strenuous ascent of the holy Hill of Tara. The National Eisteddfod of Wales, held each year in the first week of August at varying locations, is a celebration of Wales's strong Celtic tradition of literacy and poetry. In Scotland the Celtic Beltane Fire Festival is re-enacted each May Day on Calton Hill, Edinburgh.

In 1938, the Rev George MacLeod, a Presbyterian minister, feeling that a radical move was necessary to meet the needs of the times, embarked on the imaginative venture of rebuilding part of the ancient abbey on the Isle of Iona. He utilised the skills of unemployed craftsmen, and persuaded trainee ministers to work as labourers. Out of this was born the often controversial Iona Community, which over the years has trained clergy for work in deprived areas, produced innovative worship for the world church, pleaded for disarmament, spoken out strongly against world hunger and advocated joint ecumenical action on social issues. Now 82 years after its inception the Iona Community attracts hundreds of pilgrims and thousands of visitors each year.

Celticity has been described as: anarchic, spiritual, unmaterialistic, companionable, romantic, unregimented, soulful, unhurried, instinctive, the world we have lost and should not have lost. It has been 'un-anchored', it is no longer linked with specific languages or ethnic groups, it is a state of mind associated with a search for a natural religion and with the rediscovery of self. It almost seems as if the Celts are those who choose to see themselves as Celts.

And in the words of the original Celts...

May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face. May the rain fall soft upon your field, and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand. *Amen*