

**MODERN CELTIC CHRISTIANITY:  
THE CONTEMPORARY 'REVIVAL' AND ITS  
ROOTS**

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It is always exciting, and sometimes a little confusing, to live through a revival of any kind, when something long forgotten rises from oblivion, and gains a fresh and potent currency. Those of us who can lay claim to being Celts – in the strictly linguistic sense, I hasten to add, as speakers of a Celtic language (Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, Manx, Cornish or Breton) – are well used to revivals. Since at least 1800 Celtic revival movements have become almost commonplace. *Celti semper revivendi*.

What revivals do we have? Some come from within our own communities. We have had, and continue to have, our political revivals: I speak of the resuscitation movements that have come to Ireland, Scotland, Man, Wales and Cornwall. Other revivals are externally initiated, and are placed to our account, whether we want them or not. These external revivals come when we are 'discovered' and 're-discovered' by a sympathetic lobby among those who have sometimes been the means of our downfall and disintegration. Across the years – I might even say across the centuries – at the same time as we have declined in numbers and suffered all sorts of indignities at the hands of professedly superior peoples and powers, we have had our revivals. Concussed by many battles, we, the Celts, who are 'down and out' in the eyes of many, are suddenly permitted to make a staggering come-back to the stage of world history, and, for a glorious moment, when the stagger becomes a stand, we are 'up and in'. The eyes of all knowledgeable people are upon us as we stumble forward, groping for a hand-hold, and they even tell us, just to help us a little, that we definitely have something they have not got!

### **Recreating the Celts**

Revivals can, of course, be good times, but they can also be dangerous, especially if they are of the non-indigenous type. Bodies of very enthusiastic supporters, who may or may not know much about us, put their noses to the grindstone, and when the grindstone gets under way, a few more take the risk, and put their noses on it, and some go flat on their faces as a result. It is catching, I say, and not a little dangerous, because we – especially the professional academic Celts who know our Ps and Qs – have to live with the consequences. These consequences include quite a lot of plastic surgery and the reshaping of our general cultural contours to accord with the prevailing Celtic identikit. Some of us, enjoying the heady power of the revival, join in the fun, and, admitting that we stand in much need of some beautifying, reshape our own faces. Just occasionally, as the process threatens to obliterate our real identity, our Celtic crania cry out in pain. Then, in the hope of regaining our lost faces, we split lances with the surgeons as we participate in what is called a ‘damage limitation exercise’.

Of course, our really potent revivals are not political, cultural, or linguistic. They are religious. The Celtic Fringe has been noted for its religious revivalism, and the revivals have taken many forms over the last couple of centuries. Generally, these revivals have been of the Protestant type, and have been promoted by ‘enthusiasts’ (in the full and original sense of that word), and they have had their results in fuller churches, individual conversions, and greater activities of various sorts. These revivals, some would say, have helped to create a certain image of the Scottish Highlands and of Wales: the Highlands of strict, censorious sabbatarianism and unending psalmody, and the Wales of innumerable chapels and male-voice choirs. Ireland, it would seem, has by and large escaped this sort of blight, and rejoices for the present in its broad catholicity.

**Reconstructing the Saints**

Now, there has been another Celtic religious revival going on for some time, and this revival is certainly not on the Celtic Fringe. In fact, the real day-to-day speakers of Celtic languages in Pontypridd and Blaenau Ffestiniog and Ros Muc and Ballybunion and Ardhasaig and Kilmuir and Tiree and Islay have probably not heard much about this one. Nevertheless, it has a very definite existence. It has a distinctive ambience, with a touch of class: it flourishes across the social divides, goes well up the social ladder, links Protestant and Catholic, and has a faint whiff of incense around its outer edges. It seems to have something for everyone, from the Buddhist to the Baptist, and it is called by some – as the title of one book proclaims – *The Celtic Alternative*. ‘Alternative to what?’ you ask. That is not defined clearly in the book, but we will try to answer that question later.

This revival, a revival of ‘Celtic spirituality’ (as it likes to suppose, ‘spirituality’ being one of our ‘in’ words these days), believes that it is taking us back to the Christian religious experience of the Celts who occupied the islands of Britain and Ireland in the period from about 500 A.D. to 1066 A.D., and whose descendants continue to occupy Wales and Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. It probably sees itself as deriving from what is sometimes termed the ‘Age of the Saints’ in the so-called Celtic church, from about the sixth to the seventh century. The Celtic church and the saints associated with it – among them such famous national figures as St David of Wales, St Columba of Iona, St Nynia or Ninian of Whithorn and St Patrick of Ireland – are peculiarly susceptible to revival and have been revived and reinterpreted many times in the course of the centuries.

The Celtic church, in its resurrected form, has a special penchant for matching the mood of the age and, indeed, the mood of the reconstructionist. It is often seen as the ‘ideal’ church by both Roman Catholics and Protestants. In fact, there are those in the Free Church of Scotland, no

less, who look to that Celtic church of monks, anchorites and ascetics – that church of island fastnesses, hermitages, wheel-headed crosses, crucifixes and round towers – as its own lineal ancestor.<sup>1</sup> The Celtic church and its supposed theological ideals are generally envisaged as ‘pure’ and ‘clean’ when set against the excesses of the Middle Ages and the Reformation, to say nothing of the failures of our modern day. Revivalism, in that sense, all too frequently becomes revisionism, and leads to the rewriting of history to the advantage of the denomination represented by the writer.

I believe that we are living through one of the peaks of this revival at present. However, it is far from being a revival of angry saints cursing the water-beast of the River Ness, as St Columba did. The new movement is remarkably tolerant of animals of whatever kind, and is rather unworldly in its aspirations. It has a relaxed, benevolent feel to it, which is very different from the world of those irascible Celtic saints whose curses were at least as strong as their blessings. The movement has little, if anything, to say about the painful penitentials drawn up by some Celtic saints, who believed in giving the penitents the occasional crack of the whip. It is gentle, or, as some would say, ‘soft’, avoiding the less congenial aspects of our Celtic religious heritage. Few of the movement’s advocates have yet taken to living on Rockall or the Old Man of Hoy, although such eremitic sites offer stacks of potential, in keeping with the aspirations of several Celtic saints. In fact, the movement expresses itself most effectively on paper. One of the characteristics of this revival or ‘new religious movement’ – the Celtic NRM, as some might call it – is that, although it is concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Parman, *Scottish Crofters: A Historical Ethnography of a Celtic Village* (Fort Worth, 1990), p.132, contains the following information: ‘According to one Free Church minister, the Free Church is descended from the Celtic Church founded by St. Columba, which never obeyed Roman Catholic law. It is the heart of Celtic/Highland/Scottish purity.’

the rediscovery of 'Celtic spirituality', it is quite a bookish affair. I have watched its progress over the years in terms of the publication lists, and have found that in itself a fascinating experience.

### **Old Prayers for New**

When I was a student back in the 1970s, in the depths of deepest, darkest Cambridge, on the very fringe of civilisation, I found a little book that promised to throw some light into the pervading fenland gloom. It was called *The Sun Dances* and was a collection of 'Prayers and Blessings from the Gaelic', based on the earlier volumes of Gaelic prayers gathered by Alexander Carmichael mainly in the Outer Hebrides (especially South Uist and Benbecula) and published initially in the opening years of this century under the Latin title *Carmina Gadelica*. *The Sun Dances*, edited by Adam Bittleston, was first published in 1960 by The Christian Community Press, and, in many respects, set the stage for the publications that were to follow. It is noticeable that several of the books produced were collections of prayers derived directly from Carmichael's *Carmina*. In 1961 the SPCK began its long association with such material by publishing the Revd G.R.D. MacLean's volume, *Poems of the Western Highlanders* (1961). MacLean's presentation entailed a reworking of Carmichael's translations, which were recast to provide rhyming couplets and other stylistic enhancements.

After what appeared to be a rather fallow decade in the 1970s, the 1980s have witnessed the publication of several new selections of this kind. One of the most recent examples is Esther de Waal's volume, *The Celtic Vision: Prayers and Blessings from the Outer Hebrides*, published in 1988 by Darton, Longman and Todd (reprinted 1990). There have been smaller re-issues too, like *Praying with Highland Christians*, published in 1988 by SPCK, with a foreword by Sally Magnusson. This is a selection of the poems published in MacLean (1961).

One important general point emerges from the titles of these books. The first one mentioned – *The Sun Dances* – made it clear that the prayers were from Gaelic. *Praying with Highland Christians* avoids any symbolic ambiguity, but practises some mild deception by making you think that all Highland Christians pray (present tense?) in the manner of the prayers in the book. Try the Free Church of Scotland, or the Free Presbyterian Church! De Waal's title, on the other hand, departs from the Gaelic and Highland definitions, and proclaims boldly that these prayers are part of a Celtic (not Gaelic) vision, and so implies that they are at the heart of 'Celtic' religious experience, although they have been collected in Gaelic Scotland, and are, to some extent, shared with Ireland. In other words, the prayers have been moved from the 'fringe' as it were, to a central place within 'Celtic' culture, even though Wales, Cornwall and Brittany have contributed little.

### **New Prayers for Old**

In the 1980s another development was taking place, which was more creative than the volumes of Bittleston and De Waal. It brought the Celts from the farthest Hebrides and put them right inside the worship structures of at least one large denomination – the Church of England. This development was the composition of prayers in the style of Carmichael's translations. In other words, Carmichael's volumes had become a pattern for liturgical experimentation, and the net was being widened to include such models as the Old Irish hymn known in translation as 'St Patrick's Breastplate'. All of this is reflected in the little volumes compiled by David Adam, *The Edge of Glory: Prayers in the Celtic Tradition* (published by SPCK in 1985, with a foreword by the Most Reverend Stuart Blanch, Archbishop of York) and *Tides and Seasons* (published 1989). According to the publishers, the first of the Adam volumes achieved an 'instant popularity': and that popularity has continued unabated, it would seem, as

Adam's output has increased, and diversified. His volume, *The Eye of the Eagle* (published 1990) consists of 'Meditations on the hymn "Be thou my Vision"'. This volume is based on the translation of the Old Irish version of the hymn by Mary Byrne (1880-1931) and Eleanor Hull (1860-1935), which is very well known through its incorporation in many hymn-books. (See now *Border Lands: The Best of David Adam*, SPCK, 1991.)

It must be said, however, that David Adam's prayers and meditations are much more than a literary experiment. They aim to teach and to edify. The meditations, often beautifully crafted, glow with a vibrant and attractive devotion which attempts to show the relevance of these early hymns to our secular age. While having my reservations at the theological, historical and textual levels, I confess to having enjoyed them thoroughly as 'homiletic spirituality'. The prayers, too, have a profoundly religious motive at their heart. Nevertheless, they have a restorationist aim, and are advertised as an attempt to fill out what was felt to be a declining or forgotten dimension of spiritual experience; the biographical note in the first volume tells us that Mr Adam – now Vicar of Holy Island, Northumberland – 'has a particular interest in Celtic Christian traditions, of which he detects traces still lingering on in the Northern church'. It is not clear what is meant by 'the Northern church', but the phrase may reflect an awareness that monks from the Columban monastery at Iona, notably Aidan, took Christianity to the old kingdom of Northumbria in the seventh century A.D. Quite some 'lingering', I would say! More particularly, the author himself tells us that the point of inspiration came at Lent in 1984 when he and a group of parishioners, searching for patterns for prayer and aware of the earlier Anglo-Saxon and Celtic religious history of the area, found what they wanted in MacLean's book, *Poems of the Western Highlanders*. They embarked on a voyage of discovery, and participated practically in it by composing the prayers. The Archbishop of York commended the

enterprise for 'the new insights that it offers into the faith of our northern forefathers who did so much to shape the religion of this land. Their faith awaits a revival in our somewhat tired, over-formalized, despairing society.'

### **Eastern Approaches to Celtic History**

So there it is: even the Archbishop of York, in giving these new 'Celtic' prayers his *imprimatur* and putting them firmly under the wing of Anglicanism, was talking in terms of a possible 'revival', and that is what appears to be taking place, bit by bit, although the extent and effect of the revival remain to be seen. The scope of the revival is certainly broadening. It is penetrating more fully into other fields at present, and we are being offered new quasi-historical interpretations of the Christianity of the Celts who occupied these islands (Britain and Ireland) in the centuries before 1066. Shirley Toulson's book, *The Celtic Alternative: A Reminder of the Christianity We Lost* (published by Rider in 1987) is a 'radical' history of the Christianity of the Celts, which opens as follows: 'In the so-called Dark Ages, a religion flourished in the islands of Britain which had more in common with Buddhism than with the institutional Christianity of the West. It was based on a church founded without martyrs, and one that neither inflicted suffering nor encouraged bitter theological disputes.' (If only all of that were true!) She concludes by referring to the manner in which the Greenham Common women modelled some of their liturgies on Jewish and Celtic models, and states that those who establish peace groups can be compared directly to the Culdees, a monastic reform movement within the Irish (Celtic) church. From this, you will readily conclude that the 'revival' of interest in Celtic religion goes hand in hand with an attempt to provide a religious base for some of the protest movements that have sprung up in our own time, and that it co-exists with a growing awareness of Eastern religions. Eastern religions are likewise adjusting their profiles to accommodate Celtic perspectives. Buddhists in



particular are discovering – and even buying – common ground with the Celts. The *Scotsman* reported (23 November 1991) that Scottish Buddhists had bought the historic Holy Isle off Arran, in order to provide ‘a centre for spiritual contemplation by establishing a religious retreat on the rocky outcrop said to have been the home of a 6th-century Irish saint.’

As East meets West once again through the reconstructed Celtic church, the range of Celtic texts being offered to would-be meditators and pilgrims has also increased beyond the constant recycling of prayers from Carmichael’s *Carmina*. More ambitious translation-anthologies of prose and verse texts are coming from the presses. One of these is *Celtic Christianity: Ecology and Holiness*, compiled by Christopher Bamford and William Parker Marsh (Floris Classics, 1986), which (in passing) compares early Irish religious houses to Zen (Buddhist) monasteries. Another is *Celtic Fire*, published by Darton, Longman and Todd in 1990. It is edited by Robert Van de Weyer, ‘founder of the Community of Christ the Sower, based in Little Gidding’ [in Huntingdonshire] – a point that demonstrates the link between this Celtic revival and the contemplative communities that have arisen on the fringes of the larger denominations in recent years. The blurb on the back of the book does not inspire confidence in the editor or the publishers, since it contains two massive misconceptions: ‘Composed in languages long extinct,’ it says, ‘Celtic literature has been inaccessible for many centuries.’

### **Scholarship versus Spirituality?**

Both of these claims – about the extinction of the Celtic languages and the inaccessibility of the literature – are manifestly incorrect. What they do tell us is that Celtic literature is falling into the hands of some people who know nothing about its background, and assume that nobody else does either. Precise scholarship is generally not one of the hallmarks of this movement. Scholarship

seems to be a bit of a drag on 'popular' writings of this kind, and some of its practitioners might ask what scholarship has to do with spirituality. To be fair, however, the more significant writers within the movement have a concern for proper historical perspective, and it is encouraging to see that, as the movement develops, it is gradually catching up with another revival that seems to have emerged contemporaneously – namely the growth of academic research into the Celtic church. This awakening has flourished likewise since the 1960s, and is associated with the names of Nora Chadwick and Kathleen Hughes, among others. There may be a connexion, although it must be stressed that the academic writings have no obvious link with the Celtic interests under consideration here. There is, nevertheless, retrospective discovery of the Celtic academics, and occasionally there is a 'spiritualised' accommodation as they are brought within the 'fold'. Esther de Waal, herself a Cambridge historian, has utilised much scholarly material in her latest book, *A World Made Whole: The Rediscovery of the Celtic Tradition* (Harper-Collins, 1991), and confesses that, while writing the book – a very readable and attractive volume – she was 'haunted' by Nora Chadwick, author of the influential study, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (O.U.P., 1960).

It is not unfair to say that one or two writers of the modern neo-Celtic genre do try to suffuse their understanding of the Celts in a psychic sense of personal otherworldliness, believing perhaps that this is appropriate to the Celtic spiritual persona.<sup>2</sup> Thus Esther de Waal discloses that she was brought up in Shropshire, on the Welsh border, and goes on to comment that

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<sup>2</sup> See further Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Preconception', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11 (1986), pp.71-96. In a wry footnote, the writer comments: 'Most of us would rather trust a seer in South Uist than South London!'

'Borderlands are ambiguous places in which different cultures and traditions meet, frontiers from which the new can open up',<sup>3</sup> and a similar perspective is evident in the title (and introduction) of David Adam's anthology, *Border Lands*. One presumes that this aids the transition on the physical/spiritual border and authenticates at the personal level the type of sacred/secular interaction for which such writers argue. As for Mrs Chadwick, she certainly had her own mystique, but, if it was romantic at times, it was grounded in a very deep familiarity with the original Celtic sources.

Knowing the broader historical perspectives is one thing. Familiarity with the original languages, so that one can enter into a meaningful dialogue with the texts themselves, is another, and it is at this point that the movement is perhaps at its weakest. None of the modern participants mentioned in this paper appears to have had any training in Celtic languages or in the scholarly interpretation of Celtic religious texts in Old and Middle Irish. At a time when modern Irish scholars are looking afresh at the relationship between the early Irish religious movement and the secular world, and calling into question some long-treasured assumptions, the producers of our 'new' movement are discovering the translations of the early 1900s and the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s, so that there is at least a twenty-year time-lag in the process. They can talk happily about Columba's poems (as if he himself composed them) and raise no question-marks over early Irish nature poetry and its alleged association with hermits.<sup>4</sup>

Unfamiliarity with the original Celtic sources is not, however, something that causes too much heartache. The movement has an important agenda which transcends

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<sup>3</sup> *A World Made Whole*, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> The hermits are having a hard time these days. See Donncha O Corráin, 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?', in D. O Corráin *et al.* (eds), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 251-67.

language. *Celtic Fire* sets it out: 'As Christians today seek a "creation spirituality", the Celts provide a perfect model. And as we yearn for wholeness of mind and body, the Celts help us to find it.' How so, you ask? Is Little Gidding going in for a little kidding?

### **The Celts and their Charms: Carmichael and the *Carmina***

Before considering the values and emphases that emanate from Little Gidding and other power-points of this neo-Celticism, it will be very appropriate to say something about the man who set up the initial vibrations, namely, Alexander Carmichael, and to consider his aims in collecting the *Carmina Gadelica*. He had his own agenda too.

Alexander Carmichael was a native of Lismore, an island not far from Oban, where he was born in 1832. He became an Inland Revenue Officer – an exciseman, in fact – and went to work for many years in the Uists, among other places. Alongside his work, he was engaged in collecting Gaelic folklore, as part of a wider movement which aimed to collect tales, poems and other traditions. Carmichael's special interest lay in the prayers, charms and incantations that he sometimes heard on the lips of people in the Hebrides. He became aware that there was, in these prayers, an unrecorded heritage which was in danger of being lost. So he set to work to preserve them for posterity, obtaining the bulk of his material from the Roman Catholic population of South Uist, but with Protestant contributors too.

It needs to be stressed, and stressed very hard, that Carmichael faced huge difficulties in his labours. There were no tape recorders in those days, and he had to use pencil and paper, writing quickly in badly-lit houses, and listening to what he himself claims to have been the almost inaudible voices of his informants, who were often advanced in years. Having gathered the material, which was often in fragments, like shards from a clay pot, he had

to decide how to present it to the public in a manageable form. So, like a literary archaeologist, he set about rebuilding some of the fragments into seemingly reconstructions. Some fragments needed more rebuilding than others; but it was evident that restoration was the keynote of his presentation. Having restored the Gaelic models where necessary, he then translated them into English, in the beautiful, measured cadences of nineteenth-century English and in a way which often reflected very sensitively the rhythms and tones of his reconstructed originals.

Now, we live in a changed world, in more ways than one, and Carmichael's editorial principles do not please all modern scholars. For example, I once had a close friend at Glasgow University called Hamish Robertson, who, as I was finishing my Celtic Honours degree, was embarking on an editorial study of Carmichael for his PhD. Many a talk we had about Celtic literature, and about Alexander Carmichael in particular. As he got closer to Carmichael, Hamish became progressively more disillusioned with Carmichael's methods, and eventually abandoned his research. This, I may say, was a great tragedy, because we remain in need of a proper, scholarly study of the *Carmina*. However, some of the drafts of Hamish's work were published in a scholarly journal some years later, and I will quote one of his comments on Carmichael's reconstruction of a charm. This was what he said:

The charm in its original form came from a Benbecula man, and affords us an instance of how a defective original has been cast anew, like a disused Ford rescued off the scrap heap and dolled up with appurtenances designed to make it appear like a Daimler.<sup>5</sup>

This was Hamish at his most disillusioned, and I would want to add that the tradition that Carmichael was tapping

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<sup>5</sup> Hamish Robertson, 'Studies in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 12 (1976), pp.220-65.

was, indeed, a real one, despite the literary polish that he applied to the original fragments. Other collectors were active around the same period, although – significantly – they applied less polish and achieved less status than Carmichael. Among the latter was William MacKenzie, the Secretary of the Crofters' Commission, who contributed a fine (but little known) paper on Gaelic charms and incantations to the Gaelic Society of Inverness (published in its *Transactions* XVIII (1891-92), pp.97-182).

Of course, Carmichael's work must be set in the context of its own day at various levels, and space forbids me to do that here. However, one of the points that needs to be made in any such contextualisation is that Carmichael did have his own agenda in presenting the prayers as he did. In literary terms he was a 'restorationist', but in terms of religion he was a restorationist too. He was restoring 'primitivism' as he saw it, and he believed that some of these prayers may have had their origins in the Columban monasteries at Iona and Derry. Here was an opportunity to show how the Gaels had retained their pre-Reformation beliefs, at least in the Uists. Here too was the opportunity to demonstrate that there was once a splendid harmony between the sacred and the secular, between the Creator and the creation and the ordinary people, who invoked God and his saints into every aspect of their working lives. They lived close to God, whose Spirit imbued everything; immanence rather than transcendence was his chief attribute. By taking this position, Carmichael was reacting against the enormous divorce between sacred and secular that was progressively appearing in the Highlands as Protestant Evangelicalism took ever firmer hold.

### **The Great Divorce**

We have now perhaps perceived the point at which Carmichael's *Carmina* have become very meaningful to those who have rediscovered them since 1960. Although few would now accept that the composition of the *Carmina*

can be linked specifically to Derry and Iona, the general thrust of Carmichael's case has been widely accepted, and the prayers are seen as forming some sort of continuum with the period of the Celtic saints. Their testimony to the interaction of sacred and secular has been particularly well received. This is expressed very effectively by Esther de Waal in her *Celtic Vision*: 'These Prayers,' she writes, 'can help us to see as the men and women from whom Alexander Carmichael collected them saw: to see creation and God the creator in and through that creation; to see the material things which they handled in their daily lives as a way to God; to see beyond this world to the next so that the barriers go down between earth and heaven.' She goes on to say, very significantly: 'Here is something as true in a tower-block or a suburban house as in a crofter's cottage.'

This is perhaps a key statement in explaining the popularity of the *Carmina*, as Carmichael called them. By the second half of the twentieth century, the great divorce is being felt not merely in the Highlands, but throughout Britain. People have become tired of separating religious experience from ordinary human existence, as if rationalism and supernaturalism cannot co-exist; and behind all of that, it seems to me, is a deep disillusionment with the existing structures of organised religion and the sheer godlessness of what has passed for theology in the later twentieth-century. Secular society too, in erecting the tower-block, shows the decline of that most important cement – community life.

Personally, as a conservative Evangelical and a nonconformist to boot, I feel great sympathy with this view, although I recognise its dangers, particularly in its tendency to pantheism and, at times, in its almost animistic approach to the world. (These dangers are also recognised in some of the writings of David Adam.) I also find it difficult to accept any romantic view of Hebridean life in the aftermath of the terrible Potato Blight (1846) and the Clearances and other horrors. I suspect that, as

they took passage in the emigrant ships, some of the Hebridean people must have called upon their Creator in less kindly tones than these prayers suggest. I suspect too that they must have asked why he permitted such things to happen. Let us not suppose that life was all roses when the Hebrides were full of Celtic prayers.

But we must consider other possible reasons for their popularity. Why, in the early 1960s, did Carmichael's prayers become so important? And why all the reprinting subsequently, and what has led to the growth of a neo-Celtic movement based on their rediscovery?

### **The Ecumenical Columba**

Ecumenism, I suspect, has contributed much to our new Celticity, and in particular the ecumenical experiments that were going on in 'communities', notably the founding body, the Iona Community, established by the late Lord MacLeod in 1938. This experiment brought Columba and the so-called Celtic church to the awareness of many people throughout Britain. It is not clear how George MacLeod himself 'discovered' the Celtic church, but he became interested in it long before 1938, perhaps because of his Highland roots in Morvern and the associations of the church in which he first served, St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, which bore the name of an early Celtic saint. Govan, too, his first charge as a parish minister, was an early Christian site. MacLeod's espousal of Celtic matters was whimsical, romantic and well-laced with his own interpretations – a point well made in Ron Ferguson's recent wry and brilliant biography.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the embroidery, St Columba – who had almost become St George! – was given a splendid *parousia*. The fourteen-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the saint in Iona in 1963 was a great celebratory event. It was a time of mysticism, Pentecostal winds

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community* (London, 1990).



(experienced at least by Dr MacLeod) and massive pilgrim bands from the four corners of the globe, converging on Iona, courtesy of the mechanised coracles of David MacBrayne. The re-publication of Carmichael's prayers in the early 1960s was well timed.

In addition to the 'Columba consciousness', the Iona Community established a kind of corridor between Presbyterianism and Anglicanism (for example, through MacLeod's friendship with influential Anglican figures such as William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury, and Mervyn Stockwood, later Bishop of Southwark). Indeed, as we have already noted, it was the Anglican publishing body, SPCK, that most readily took up the challenge of printing volumes of Celtic prayers. (SPCK has also provided us with some fine, scholarly studies of the real Celtic churches, in the work of such writers as Kathleen Hughes, Siân Victory and Leslie Hardinge.<sup>7</sup>) Oddly, Presbyterianism has been much less receptive, and Lindisfarne has outstripped Iona in productivity of this kind. This may be because Anglicanism has retained liturgy, and is more responsive to experimentation of this sort. Perhaps it is also because, at its highest points, Anglicanism is a sort of buffer between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, capable of retaining a broad catholicism which suits the *Carmina* and their successors. All the main editors and composers of the new post-1960 collections have been, or are, Anglicans: G.R.D. MacLean, David Adam, Esther de Waal, Robert Van de Weyer.<sup>8</sup> Presbyterian interest in the history of

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<sup>7</sup> Hardinge's book, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London, 1972), provides a very useful overview of the theology of the 'Celtic Church'. It is unfortunate that the writer confuses Ireland with Britain.

<sup>8</sup> It is one of the ironies of this Anglican neo-Celtic movement that its protagonists have, to a considerable extent, underplayed the rich resources of pre-Conquest English (*i.e.* Anglo-Saxon) 'spirituality'. In England there are several early medieval church buildings which are still used regularly by the Anglican Church, and

Celtic Christianity is growing, however, as is evident in Andrew Patterson's recent booklet entitled *Whithorn, Iona and Lindisfarne: A Celtic Saga* (Saint Andrew Press, 1991). This is a piece of 'historical' narrative, aiming to show that Whithorn is central to the matrix of Celtic Christianity. The many difficulties and vexations involved in establishing an appropriate chronology and context for Nynia/Ninian are deftly avoided.<sup>9</sup>

The communities established through and by ecumenical ventures have been an important catalyst not only in the 'anglicising' but also in the 'easternising' of the new Celtic movement. Their frequent emphasis on contemplation and meditation provides a link with non-Christian faiths which have a strong contemplative element. For such, the lure of the 'remote Celtic island' is very attractive. Thus, in making a case for buying Holy

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at least one of these is pre-Viking. There is an extensive Anglo-Saxon literature of spiritual experience, ranging from homilies (by Aelfric, Wulfstan *etc.*) to poetry, some of it carved occasionally on magnificent Anglo-Saxon crosses (*e.g.* the famous excerpt from 'The Dream of the Rood' on the Ruthwell Cross). An awareness of the Anglo-Saxon heritage is certainly evident in the work of David Adam, who includes prayers by Anglo-Saxon saints in his *Edge of Glory*. However, the Anglo-Saxons play second fiddle to the Celts, and some writers confuse the cultural identities of the saints. This is to some extent understandable because of the interaction of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon missionary endeavour in such areas as Northumbria. However, it looks as if cultural assimilation has gone further in the minds of some writers than the evidence warrants. David Adam seems to regard Guthlac as a Celtic saint, when he was in reality an Anglo-Saxon one (*The Eye of the Eagle*, p.35). The apparent displacement of the Anglo-Saxon heritage is hard to explain. Perhaps Canterbury and its Rome-ward drift is both the problem and the inspiration to look elsewhere! Is it possible that, as ecumenism moves ahead within Anglicanism and as distinctive features are increasingly at risk, the Celts are brought on stage as a kind of cultural and emotional counter-balance? If only the Celts had won the day at the Synod of Whitby.... But they are winning now!

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent academic treatment of Nynia, see John MacQueen, *St Nynia* (2nd edition, Edinburgh, 1990).

Isle off Arran, Buddhists stated that 'the island would make a perfect retreat island – open to all faiths – because it offers an atmosphere of sacred calm, unspoilt beauty and peaceful isolation'. Here, surely, is an extension of the 'Iona model'. Its potential has been welcomed by one Scottish churchman, Bishop Michael Hare Duke, who claims that it offers 'tremendous attractions' (*Scotsman*, 23 November 1991).

### **Celts, Cults and Ecology**

With the wider religious world in mind, we must return from Iona and Lindisfarne to Little Gidding, and consider a final, broader perspective on the matter. Over the last twenty or twenty-five years there has been a massive change in the religious complexion of Britain.

I became aware of it in 1972, when my good friend, Hamish Robertson, left his research on Carmichael's *Carmina* and joined the World Unification Church of the Korean leader, Sun Myung Moon. From those early days of the '70s, the number of cults and sects and 'alternative religions' has mushroomed in Britain, to the extent that even HMSO has published (1989) a superb book by Dr Eileen Barker entitled *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*. Dr Barker reckons that there are about 500 such groups in Britain, and had to be selective in including 100 in the immensely useful appendix at the back of her book.<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me – and I make this claim rather hesitantly, pending further research – that there is a relationship between our neo-Celticism, as it has developed, and the concerns of some of these groups. I find the most interesting parallels between the Celtic evidence and what is collectively termed the 'New Age Movement', a conglomeration of old ideas and new, in effect the ecumenical movement of the cults. Dr Barker shows how it links with various -isms of the present day, and

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<sup>10</sup> *New Religious Movements*, p.148.

summarises its main concerns: 'Ecological issues take a high priority; one finds vegetarianism, "back-to-earth" communes, organic farming, home-spun textiles, cottage industries, alternative technology – usually with the conviction that "small-is-beautiful". The feminine is stressed; politics are decidedly Green.... Self-expression through dance, drama, pottery, or poetry is believed to promote creative energy – or enable the individual to tap into cosmic energy.'<sup>11</sup>

Now, it would be very wrong of me or Dr Barker to suggest that anyone who supports the Green Party or who enjoys making pottery is participating in the New Age.<sup>12</sup> There are many people who are properly concerned about the misuse of our environment and who have nothing to do with the New Age or indeed the Green Party; even Mrs Thatcher 'went green' in the midst of what I would call the 'Ecological Eighties'. It would be equally unwarranted to assume that our neo-Celticism is a branch of New Age thinking just because it shows characteristics of this astonishing medley of ideas and ideologies. It would, however, certainly be fair to say that, at the very least, both are reflecting contemporary concerns.

The view from Little Gidding, represented in Van de Weyer's introduction to his book, seems to me to read many of the burning issues of the present day into the Celtic literature that has been discovered. These concerns also surface in works by David Adam and Esther de Waal, but they are particularly prominent in Van de Weyer's

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<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, pp.188-92, for a very useful summary account of New Age concerns, including links with Zen Buddhism. There is, in fact, remarkably little in New Age thought that is truly new: it accommodates old heresies (Gnosticism) and the basic ideas of many ancient non-Christian world religions. It assimilates itself to Christianity too. The term 'New Age' refers to the Age of Aquarius, which has succeeded that of Pisces. No prizes for guessing that there is some astrological significance there!

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Dr Barker gives strong warnings about the dangers of generalisation when handling this sensitive subject.

introduction. Indeed, perhaps the main aim of introductions of this kind is to programme the mind so that the accompanying texts will be seen to be 'in tune' with modern concerns, whether or not these are integral to the texts. The environmental question comes first: 'As the scale of our ecological crisis becomes apparent, men and women are seeking a spirituality which embraces the natural order, kindling our love for the animals and birds, trees and insects with whom we share this fragile planet.... The Celtic fire had three main sources. The first was the ancient Druid religion....'

### **Enter Druids**

Druids are the darlings of several writers of the neo-Celtic literature, but they are portrayed in a very different light from the rather lurid hue which characterises the 'real' Druids observed in their proper Celtic context by the classical writers (Strabo, Caesar, Pliny, Tacitus, *etc.*). According to Van de Weyer, 'Druidic philosophy placed great emphasis on love and on forgiving the wrongs of others, and taught that those who were loving and merciful on this earth would receive eternal bliss. So conversion to Christianity involved no change in moral belief.... The Druid priesthood included both men and women, enjoying equal status; and this was maintained in the Celtic church....' This caricature of the Druids and their philosophy, which resembles the depiction of Getafix and Valuaddetax in *Asterix the Gaul*, curiously overlooks the evidence of the classical sources for the Druids' involvement in human sacrifice and divination based on the observation of human entrails. Are we to suppose that Celtic clerics continued these practices? The view that Celtic Christianity was another version of a happy, jolly-oak-groves sort of Druidism is simply not tenable. Although it is true that Christian clerics appear to have taken over some of the offices previously held by Druids, that is a far cry from the type of wholesale continuity envisaged by such writers as Van de Weyer. Such

speculation is to be taken with a pound of acorns. It shares its presuppositions with the fictitious neo-Druidism which emerged in the eighteenth century, particularly through the labours of the Welsh forger, Iolo Morgannwg. In reality, we know next to nothing about the existence of female Druids and comparatively little about any systematic Druidic philosophy within the ranks of the proper 'classical' variety of Druids.

Druids have, of course, a much more sinister alignment in the contemporary cults, where they are hardly the friends of the Christian faith. Dr Barker notes their connection with occultism and neo-paganism, the latter locating its power-points at Glastonbury and Stonehenge – names which must surely reverberate in the Celtic consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The contemporary debates of Anglicanism may well colour Van de Weyer's interpretation of the Druids and of much else that is allegedly Celtic. Concerns about the role of women in the church, the need for simpler structures, the question of authority – all of these peep out from the burning embers of the Celtic fire.

### **...Exit Celts – Towards the New Age?**

Modern problems afflicting Western humanity have undoubtedly boosted the revival of Celtic Christianity. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to claim dogmatically that modern Celtic Christianity is little more than New Ageism in disguise, any more than we can say that early Celtic Christianity was merely a variant of Druidism. Perhaps those who promote the neo-Celtic movement do so, not because they are New Agers or crypto-Druids, but because they see the Celtic path that they have discovered as a healthier, more 'holistic' way to travel, avoiding the dangers of neo-paganism, occultism and the New Age itself. They may also believe very sincerely that there is such a thing as a 'native spirituality' (native to

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-200.

the British Isles, that is), and that it can be reconstructed. It may be the merest coincidence that the concerns of certain writers reflect those of the New Age – a coincidence that can happen all too easily because of the pervasiveness of such ideas within modern society.

Even so, I have the feeling – just occasionally – that, however unwittingly, the Celtic movement, in some of its manifestations, is travelling towards the New Age. New Age buzz-words like ‘consciousness’ have come into discussion of Celtic matters, even at the scholarly level, and, like Shirley MacLaine,<sup>14</sup> Celts and neo-Celts can listen to their own ‘reverberations’ or (according to Esther de Waal) ‘fraternize with obscure parts of oneself, with one’s own depths’.<sup>15</sup>

If this is the case, one wonders where some of our neo-Celtic adventurers are going on their pilgrimage. Who is leading whom? And to what destination? When will Celtic prayers eventually be superseded by their New Age successors? I ask this question in all seriousness, because of a poem published in the *Scotsman* (8 September, 1990), by Bishop Michael Hare Duke of the Episcopal Diocese of St Andrews, Dunblane and Dunkeld. Note the question-mark in the title. The composer is asking the Iona community if it is going to accept the ‘New Age’ as a welcome visitor, if not a resident, within its walls.

**Iona: Womb for a New Age?**

Abbey or fortress?

Garrisoned by the encircling sheep

are your cloisters fenced

to shelter a fragile faithful?

Or is your table set

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<sup>14</sup> For a succinct introduction to Shirley MacLaine’s ‘spiritual adventures’ (*ipsa dixit*), see her *Going Within* (London, 1989). It is central to her thinking that she seeks the Higher Self within herself, and therein lies her concept of ‘God’.

<sup>15</sup> *A World Made Whole*, p.88.

with banqueting rites for all  
who stir at the quest  
of being?

When gnostic intellect,  
born again to a New Age, knocks  
should outraged divinity bar the door?  
Beyond the wall  
will demons snare  
the incautiously inquisitive?  
Or has faith designed an open house  
to fold the thoughtfully deviant  
and the unbridled pilgrim?

There is a confidence in questions.  
Ancient wisdom lights torches  
to probe the shadows of hidden places  
not mark salvation's flare path.

Fear cries 'crusade!'  
and under the banner of assurance  
rallies the anxious to the ramparts  
against the insurgent Spirit.

Heritors of the open sky,  
the fellowship of the Dove,  
lift, wheel and play,  
wings spread to catch the wind  
that blows  
over the risky deeps of liberty.

### **Conclusion**

The 'movement' surveyed in this article is seen to be such only when its various parts are brought together. These parts are certainly different in style and content, from the penetrating reflections of David Adam and the quiet explanatory expositions and anthologies of Esther de Waal, to the rather less cautious statements of Robert



Van de Weyer. In between these markers, we find collections of reprinted prayers, volumes of special pleading on behalf of sacred sites, 'historical' narratives *etc.* It is perhaps too much to say that we have everything from the sublime to the ridiculous, but the spectrum of writing is certainly broad. In fairness, each item needs to be assessed in its own right. Some might argue that there is no 'movement' of any kind, but a series of personal, individualised expressions of wonder at the beauty of the Celtic treasure-house, and an attempt to attract the attention of our godless world by displaying the glory of that house. Others might say that there is no revival either: just a few isolated outbreaks of spiritual Celtomania.

Nevertheless, in several writers there is a general consistency of approach, both in what is contained in their work and in what is omitted. Evangelical scholars will notice that there is much in the latter category: a theology of redemption through the atonement is not prominent; Pelagius is preferred to Augustine; and Celtic understanding and expression appear to have higher authority than the Scriptures. Again, generalisation of this nature has its dangers. David Adam, for example, frequently relates his Celtic explorations to the Scriptures, and, for this reason, his writings will be very meaningful to evangelical readers, who will surely appreciate much of his godly concern to find a way through the wall of modern unbelief.

In the lack of a scriptural foundation, so evident in several writers, lies a challenge to evangelical scholars and to evangelical churches. The balance needs to be redressed on the basis of Scripture. We must find ways of addressing the angsts of our age, using arguments that are both Bible-based and relevant. It is to the credit of the proponents of our neo-Celtic movement that they have tried to find a theology which accommodates and addresses the thorny issues of our time. It is a measure of our failure that they have found it necessary to build neo-

Celtic constructs of the kind that we have considered in this article. The challenge to Celtic scholars is no less. If we remain in the top storey of our round towers obliviously copying our parchments, who is to blame if we ignore the treasure buried beneath our foundations, and suddenly find that somebody with a metal-detector has discovered it and presented it for exhibition in a sparkling display-centre? Can we complain if that centre is equipped with a range of modern mirrors which enlarge – and distort – the artefacts?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This article was first presented as a talk to the Church of Scotland Society at the University of Edinburgh in October 1991.