

SURVEYING THE SAINTS: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT WRITINGS ON 'CELTIC CHRISTIANITY'

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In the Spring 1992 issue of this *Bulletin*, I called attention to the vogue for modern 'Celtic Christianity'.¹ Here I shall comment on changes that have become evident in the direction of the movement since I wrote my first papers on the subject in the early 1990s, and then I shall offer a survey of recent writings and interpretations of sources. In conclusion, I shall provide a brief overview of recent scholarly writing on Scottish saints.

Popular 'Celtic Christianity'

In essence, 'Celtic Christianity' is a popular quest for a form of early British and Irish Christianity which is free from the great sins and failures of medieval and modern Christianity in the West. 'Celtic Christianity' and the 'Celtic Church', as defined by the proponents of the new popular movement, are the antidotes to the religious angsts of our time. In contrast to the conventional structures of church and state, 'Celtic Christianity' and the 'Celtic Church' are perceived to be native, holistic growths; they represent a well of forgotten purity, whose waters flowed out copiously, and indeed (some would argue) continue to flow still, in small but potent supply, ever available to meet the pains of our time, to protect the environment, erode unnecessary ecclesiastical structures, and nourish such highly desirable developments as the ministry of women in the church. 'Celtic Christianity', in short, tends to scratch the many itches of our ecclesiastical bodies, public and personal.²

Given the profusion of our itches, it is hardly surprising that this interpretation of early Christianity in the British Isles crosses denominational, and even religious, boundaries. It is also growing in its popularity, as is witnessed by the endless stream of publications claiming to expound some dimension of the theme.

¹ Donald Meek, 'Modern Celtic Christianity: The Contemporary "Revival" and its Roots', *SBET* 10 (1992), pp. 6-31.

² Donald E. Meek, 'Modern Celtic Christianity', in *Studia Imagologica: Amsterdam Studies on Cultural Identity* 8 (1996), pp. 143-57. This volume of *Studia* is entitled *Celticism*, and is edited by Terence Brown.

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The popular brand of 'Celtic Christianity' is to be distinguished carefully from the properly academic study of the history of early Christianity in the British Isles in the period before 1100.

Patterns of Popular Publication

The popular books on 'Celtic Christianity' published in the 1980s can be divided into two broad groups: devotional literature, aimed at those who wish to use 'Celtic' models of prayer and reflection in public or private worship, as in the work of David Adam; and descriptive volumes, explaining the main themes of Celtic Christianity and stressing the differences between it and the present-day Christianity, as in the work of Ian Bradley and Esther de Waal.³

Since the late 1980s, 'Celtic Christianity' has developed an academic respectability, and has worked its way into the curricula of some colleges and universities. This is reflected in the anthologies of 'Celtic' texts which are being made available for the benefit of students. These anthologies are very wide in their sweep, containing material from the hagiographers of the Dark Ages to the modern poets of the twentieth century; see, for example, *Celtic Christian Spirituality*, edited by Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie (SPCK, 1995, £15.99), which provides all its material in translation, and thus leaves the properly Celtic linguistic dimension out of consideration. The terms 'Celtic' and 'Christian' in such contexts seem to be capable of infinite expansion, almost to the point of meaninglessness.

It is probably fair to say that there has been a change of direction in the more popular publications too since the early 1990s. Several seem to lay particular emphasis on the saints. There are various reasons for this increase in the saintly profile. There is the very obvious booster-rocket provided by the Columba anniversary itself, which coincides with the Augustine anniversary, and has managed to pull other saints like Ninian into its orbit. Authors have been very busy meeting the challenges of anniversary-driven publishers' deadlines. Furthermore, the 1990s were designated 'The Decade of Evangelism', particularly by ecclesiastical bodies south of the border. The Anglican Church affirmed the importance of the Celts as role-models for evangelistic strategy in the British Isles, and the Celtic saints have been seen as the principal

³ Earlier works and patterns of publication are discussed in the two articles cited in notes 1 and 2.

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exemplars of desirable, indeed essential, missionary outreach to post-Christian Britain.

The patterns of publication tend to confirm several of the trends which were first noted in my 1992 article. It is now apparent that Anglicans, in particular, have turned 'Celtic Christianity' into a growth industry. It is specially noticeable that the majority of writers have an Anglican background, and that several hold high office in the Anglican Church. Bishops are not infrequent contributors. One of the most recent volumes, *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996, £8.95), was written for the Decade of Evangelism by John Finney, Bishop of Pontefract and formerly Anglican officer for the Decade of Evangelism. Anglicans appear to be rather uncertain about their identity these days, and this may be why they are recovering the 'Celtic' past in a big way. It is a very proper and very dapper sort of past, but it tends to lean away from Rome and Canterbury, towards Lindisfarne and Iona.

There is some interest too from within Roman Catholicism; Cardinal Basil Hume is among the latest writers, with his recent book, *Footsteps of the Northern Saints* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996, £7.95), in which he affirms Lindisfarne as the cradle of Celtic Christianity. The Cardinal, however, is not concerned to present a brief for Celtic Christianity, and the saints whom he describes are predominantly Anglo-Saxon: Paulinus, Aidan, Hilda, Theodore of Tarsus, Benedict Biscop, Wilfrid and Cuthbert. Cardinal Hume's book is really quite different from the usual popular volumes on 'Celtic Christianity'. It is much better focused, since the Cardinal views the saints from his own position as an overseer, and draws lessons from their lives; it is also better balanced than most, since it takes a wider sweep, allowing the Canterbury mission into its purview.

Cardinal Hume's greater emphasis on the non-Celtic saints underlines a difference of perspective between the Catholic side of the movement, and the Anglican side, certainly in England. It is fascinating that Anglicans have so obviously forsaken their own home-grown, Anglo-Saxon saints, and have 'bought in' to the Celtic variety. Generally, writers are at pains to contrast the 'Roman' and 'Celtic' dimensions of mission, with the 'Celts' much in favour, and the 'Romans' portrayed as Latinised, hierarchical, imperialist, power-mad tyrants. The Celts, on the other hand, are indigenised, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, democratic evangelisers.

From a Scottish perspective, it is interesting that there are still so few Scots, and notably so few Presbyterians, who have taken up the popular cause of the 'Celts' and their saints, even in this period of increasing

national consciousness. This is particularly fascinating because Scots like the Free Kirker, the Revd Thomas McLauchlan, in the mid-nineteenth century were among the first to reconstruct the 'Celtic Church' to bolster the claims and credibility of Presbyterianism. Perhaps Scots are wise enough to understand that the sort of 'Celtic Church' which the 'Celtic Christianity' writers advocate as a means of bringing Anglicans and Presbyterians together is exactly the kind of church that they do *not* want.

Conquering the 'Fringes'

From their southern perspectives, most of our writers reach out to embrace the northern 'fringes' of the British Isles, often placing a great deal of emphasis on what might be termed the 'purity of the periphery'. Within an historiographical framework, if the movement deserves to be seen in that way, it is apparent that this is another, more populist, version of the Anglocentric history with which we poor Celts have been saddled across the centuries. It looks out from an imperial centre, conducts an ideological reconquest of the 'fringe' areas of the British Isles, and reconstructs their history in a rather self-indulgent way. Those of us who inhabit the fringes find this kind of writing a little patronising.

The writers are probably unaware that they are subscribing to an agenda of this kind; the view from Pontefract is hardly likely to be interrupted by major cultural mountains, and there is little evidence that the writers have conducted much research into the original documents. Most (though not all) are not concerned with the primary sources of information, and occasional slips of the pen tell their own story. Thus, John Finney writes on his second page:

In A.D. 597 two symbolic events took place. The Celtic St Columba died at Lindisfarne and the Roman St Augustine came to Canterbury. The Iona Community should take due note of this subtle bit of asset-stripping – or should we call it 'relic-snatching'? – and extract some form of compensation from Darton, Longman and Todd. This would allow it to buy a modern, electronic, state of the art, mort-safe. A kind of ultra-sophisticated version of the Monymusk Reliquary, which could sniff out snatchers within a ten-mile radius, would do the job nicely.

Rejecting Romanticism

Recent writers like John Finney are very much aware of, and address themselves to, the dangers of oversimplification and romanticism, but they are not able to confront the issues with complete charity. The 'Celtic' side invariably wins out in such books, most notably in Ray Simpson's volume, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, £7.99), and it is seen as the better model for evangelism at the end

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of the twentieth century. Simpson draws extensively on the lives of the saints for his material, but he is also heavily indebted to non-Celtic commentators. His work shows the standard hallmarks of this kind of volume, notably in its romantic idealism, which Finney tries to counteract.

It has to be said, nevertheless, that there is a growing awareness of the over-romanticised perspectives of earlier writers, and that some degree of sobering up is now evident. Properly scholarly books such as *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, edited by Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Márkus (see below), are gradually having a salutary effect. The corrective power of excellent presentations of this kind can be seen within the academic wing of the 'Celtic Christianity' movement; it is most evident in Ian Bradley's book on *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* (Wild Goose Publications, 1996, £6.99) which offers a very lively and useful introduction to Columba, and includes some interesting passages of recantation with regard to the author's earlier perspectives on both the 'Celtic Church' and 'Celtic Christianity'.

Since the early 1990s also, the saints generally have gained a much higher profile. Indeed, there are books which consist of little homilies on the saints, designed to meet the needs of the modern day, notably Michael Mitton's *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995, £7.95). In this book the saints' biographies are used to give guidance in particular concerns of life.

(Mis)representing the Saints

The modern, popular presentation of sanctity tends to focus on a number of set themes, determined more by the needs of contemporary society than by the sources. Here, I will select a few individual volumes, and discuss four of these themes. In so doing, I hope to give Columba more emphasis than I propose to give to the other saints.

Paganising the Saints

The relationship between 'pagan and Christian' is prominent within the reconstructed popular paradigms of sanctity. 'Celtic Christianity' often enthuses over the way in which the Celtic saints absorbed or internalised aspects of pagan, pre-Christian culture. This perspective is developed in John Marsden's volume, *Sea-road of the Saints* (Floris Books, 1995, £9.99). This little volume is scarcely to be compared with the more popular volumes that I have already alluded to; it sits between scholarly studies and popular pot-boilers. On the whole, it is reliable and trustworthy, and one of its strengths is Marsden's swift and effective

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dismissal of the so-called 'Celtic Church', although (sadly) he comes under the spell of the equally elusive 'Irish Church'. The author's handling of place-names and other aspects of history is not always strong, but his structure and approach are refreshingly sane. However, one of his key themes is the relationship between early Irish saints and druids. In particular, he sees Columba as one who has taken over the role of the druid in Celtic society. Thus, Marsden argues, the intensity of Columba's visions in Hinba (Iona) is to be explained partly by the way in which the saint has taken on the role of the druid in early Ireland and Scotland:

Much as the druid entered into a trance before proclaiming a pagan king, it is more than likely that Columba would have entered upon a regime of solitude, prayer and fasting to resolve a political crisis. Such extremes of ascetic practice ... induced the visionary experience of the holy man in the ancient Irish church and such visions were regularly recruited to underwrite the intervention of the saint in affairs of state (pp. 111-12).

The parallel between the druid and the saint on this occasion is something of a long shot, a contextual parallel rather than a claim for absorption or direct influence, but elsewhere in the volume Marsden sees the saints as indebted to the druids:

So numerous are the druidic aspects of the ancient Irish church that it must have been through the druid that the Irish holy man inherited a spiritual consciousness with its roots deep in the Celtic, even the pre-Celtic, past (p. 31).

The problem here is that one is really talking about generalities, rather than specifics. The role of the druid in early Celtic societies is by no means homogeneous through time or place, and the type of druid which such writers envisage as the precursor or even the prototype of the Irish saint is generally very benign, quite different from the sort of druids who operated in Gaul in Julius Caesar's time. Furthermore, saints and holy men who probed the mysteries of heaven through ecstatic experiences are known from the accounts of the Desert Fathers, and owe little to druids. Saint Paul had visions of this kind too, and it is worth bearing in mind that, in Adomnán, Columba is very much a New Testament saint. Adomnán and Dallán Forgaill, who composed an elegy on Columba, and also links Columba with angels, are not, in my view, showing a man who is a successor to druids, but rather the real ascetic, up sides with the best of the visionaries of Christian, rather than pagan, tradition. Adomnán is anxious to demonstrate that Columba is able to renounce the world for longish periods, and that he can commune directly with the heavenly realms, in a way that parallels the transfiguration of Christ. This portrayal

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of his sanctity is used to give Columba tremendous authority when selecting candidates for kingship, for example. Unlike Adomnán, modern writers, influenced by syncretistic tendencies, are anxious to present evidence for a compromise between paganism and Christianity, and druids are a handy means towards that end. It is, however, evident that writers are now rather less inclined to find parallels for the visions and miracles of the saints in the alleged paganism of the Celtic past, and are turning more effectively, and in my view more fairly, to the Bible.

Domesticating the Saints

It is evident that several modern writers on the 'Celtic' saints are keen to show that they are a very accessible breed, both homely and kind. Thus, Esther de Waal writes in her latest book, entitled *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1996, £7.99):

Celtic saints are approachable, close at hand, woven quite naturally into life, just as would be any other member of an extended family. It is this which sets them apart from the great saints of the Western Church, who were made saints by formal canonisation through the process of a centralised ecclesiastical machinery.

De Waal's portrayal of the saints is heavily influenced by the presentation of their role in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and seems to me to give insufficient weight to the way in which the saints have been reconstructed across the centuries. The Columba who was known in the nineteenth-century Highlands was a far cry from the Columba of the so-called Dark Ages. Columba of the charms and incantations is usually a gentle figure (*Calum Cille caomh*, 'gentle Colum of the Cell'), more involved in the protection and enabling of human life and activity than in struggles to maintain and extend his authority and influence.

Protection and enabling of human activity were indeed features of the saints of the Dark Ages, and, as Ian Bradley duly notes, Adomnán's portrait of Columba has these attributes. However, it seems to me that the modern balance has tipped more markedly towards the gentle side of Columba's nature, and of that of the so-called Celtic saints more generally. Re-reading the *Life of Columba* recently in Richard Sharpe's excellent edition (see below), I was very struck, particularly when going through Columba's prophecies in Book I, by how very powerful and awesomely terrifying he could be. His capacity to foretell the death of miscreants is quite frightening, quite *unapproachable* at times, and even those who are honourable and seek his help seem to die very soon after they have come into contact with the saint. This is not the sort of saint we usually see in modern writings on Celtic Christianity; the 'new Columba' is an ecumenist and a warm-hearted evangelist, going out among people,

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rather than standing apart from them. The portrait of Columba in Adomnán is, in my view, a fairly complex one, with many dimensions and many nuances aimed at establishing the saint's authority in numerous different fields. Modern writing tends to have its own set of agendas too, and to pick and choose accordingly.

Saints and Animals

If there is one theme above others which is often explored by the new writers on the saints, it is that of the environment. Saints, including Columba, are generally portrayed as very environment-friendly, setting up the precursors of the animal sanctuaries of our time. The starting-point of this interpretation of Columba is in the famous incident, recorded by Adomnán (I.48), in which the saint shows great kindness to a crane (or heron, according to Sharpe). The line that is taken by popular writers is that the saint is here showing his concern for creation or for hospitality 'for all God's creatures' (see Simpson, p. 70). That may be true in a very general way, but it is not at all the point that Adomnán is making. According to Adomnán, the important thing about the crane, in Columba's estimation, is that it comes from the north of Ireland, from the very region of Columba's ancestors (*de nostrae paternitatis regione*). It is therefore worthy of great care and attention. Here Columba is affirming his Irish ancestral roots, and the crane acts as a specific link between the exile and his homeland. It is worth noting too that the motif of a bird which travels between different members of a kin, especially between an exiled member and the family in the homeland, is known elsewhere in Celtic literature. The very specific, kin-based nature of Columba's interest in the crane is overlooked consistently by the popular writers.

Mission and Peregrination

Another theme which is currently pursued in the popular books has a direct bearing on the exile of Columba, and on that of many other saints – namely *peregrinatio*. It too is currently being reinterpreted in the light of modern agendas. John Finney, at the end of his book *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission*, writes:

When a large group of people are not Christian, living in a society which has attitudes and an ethos which is not Christian, then the Celtic model of evangelism is more effective. Such evangelism needs to make room for the *peregrinati*; in modern terms these are the travelling evangelists and church-planters and the religious orders and places like Lee Abbey and Iona who are experimenting with small houses set in inner-city areas (p. 141).

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One has to work one's way carefully through a statement like that because it includes so many different strands of interpretation, all of which seem to me to be stretching the concept of *peregrinatio* (and associated terms) well beyond the intentions and aims of the Celtic saints. When Columba left Ireland on his *peregrinatio*, was mission in the modern sense his first priority? Personally, I think not; the aim of the *peregrinatio* was to escape from the masses, to go into seclusion, in order to contemplate God and the things of God. That was the spirit of the Desert Fathers too, and of many other Celtic saints besides Columba. *Peregrinatio*, if interpreted in the 'Celtic' manner, could lead to a mass exodus of clergy from England to the remotest bounds of the globe, rather than to a major engagement with local society – and few participants would survive to write their memoirs.

It is certainly true that, in certain cases, saints evangelised parts of the lands in which they finally established their bases, but evangelism of the people was not, as I see it, their first priority, at least not in every case. Some were recluses, while others were more outward-going types. We must therefore draw distinctions between different holy men and their motives, between, for example, Columba of Iona and Aidan of Lindisfarne, and we must be very careful that we pay due attention to the different motives for their respective careers, to say nothing of the perspectives that writers like Adomnán and Bede brought to bear on their subjects. The people-friendly Aidan, so lovingly portrayed by Bede, seems to me to stand in sharp contrast to those other earlier British clerics who did not evangelise the Anglo-Saxons, and incurred Bede's disdain. Motives, methods and means all varied, right across the spectrum. The liberal misuse of the term 'Celtic' all too often disguises these differences.

It can be said that the 'Celtic' saints are very much at the forefront of evangelistic thinking these days. They are at the heart of 'Celtic Christianity'. They are seen to be relevant to the needs of the late twentieth century. But the question which scholars must ask is whether our Celtic saints, thus dressed in twentieth-century garb, are the real Celtic saints, and, if we respond with a resounding 'No!', we must then ask ourselves how we define 'the real Celtic saints'. Where can we find the real Columba?

Saints and Scholars

That question is not easily answered, because Columba and other saints have been reconstructed across the centuries. Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* is arguably a reconstruction of the saint in a manner which meets the needs of Adomnán and his church, but it does have the advantage that the

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writer was some thirteen hundred years nearer to the actual person. We will be helped towards discovering the nature of the early saints, not by adding another layer of fabrication to the picture, but by consulting the work of scholars whose aim is to dig into the early sources rather than construct their own romantic archetypes.

Those who wish a reliable general account of the saints and their *peregrinationes* will enjoy Lisa M. Bitel's book, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Community in Early Ireland* (Cork University Press, 1993, £12.95). Unlike the devotees of 'Celtic Christianity', Bitel emphasises the harsh realities of being an exile for the sake of Christ: 'Although famous, the exiles were few; most monks stayed safely at home. Only saints and saintly monks survived voluntary exile. This was because only saints needed no shelter, food, or human companionship' (p. 222). She underlines the potentially destructive effect of such exile on monastic communities, since it 'contradicted ordinary monastic existence' (p. 228).

Columba has been well served by academic writers since the early 1990s, and here we may note that modern Scots (to their credit) are, on the whole, more inclined to saintly scholarship than to romantic reconstructionism. The fine edition of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* by Allan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, first published in 1961, was revised by the latter and republished by Oxford University Press in 1991 (£45.00), in a compact form. This edition remains essential for any serious work on the saint. This was followed in 1995 by Richard Sharpe's translation of the *Vita* in the Penguin Classics series, under the title *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (£8.99). Sharpe, an Oxford scholar, provides a very useful *vademecum* for those who may be daunted by the scale and price of the Andersons' edition. It contains substantial notes and an excellent historical and literary introduction, with a section on 'The modern legend of St Columba' which deals with the modern reconstruction of the saint and is very relevant to the theme of this article. The focus on the Latin *Life* of the saint has been complemented by the study of poetry associated with Columba and Iona, edited and set in context most accessibly by Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus in their volume, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh University Press, £12.95). While it cannot be proved that all the poems in the volume were composed at Iona, they are concerned with, or linked to, Columba, and provide a further dimension to our understanding of how he was perceived, not least within an Irish / Gaelic cultural context. The introduction to the volume and to individual poems sometimes draws proper and just attention to the contrast between

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the theology of the poems and that popularly regarded as constituting 'Celtic Christianity'.

Over the last fifteen years or so, steady work has been done on the Scottish saints by Alan Macquarrie, who has written a large number of seminal articles in scholarly journals. These have now been gathered together with some further unpublished writing in a single volume, *The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History AD 450-1093* (John Donald, 1997, £14.95). This well-paced and readable book is securely rooted in the primary sources, and currently forms the single most substantial general work relating to the Scottish saints, including Columba. Those who wish to struggle free from the spell of 'Celtic Christianity' will be safely guided by the firm tread of this diligent scholar.

Less weighty volumes, which are nevertheless distinct from those of popular 'Celtic Christianity', are also appearing, among them Donald Smith's well-illustrated publication, *Celtic Travellers: Scotland in the Age of the Saints* (HMSO, 1997, £3.99). This surveys the Scottish saints on a regional basis, and the reader can travel around, using the book to discover the saints and saints' cults within specific localities. The writer recognises the dangers of that word 'Celtic' – but it is nevertheless used in the title. In the context of 'travellers', while describing the saints, it may give an entirely new gloss to the significance of those ancient, but colourful, buses which occasionally participate in peregrinations and adorn remote Scottish lay-bys.

The profusion of publications from the pens of those who subscribe to the popular version of 'Celtic Christianity' are thus being balanced by a continuing concern with the properly scholarly analysis of surviving evidence. It is to be hoped that the latter will have a beneficial, corrective effect on the former. If 'Celtic Christianity' becomes less trendy, less pseudo-'Celtic', and more realistic in its assessments and perspectives as a result of the 1400th Anniversary of the death of Columba, the saint will not have lived – or died – in vain.