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EARLY CHRISTIANITY OF IRELAND.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

## ST. COLUMBA—521—597.

BY THE REV. S. HARVEY GEM, M.A.

**S**T. COLUMBA was born in Donegal. The year of his birth is alleged to be A.D. 521. "Colum" meant a dove, in Latin, "Columba." "Columkill" in Gaelic signified "Columba of the Church." He was descended from royal races both on his father's and on his mother's side. His father's family were Neills, now represented by the O'Donnells. After studying in various parts of Ireland under some of the most learned teachers of the day, he was ordained priest. Returning to his native region, he founded a monastery at what is now Derry or Londonderry. The spot was called Daire Calguish, from an oak grove there, whence came the name of Derry. Some springs in the neighbourhood are still called St. Columb's Wells. Not very long after he founded another monastery, that of Durrow, also named from an oak grove. This was near the centre of Ireland. There again there is a well that commemorates Columba.

During the remaining years of his sojourn in Ireland he established several other monasteries, the most noted of which was Kells in Westmeath. Some sensational legends, which implicate the Saint in connection with an Irish battle, need not be repeated here, as they are not considered authentic by expert students, and can be read in modern accounts of his life.

When about the age of forty, he decided to go out as a missionary. He chose the South-West of North Britain to begin with, as there was already a settlement of his countrymen there in the region which is now Argyllshire. The Irish were then called Scoti, and from them, eventually, North Britain obtained the name of Scotland. That country was at this period known as Alba, or Alban, a Gaelic word.

He took twelve companions with him, and trusting themselves to an osier boat, covered with oxhide, and propelled by sail and

<sup>1</sup> The first article in this series, "Early Christianity of Ireland: St. Patrick—432—461," appeared in the *CHURCHMAN* for January.

oars, they landed on the south-west coast, and obtained from the chieftain or king the grant of the island of Iona. The spot where they went ashore on this, is still called "Port na Curaich," the bay of the coracle. An island was probably chosen as affording retirement after missionary excursions. Security it did not guarantee, for during the early monastic age, massacres of the brethren by the Danes are recorded on three occasions. The Irish called it "red martyrdom" to die for Christ and "white martyrdom" to live and endure bravely for Him."

The island of Iona was at first called Iou. Adamnan the eighth successor of Columba, who wrote his life, Latinized the name by adding an "a," making it Ioua, and mediaeval scribes mistaking the "u," changed this letter into "n," whence the later designation of "Iona." "It<sup>1</sup> is a pleasant little island, three miles and a quarter long from north to south, and a mile across the middle. There are hill and dell, wet heathery upland and fertile plain, sea-cliff and silvery sand. Only a few small trees exist, and all near man's habitations. The arable land is a belt across the island." The monks were careful in observing the usual hours of prayer, which included a service at midnight, but were active in bodily labour, and besides their farming, they occupied themselves in fishing, boatbuilding, carpentry, and metal work. The copying of manuscripts was a constant task, and great skill in illuminating these in colours was attained. Designs of interlaced colours were characteristic of the Celtic books, and the so-called book of Kells, attributed to the eighth century, shows the continuance of this elaborate art. Thus Iona was by no means destitute of learning, and Adamnan, the biographer of Columba, was a well-read student.

In making his missionary start from the South-West, Columba was not altogether among heathen, and we ought to notice that two saintly men had reached Argyllshire before him: St. Kieran, who has been regarded as the patron saint of that shire, and St. Brendan. They do not appear, however, to have settled there permanently, but to have subsequently visited Columba. But

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is from a most interesting book, by the Rev. E. C. Trenholme, S.S.J.E., *The Story of Iona*. Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1909. It has excellent photographs, taken by Miss Richmond, granddaughter of the well-known Evangelical Rector of Turvey, Leigh Richmond, who had visited Iona, and won the regard of the islanders.

Columba's settlement in Iona was intended from the first to be permanent, a citadel from which his monks could go forth from age to age for their holy war. There, apart from the turmoil of earthly life, the brethren could prepare themselves by lonely prayer, and secret self-discipline, for their beneficent incursions into a world lying in wickedness. For of course they well knew that their future efficiency to help on others must be preceded by efforts after holiness in their own hearts and characters. In that solitude, broken only by the cry of the sea-gull and the roar of the waves, they might hope, after the example of St. John, to receive some visions of the heavenly world, and to hear from above the celestial message which they were to bear into far different scenes. Yet even there, the life of the brethren could not be entirely hidden. Their neighbours on the mainland soon began to ask what that life could be, what mysterious secret could lie behind it, which combined so successfully heavenly aspirations with earthly labour. "Soon and frequently loud cries were heard from the other side of the straits. These shouts were the signal for the monastery boat to put across and ferry the strangers over to the island, strangers coming with different motives, some to seek alms, or medicines for illness, others with the genuine desire to be taught to commune with spiritual things."

Though at first the companions of Columba consisted only of the twelve whom he had brought from Ireland, it was not long before they received numerous accessions from the British and even the Saxon tribes. Eventually it became necessary to send off colonies to the neighbouring isles, and to the mainland, to found monasteries and to build churches, and though these were chiefly of wooden construction, and therefore very simple, they were no less effective for spiritual uses, and all of them owned allegiance to the Abbot of Iona.

In all these good influences the Abbot Columba was an excellent leader. He was foremost alike in prayer and in work. He had many natural gifts which fitted him in an eminent degree for his enterprise. He was not less a man because called to be a saint. "Tall of stature, of a vigorous and athletic frame, of a ruddy and joyous countenance, he possessed an extraordinary power of winning the love of all with whom he came in contact.. He was celebrated also for the strength of his voice, which could be heard at an amazing

distance. He could render aid in any emergency. He could guide the boat, grind the corn in the handmill, arrange the medicine for the sick, and overlook and share the farm work, just as well as he could exercise a refined delicacy in the copying of manuscripts."

After a while, a great opportunity occurred of bringing the sanctifying influences of religion to bear upon secular affairs. On the death of the King of South-Western Scotland, and the succession of a relative, the ceremony of consecration was performed by Columba himself in the monastery of Iona: an event which marks the beginning of a subsequent monarchy of Scotland. Later on, many of the Kings of Scotland were buried in the sacred soil of Iona.

But Caledonia was very far as yet from being under the rule of one predominant King, and the tribes which inhabited it were widely divided from each other. The intrepid Columba was not satisfied to labour only among the South-Western tribes that had come from his own beloved Ireland; he decided to penetrate into the northern regions of Britain. We are to recognize, however, says Bishop Stubbs, that his attempt to Christianize Northern Britain was only one attempt among others, but we must allow that it was the greatest. With a few companions Columba climbed the wild mountains of central Scotland, crossed Loch Ness in a frail skiff, and penetrated to Craig Phadrick near what is now Inverness, where the Northern chieftain-ruler of the fierce Picts held his court.

Receiving him somewhat unwillingly at first, the chieftain eventually permitted the exercise of his missionary labours, and defended him against the enmity of the Druids. Columba penetrated the wild defiles of the mountains, preaching the Word of God, sometimes with, sometimes without the aid of an interpreter. But even the dangers of North Britain were not sufficient for the energy of the Saint and his hardy companions. "Committing themselves<sup>1</sup> to their boats of osier covered with skins, they braved the perils of the Northern Sea, and carried the message of the Cross as far as the Orkney Islands." In the island of Skye memorials of the visit of Columba exist to this day, in the names of the bay called Loch Columkill, and the islands called Gilean Columkill. Nor was this all; for according to traditions accepted by Dr. Maclear and others, the disciples of Columba learnt to despise the terrors of the open sea, and navigated their frail vessels to the Shetland and Faroe

<sup>1</sup> Maclear: *Apostles of Mediæval Europe*.

Islands. Besides their coracles, they used boats formed out of trees hollowed out.

The life written by Adamnan shows, among other points, the interest which Columba had learnt from the Gospel of Christ to take in the poor, and in working people who in those days were regarded as of small account. This appears an important point, as showing the leavening effect of Christianity.

“ A certain blacksmith was living in the central portion of Ireland (then called Scotland), very intent on almsdeeds, and abounding in other acts of righteousness ; when this man, surnamed Coilrigin, was come to his latter end in a good old age, in the same hour in which he was led forth from the body, St. Columba, then living in the island of Iona, thus spoke to some few seniors who were standing around : ‘ Coilrigin, the blacksmith, has not laboured in vain ; for out of the labour of his own hands has he, a happy purchaser, obtained eternal rewards. For, behold, now is his soul carried by holy angels to the joys of the heavenly country. For whatever he was able to acquire by the business of his craft, he spent upon alms for the poor ’ ” (p. 118).

In like manner, at another time, the holy man, while living in the island of Iona, one day, raising his eyes to heaven, spoke these words : “ Happy woman, happy for thy holy life, whose soul even now the holy angels of God are carrying to Paradise ! ” Now there was a certain religious brother, an Englishman, and a baker, engaged in baker’s work, who had heard this word proceeding from the mouth of the Saint. And on the same day of the month, at the end of that year, the Saint says to the same man, Genese the Saxon, “ I see a wonderful thing. Behold, the woman I spoke of a year ago in thy presence is now meeting in the air the soul of a certain peasant, her husband, and together with holy angels is fighting for that soul against hostile powers ; by their assistance, and the righteousness of the same poor man recommending him, his soul is snatched from the contentions of demons and led through to the place of eternal refreshment.”

An incident in the last hours of Columba shows his tenderness to the inferior creatures, a tenderness which, in that rough and cruel age, he must have learnt from the sanctifying influences of Christianity. But in his previous life we find the following incident related by Adamnan. The prophetic part may be legendary, but

the kernel of the story sounds real, and it would be unlikely to be a mere invention.

“ While the Saint was living in the island of Iona, he calls one of the brethren to him, and thus addresses him, on the third day from this that is breaking. Thou oughtest to sit on the sea-shore, and look out in the western part of the island ; for from the northern part of Ireland, a certain guest, a crane to wit, beaten by the winds during long and circuitous aerial flights, will arrive after the ninth hour of the day, very weary and fatigued, and its strength being almost gone, it will fall down before thee, and lie on the beach. Thou wilt take care to lift it up tenderly, and carry it into some neighbouring house ; and whilst it is there hospitably received, thou wilt diligently feed it, attending to it for three days and three nights, and then, unwilling to sojourn with us any longer, it will return with fully recovered strength to its former sweet home in Ireland, whence it came, and I so earnestly commend it to thee, because it comes from our Fatherland. The brother obeys—when it is come,—fallen, he lifts it from the beach ; weak, he bears it to the hospice ; hungry, he feeds it ; and when he has returned to the monastery in the evening, the Saint says, ‘ God bless thee, my son, for that thou hast well attended to our stranger guest, which will not tarry long in its wanderings, but after three days will return to its native land.’ And after being lodged three days, it first lifted itself up on high by flying from the earth in the presence of its ministering host ; then after looking out its way in the air for a little while, it crossed the ocean wave and returned to Ireland in a straight course of flight on a calm day.”

After thirty years’ labour in Britain the holy Columba was anxious to pass away to his rest with the Lord. But for the sake of the churches, he was, as he says himself, delayed for four more years.

“ He told his disciples that for many days he had been praying for his release, that he might go to his heavenly Fatherland. But, as he added, the prayers of many churches had gone up to God that he might stay longer with them, and four years were added to his life. At the completion of the four years his end was approaching. One day, in the month of May, the old man, now worn out with age, was drawn in a cart to visit the brethren at work in the western part of the island, about a mile from the monastery, and calling to them he began to say, ‘ During the Paschal solemnities in April,

with desire I desired to depart to the Lord Christ, as He had granted I should if I preferred it. But lest the festival of joy should be turned for you into mourning, I wished to put off for a while longer the day of my departure from the world' ” (*v. Bp. Dowden*, pp. 112-20). And then, still seated in the cart, he turned his face to the east and blessed both the island and them that dwelt therein. When he had finished the words of blessing he was carried back to the monastery. (For these last days, see the *Life of Columba*, by *Adamnan*, edited by Dr. Fowler, from which some of these passages are quoted.)<sup>1</sup>

And so the venerable man at the end of the same week, that is on the Sabbath day (Saturday), himself and his dutiful attendant Diormit, go to bless the granary, which was close at hand. On entering which, when he blessed both it and two heaps of corn that were stored therein, he uttered these words with giving of thanks, saying, “ I greatly congratulate the monks of my household that this year also, if I should have to depart from you to any place, ye will have enough for the year.” On hearing this saying, Diormit his attendant began to be sorrowful, and to speak thus: “ In the course of this year, Father, thou art often making us sorrowful, because thou so frequently makest mention of thy departure.” The venerable man in the next place thus speaks: “ This day is in the sacred volumes called Sabbath, which is, being interpreted, Rest. And for me this day is a Sabbath indeed, because it is the last day of this my present laborious life, in which I take my rest after all the weariness of my labours. And in the middle of this most solemn night (eve) of the Lord’s day that is now coming, according to the saying of the Scriptures, ‘ I shall go the way of my fathers.’ For even now my Lord Jesus Christ deigneth to invite me, to Whom, I say, in the middle of this night, I shall depart, at His invitation. For thus it hath been revealed unto me by the Lord Himself.” The attendant on hearing these sad words began to weep bitterly, but the Saint endeavoured to console him as well as he could.

After this, the Saint goes out of the granary, and, returning to the monastery, sits down at the half-way, in which place a cross, afterwards fixed in a millstone, and standing at this day, is to be seen on the side of the road. And while the Saint, feeble with age, as I said before, sat down for a little while and rested in that place,

<sup>1</sup> *Adamni Vita S. Columbae, with translation*; edited by Dr. Fowler, F.S.A. Oxford, Clarendon Press.



behold ! there comes up to him the white horse, that faithful servant that used to carry the milk-pails between the cow-pasture (or byre ?) and the monastery. This creature then coming up to the Saint, wonderful to say, putting its head in his bosom, knowing that his master would soon depart from him, and that he would see his face no more, began to utter plaintive moans, and, as if a man, to shed tears in abundance into the Saint's lap, and so to weep. Which when the attendant saw, he began to drive away that weeping mourner ; but the Saint forbid him, saying, " Let him alone ! As he loves me so, let him alone ; that into this my bosom he may pour out the tears of his most bitter lamentation. Behold ! thou, even seeing that thou art a man, and hast a rational soul, couldest in no way know anything about my departure, except what I myself have lately shown to thee ; but to this brute animal, destitute of reason, in what way soever the Maker Himself hath willed, He hath revealed that his master is about to go away from him." And, so saying, he blessed his sorrowing servant the horse, then turning about to go away from him.

And going forth thence, he ascended the little hill that overlooks the monastery, and stood for a little while on the top of it, and, standing with both hands lifted up, he blessed the monastery, saying, " To this place, small and mean though it be, not only the Scotie kings (Irish and Dalriadic) with their peoples, but also the rulers of strange and foreign nations, with the people subject to them, shall bring great and extraordinary honour ; by the Saints also of other churches shall no common reverence be shown."

The Saint then enters the church for the evening mass of the Lord's day (eve), and as soon as this is over he returns to his cell, where he had bare rock for his bedding, and a stone for his pillow, which at this day is standing by his grave as a kind of sepulchral monument ; and he sits on the bed through the night. And so, there sitting, he gives his last commands to the brethren, in the hearing of his attendant only ; saying, " These last words, O my children, I commend unto you ; that ye have mutual and unfeigned charity among yourselves, with peace. And if, according to the example of the holy fathers, ye shall attend to this, God, the Comforter of good men, will help you ; and I, abiding with Him, will intercede for you. And not only shall the necessaries of this present life be sufficiently supplied by Him, but He will also bestow those

rewards of eternal riches, which are laid up for them that keep His Divine laws." Thus far we have drawn up, recounted in a short paragraph, the last words of our venerable patron, spoken just as he was passing over from this weary pilgrimage unto the heavenly country.

After which, as his happy last hour gradually approached, the Saint was silent. Then, in the next place, in the middle of the night, at the sound of the ringing of the bell, he rises in haste and goes to the church; and, running more quickly than the rest, he enters alone, and on bended knees falls down in prayer beside the "altar." So Diormit, entering the church, keeps on asking, in a lamentable voice, "Where art thou, Father?" And, feeling his way through the darkness, the lights of the brethren not yet being brought in, he finds the Saint prostrate before the "altar"; and, lifting him up a little and sitting beside him, he placed the holy head in his bosom. And meanwhile, the congregation of monks running up with the lights, and seeing their father dying, began to weep. And, as we have learnt from some who were there present, the Saint, his soul not yet departing, with his eyes opened upward, looked about on either hand with a wonderful cheerfulness and joy of countenance; doubtless seeing the holy angels coming to meet him. Then Diormit lifts up the holy right hand of the Saint that he may bless the choir of monks. But also the venerable man himself, so far as he could, at the same time moved his hand, so that he might still be seen, while passing away, to bless the brethren by the motion of his hand, though he was not able to do so with his voice. And, after his holy benediction thus expressed, he immediately breathed out his spirit. "Which having left the tabernacle of the body, his face remained ruddy, and wonderfully gladdened by an angelic vision; so that it appeared not to be that of one dead, but of one living and sleeping. Meanwhile the whole church resounded with mournful lamentations."

Columba died in the very year in which the Roman Mission under Augustine landed in Kent. And we cannot pass on without referring, however briefly, to the share which the monks of Iona had in the conversion of our northern forefathers. One of the companions of Augustine, Paulinus, had spent six years in the attempt to evangelize Northumbria. But a terrible war overwhelmed his work and Paulinus retired. His companion James the Deacon

remained and worked on near York. But when the saintly Oswald became King, having in his exile taken refuge among the Irish in Scotland, he naturally turned to the monks of Iona and applied to them for help to Christianize his kingdom. This led to an offshoot of Iona being planted in a similar island of the eastern coast near Bamborough. Aidan, a Celt, became the missionary leader—and Oswald the king went about with him, interpreting his words to his English subjects. This was indeed, as I have heard Canon Bright say, Church and State in its fairest form. Oswald, says Bede, listened humbly and willingly to Aidan's admonitions in all things and took care with much diligence to build up and extend the Church of Christ in his kingdom; where the following most delightful sight was often seen: that while the prelate who had not perfectly learnt the tongue of the Angles was preaching the Gospel the King himself stood forth as an interpreter of the celestial word to his leaders and ministers, because forsooth he had already fully learnt the tongue of the Scots during the long period of his exile. From that time, more began to come daily to Britain from the region of the Scots (that means Irish missionaries from Iona and the region about), and with great earnestness and simplicity they laboured for the conversion of the Saxons, so that "the larger part of England was Christianized by their influence." To say this is no disparagement to the work of St. Augustine, who began the effort to convert the Saxons in Britain.

The following quotation is from *The Story of Iona* (p. 96), by the Rev. E. C. Trenholme:—

"Iona is a Presbyterian island, but its people will rightly expect some mention of an English clergyman whose name is handed down as a household word among them. Legh Richmond was Rector of Turvey in Bedfordshire, from 1805 to his death in 1827, and was widely known in the English religious world as the writer of a famous tale of piety, *The Dairyman's Daughter*. In 1820 and again in 1823 he visited Iona, where the regular religious ministrations were a quarterly visit from the minister in Mull, and a sermon read on Sundays by the worthy schoolmaster, Allen Maclean. Mr. Richmond gathered the people round him, and preached to them the Word of God sometimes in English to those who could understand, sometimes to all, with the schoolmaster interpreting into Gaelic sentence after sentence. 'A rock my pulpit,' he says in his diary, 'and

heaven my sounding-board ; may the echo resound to their hearts.'

" By his kindness and goodness he won the love of all, and the Legh Richmond Library, which was founded through his exertions, remains as a memorial of him in Iona village. The books continue to be added to, and are now housed in a good building, the erection of which is due to the efforts of the Rev. Archibald Macmillan of Iona, and the generosity of that builder of libraries, Mr. Andrew Carnegie.

" About this time, a son of Iona, Charles Chapman MacArthur, revived the traditions of his birthplace by going forth as a missionary to distant Ceylon, after preparation at the English College of the Church Missionary Society."

Dr. Samuel Johnson's remarks on Iona are well worth being recalled (*Journal of Tour to the Hebrides by Boswell*). " We were now treading that illustrious island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans and roving barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge and the blessings of religion. To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavoured, and would be foolish if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of the senses, whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the scale of thinking beings. Far from me, and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy, as may conduct us unmoved over any ground that has been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue. That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona."

S. HARVEY GEM.

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LONDON JOINT CITY AND MIDLAND BANK.—The striking development of the London Joint City and Midland Bank is well described in a new booklet which contains a reprint, with additional illustrations, of an article from the *Bankers' Magazine* for October 1920. The literary matter is of great interest, and the volume contains photographs of the late Chairman (Sir Edward Holden, Bart.), the present Chairman (the Right Hon. R. McKenna), and the joint managing directors (Messrs. S. B. Murray, F. Hyde, and E. W. Woolley). Other illustrations relate to some twenty-five or thirty of the 1,770 offices of the Bank.