NOTES ON ST. NINIAN

THE name of Ninian is justly revered in connection with the beginnings of Christianity in Scotland. It is the more to be regretted that so little is definitely known of his history. The life and acts of his fellow-countryman and contemporary, St. Patrick, are known from his own writings and from very early tradition. Ninian, on the other hand, has not left a single word that has come down to us; his parentage is unknown and his place of origin is doubtful. No date in his life can be said to be other than approximate; even his "day" is uncertain. The earliest mention of him is about three hundred years after his death. This account, by the Venerable Bede, states that he was a Briton and gives his name as Nynia, which may be taken as approximately its native form. Bede states further that he had been regularly instructed at Rome, that he was a bishop, and founded a church of stone commonly called Ad Candidam Casam, in a place which in Bede's time was in the possession of the English nation and belonged to the province of the Bernicians. This seat was distinguished by the name of St. Martin (of Tours). Through his preaching the Southern Picts, who dwelt on Bede's side of the mountains which divided them from the Northern Picts, had received, according to tradition, the true faith long before Columba had preached the Word of God to the provinces of the Northern Picts. Lastly, Nynia himself and many other saints rest in the body in (or at) the church which he founded.

By the mountains which divided the Southern from the Northern Picts, Bede undoubtedly meant the range known as the Mounth (Gaelic *monadh*), or loosely, in later times, the Grampians. His phrase "intra montes" corresponds exactly to that used in the Annals of Ulster, under date 782, "rex Pictorum citra Monoth," "the king of the Picts on this side (i.e. the south side) of the Mounth." Conversely the northern side is referred to in early Irish as "fri Monad a tuath," "benorth the Mounth," and in old charters as "ultra Muneth," "beyond the Mounth." To the present day that range is styled in Gaelic "monadh," with qualifying terms to denote its separate sections. These remarks would be unnecessary were it not for

a theory promulgated of late that by the range in question Bede meant the range which forms the watershed between the east and the west of Scotland, running northward from about Loch Lomond, and known in Gaelic as Druim Albann and in Latin as Dorsum Britanniae, "the backbone of Britain." On this theory Ninian's province extended from the Solway along the eastern side of Scotland to the Shetland Isles, a proposition which is incredible on the face of it as well as contrary to the plain meaning of Bede.

The next mention of Ninian is an extremely interesting letter written by the learned Alcuin to the fraternity of St. Ninian of Candida Casa between A.D. 782 and 804. Ninian's many miracles had been brought to his notice by means of a poem by his faithful disciples, scholars of the church of York, wherein he recognized both the learning of the author and the holiness of him who performed the miracles. He sends a silken cloth for the body of "our holy father Nyniga," and begs the brethren to intercede for him in the church of "our father Nynia, the bishop." The poem was doubtless composed in Latin. There appears to be no subsequent mention of it, but it is of much interest to know that it existed, and was in vogue, if not actually composed, at York. Alcuin uses three forms of the saint's name: (1) the Latinized *Ninianus*—the earliest instance of this form; (2) *Nyniga*; (3) *Nynia*, as in Bede. The two last correspond to the old Welsh name Nynnyaw or Nynyaw, found in the old Welsh genealogies and in the Mabinogion.

The Life by Ailred of Rievaux, who was brought up at the court of David I of Scotland and died in 1166, professes to be a more elegant version of a book of Ninian's Life and Miracles, written in a barbarous language, but never varying from the foundation of Bede. Ailred begins with Bede's account, and adds that Ninian was the son of a British king, who was a Christian. His description of Ninian's place of birth fits either side of the Solway. He emphasizes Ninian's connection with Martin of Tours, to whom after Martin's death he dedicated his church. The miracles ascribed to Ninian follow common form, but are singularly lacking in local and personal colour. Only three names are mentioned in this connection, viz. that of a local king, Tuduvallus, who was healed by Ninian himself, a girl named Deisuit, and a man named Adefridus, who were healed by means of his relics. The last is obviously an English name of the type of

Adelfrid, etc. Deisuit is doubtful to me. Tuduvallus represents Early Celtic Touto-valos, "people-ruler"; in the old Welsh form Tutagual it appears as the name of the father of Riderch Hael or Riderch Hen, the sixth century king of Strath Clyde, contemporary with Columba. Adamson in his *Life of Columba* gives the name as Tōthal, which in later Irish is Tuathal. This prince would therefore have flourished round about A.D. 500, and as no other prince of that name appears in the old Welsh northern genealogies, it may be supposed that he is the king mentioned by Ailred, by an anachronism not uncommon in the Lives of Saints written long after their death. Only one place-name is mentioned, and it is English—Farres Last, "the bull's footprint."

Ailred's biography has been justly pronounced by its editor, Bishop Forbes, as almost worthless as a historical tract. It is undoubtedly coloured, as Bishop Forbes notes, by the ideas of his own time. One statement deserves special mention, that namely in which he says that after converting the Southern Picts Ninian began to ordain presbyters, consecrate bishops, distribute the other dignities of the ecclesiastical ranks, and divide the whole land into certain parishes. This is inserted in an offhand manner, as if it were a matter of course, and would now be termed a tendencious statement, intended to imply that Ninian introduced a full-blown diocesan system, exactly such as was being introduced in Ailred's own time and a little before that. The measures indicated were among the most potent means whereby at that time the change from the monastic system of the Celtic Church to the diocesan system of the Church of Rome was being advanced. Ailred's aim is to give a sanction and authority for these changes. These changes, as I have suggested elsewhere, instead of being innovations, are represented as a restoration of the ancient and pure system of Ninian; the monastic Scoto-Celtic Church was to be regarded as an unauthorized and discredited interlude.

Ninian's Day

Ninian's day, i.e. the day of his death, appears in the Scottish calendars at September 16th, but this depends on the mistaken equation of Ninian with St. Maoineann of Cluain Conaire in Co. Kildare. The confusion was pointed out long

ago by the eminent hagiologist, Dr. Charles Plummer, in his notes to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, and rather more fully in my *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (pp. 294-5). The name of the saint of Cluain Conaire is, in Old Irish, Moinenn, Moenenn, with variants Moninn, Monenn, which latter were assumed to begin with the common honorific " mo," my, with stress on the following part, and to mean My Ninn, i.e. My Ninian. The forms Moinenn, Moenenn, later Maoineann, however, show conclusively that the stress is on the first syllable, and that therefore the name does not contain the prefix " mo." It is in fact identical with that of Moenu, bishop and abbot of Clonfert, whose day is March 1st, and who appears to have been a Briton[1]; his name in Oengus's *Félire* is Moinend, Monenn, later Maoineann (genitive case, as often in names of saints).

Commemorations

Commemorations of St. Ninian are numerous, and occur in the North of England and in every county of Scotland except, I think, Kirkcudbright, Selkirk, Berwick, East Lothian, and Nairn. In the isles the only instance is in Bute. On the western side there is one in Kintyre and another in the little island of Sanda off the Mull of Kintyre. Bishop Forbes' list has about sixty-five, some of which are spurious.

What inferences are we entitled to draw from the commemoration of a given saint in a given place? The question is difficult, but it is safe to say that the mere fact of a commemoration does not of itself imply the actual presence of the saint commemorated. This applies to ancient as well as medieval instances. St. Martin of Tours was never at Whithorn, which bore his name. The same applies to commemorations of St. Brigid in Scotland, to Kirkoswald in Ayrshire and Kirkcarswell in Galloway, both commemorating the royal English St. Oswald, and to other instances. It is practically certain, for example, that St. Cuthbert did not found Kirkcudbright on Tig in Ayrshire; he was commemorated also at Peterculter in Aberdeenshire, and a chapel in Wick was called St. Cuthbert's Church. St. Columba had a church in Iceland, founded before A.D. 900 by a Norseman from the Hebrides. He was commemorated also in the Orkney Isles of Hoy and Stronsay. The saint of Dornoch

[1] Plummer: *Vita Prima S. Brendani*, para 91, and index.

in Sutherland and of Kilbar in Barra is St. Barr of Cork, not St. Findbarr of Moyville, as has been wrongly asserted in the case of Dornoch. Did St. Barr ever visit Dornoch or Barra? All these and many other instances are, in my opinion, to be explained by factors other than the actual presence of the saints in question. The case of St. Martin is clear. The cult of St. Oswald was introduced to the south-west of Scotland under Anglian influence; so with St. Cuthbert in Ayrshire. The cult of Columba reached Iceland and Orkney through the Christianized Norsemen of the Isles.

The Norsemen were well acquainted with Galloway, and it is decidedly easier to suppose that they introduced the cult of St. Ninian into Shetland, Orkney, and Caithness, than it is to postulate, in defiance of all evidence to the contrary, the presence of St. Ninian in those far north regions. We shall see further reason for this explanation later on. The same applies to the instance at Navidale on the east coast of Sutherland, if it be indeed a genuine instance and not a mere inference from the form of the name. In Ross-shire the early Gaelic Earls of Ross were connected with Galloway. The first Earl, Fearchar mac an t-Sagairt, founded the Abbey of Fearn, and its first abbot came from Whithorn. It is not surprising, therefore, to find on record a chapel of St. Ninian at an ancient seat of the Earls, Balconie (Bailcnidh), near Novar station, and also "the lands of St. Ninian at Tain" on record in 1584 (R.M.S.). Without going further into this aspect of the subject, it may be enough to say that no commemoration of St. Ninian north of the Mounth or Grampian range can be proved ancient. Nor can it be proved that any teacher of the faith laboured in that region before Columba, whom Bede expressly states to have been "primus doctor fidei," the first teacher of the faith, to the people of the North.

We have seen that the name Ninian is a Latinized form of a native British name. Now in the case of all other saints, it is the native name, handed down by tradition, that appears in commemorations, not a Latinized form of that name. Further, as early as 1301, the name appears in Galloway as St. Rineyan, a change caused by the vernacular pronunciation of Sanc Ninian, which again shows English influence, for in Gaelic commemorations the prefix Sanc (for Sanct) is never found except in the rare instances where the name was strongly influenced by Scots.

A still earlier example may be the Norse name Rinansey, now North Ronaldsay in Orkney. If it is rightly explained as Ninian's isle, the comparatively late origin is obvious. " Sanc Rynganeis chapel in the kirkyarde of Alytht " (East Perthshire) appears in 1482 (Bamff Charters). Another vernacular form is Tringan, as in Kilantringan for Kil Shanct Ringan. This appears in modern Gaelic as Cill an Truinnein, now heard in Glen Urquhart, Inverness-shire, where there are also Teampull an Truinnein, St. Ringan's Temple, and Slios an Truinnein, St. Ringan's side or slope. If this was an original foundation by Nynnyaw, how did this extraordinary linguistic development take place in a district remote from all English influence ? The answer, as it seems to me, is that the saint was introduced under his vernacular Scots appellation by the early Scots lords of Glen Urquhart. It is highly significant that hard by St. Ninian's Temple there is a hollow still known as Lag Chill Fhìonain, the hollow of St. Finan's church, also Allt Chill Fhìonain, the burn of St. Finan's church. For St. Finan's cult over a wide area in this region, I must refer to the *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*. His image was worshipped not far from Glen Urquhart in 1643. Whose cult was first on the spot, that of St. Finan or that of St. Ninian ? It may be added that St. Finan was a contemporary of St. Columba. He is also commemorated in Cill Fhìonain, Kilfinan, in Cowal, which of late I observed assigned erroneously and inexcusably to St. Findbarr or Finnen of Moyville, whose church would, of course, be in Gaelic Cill Fhinnein.

Two other points of importance may be noted here. It is well known that throughout Scotland the old custom, surviving to our own time, was to hold fairs on or near the day of a saint, e.g. Féill Dubhthaich, St. Duthac's Fair, at Tain ; Féill Aonghais, St. Angus's Fair, at Balquhidder, and so on *passim*. Not one single fair in Scotland was named after St. Ninian.

The other point is perhaps still more remarkable. In Scotland and Ireland there were and are a host of personal names formed from the saints by prefixing the terms *Maol* and *Gille*, both meaning in practice " servant." Thus from Columba's name we have Maol Coluim, " Columba's servant," now Malcolm, an ancient name, for *maol* ceased to be used round about A.D. 1000, being displaced by *gille*, as in the later Gille Coluim, now Gille Caluim. Early instances in the south are Gille-gunnin, also Gille-winnin, St. Finnen's servant, a hybrid

formation, where Gunnin or Winnin is the Welsh form of Finnen, St. Findbarr of Moyville, who studied for a time at Whithorn. Others are Gille Asald, St. Oswald's servant; Gille ma-choi, Mo-Choe's servant; Gille Mernoch, St. Mernoc's servant, and so on. These are paralleled by Welsh names in the south of Scotland beginning with Ques or Cos for Welsh *gwas*, servant: e.g. Cospatrick, St. Patrick's servant; Queschutbrit, St. Cuthbert's servant. But from Shetland to Tweed there appears on record no sure instance of a personal name in *maol* or *gille* or *gwas* combined with the name of St. Ninian.

All this, coupled with what has been said on the subject of commemorations, points to a broken tradition, which was to some extent officially revived in the twelfth century, but which failed to become an active force in the life and minds of the people.

Historical Background

I should like now to turn to another aspect of our subject, namely the historical background of Ninian's life. The one date in his life that can be approximately fixed is his arrival in Britain as a bishop about the time of the death of St. Martin in A.D. 397—this seems the best attested date of St. Martin's death. Taking this as granted, we may fairly assume Ninian's age at that time to have been not less than forty, most probably somewhere between forty and forty-five. Investigation into the bishops of that period will show that very few were consecrated under the age of forty. This would place Ninian's birth about A.D. 355 or a little earlier, when Roman Britain, i.e. from the wall between Solway and Tyne southwards, was officially Christian and had an organized Christian Church. I need only mention the presence of British bishops and others at the Council of Arles in 314, and in larger numbers at Ariminum in 359. Towards the end of the century we find Chrysanthus, after having been lord lieutenant (*vicarius*) of Britain, becoming bishop (in Constantinople) of the sect called Novatians; he died in 419.

At the beginning of the fourth century, Roman Britain, as has been said, was bounded on the north by the wall of Hadrian, between Solway and Tyne. The wide district between this and the wall of Antonine, between Forth and Clyde, had been abandoned soon after 180. North of that again were the

peoples who had indeed known the might of Rome, but had never been subdued—*Invicta Caledonia*. The Roman Province long suffered inroads and ravages from the north, and, not to mention earlier incidents, the Emperor Constantius Chlorus died at York in 306 after a punitive expedition against the Picts north of Antonine's wall. Of the next fifty years little or nothing is known, but Ammianus records that in 360 the Scots (i.e. from Ireland) and Picts broke the peace that had been agreed upon, ravaged the districts next the wall (of Hadrian), and caused terror throughout the provinces, wearied by a succession of previous disasters. In spite of efforts to deal with the situation, things went from bad to worse, till in 368 Roman Britain was reduced to a desperate condition. Nectarides, the Guardian of the Coast (*Comes maritimi tractus*, our later *mormaer*, sea-official), was slain. The Roman general was entrapped by ambush. Picts, Scots and Saxons all fell on the devoted country, ravaging, it would seem, even to the neighbourhood of London. Commander after commander was sent without success, until at last operations were entrusted to Theodosius. Landing at Richborough, he marched to London, which he made his base, and thence dealt with the enemy in detail. The campaign continued in the next year, till he had routed the various peoples who had so insolently attacked the Roman power, encouraged by long impunity. The recovered province was called Valentia. Such were the times of Ninian's boyhood.

Theodosius was a Spaniard of noble family. When he came to Britain he brought with him his son Theodosius, then a young man of about twenty-two, and another Spaniard, probably of about the same age, named Maximus. Ten years later young Theodosius became Emperor of the East. Maximus stayed on in Britain as commander of the forces there with conspicuous success. He was a most able man, of strong and attractive personality, and he became the idol of the British troops. The impression he made on the British peoples, including the less Romanized peoples of the west, was such that, under the name Maxen Wledig (Maxen the King) he became a foremost hero of Welsh romance. " The Dream of Maxen Wledig " is one of the great old Welsh tales still extant. He was, moreover, an orthodox Christian. As time went on, Maximus, ambitious as well as able, appears to have become discontented with his position in Britain as compared with that of his former comrade Theodosius. In

any case he was proclaimed Emperor by the soldiers, and with a large army of Britons, neighbouring Gauls and Celts and others, crossed to Gaul, where the soldiery received him with enthusiasm. He appears to have attracted a large number of native Britons to his standard. The Church historian Sozomen states that the pretext advanced by Maximus for his rebellion was his desire to prevent innovations in religion. As a matter of fact, when Maximus raised the standard of revolt in Britain, " Priscillianism " was causing much trouble in the west, and particularly in his native country of Spain. In the end the heretics were dealt with by Maximus immediately after he had become Emperor in 383. A full account of the proceedings is given by Sulpicius Severus in his *Life of St. Martin* and his *Historia Sacra*. Sulpicius had a very high opinion of Maximus. His contemporary Orosius (*c.* A.D. 400) says that Maximus " was a vigorous and good man, worthy of being Emperor were it not that he had risen by means of despotism, contrary to his oath of allegiance ; he was made Emperor by the army almost against his will." When Maximus became Emperor of the West, Ninian would have been about twenty-eight.

As Emperor from 383 to 388 Maximus came into close contact with St. Martin, who had become Bishop of Tours in 371. Their relations, as told by Sulpicius Severus, are extremely interesting and deserve careful reading. Maximus often summoned Martin to the palace and honoured him with reverence. Their whole conversation concerned the present state, the future, the glory of the faithful, the eternal life of the saints. The Empress hung on the words of Martin ; she wet his feet with her tears ; she dried them with her hair. On one occasion she waited on Martin at table ; she herself cooked and served the food, and stood apart while he partook of it. She handed him the cup ; when the meal was over she collected the crumbs, preferring them to an imperial banquet.

To follow Maximus's career in further detail does not concern our subject. He was killed in 388 at the hands of his former comrade Theodosius. His whole history contains the material for a great tragedy.

Such in brief was the background of St. Ninian's earlier life. I have long thought that it leads us to the question whether Ninian was one of the native Britons who followed Maximus to Gaul, and whether it was not in this way that his association with

St. Martin began. He might well have been attracted to Maximus on religious grounds, and after Maximus's death in 388 he may well have stayed on with St. Martin, whose fame was so great, especially for the training of clerics. The years between 388 and 397 would afford ample time for training under St. Martin, and it is more than possible that, like Martin himself and like St. Patrick, Ninian received his whole training in Gaul.

When Ninian returned to Britain and settled at what is now Whithorn, it is very probable that he found a nucleus of Christianity in that region of Scotland, which it was his business to extend and organize. The name of his bishopric has not come down to us. He may have been bishop of the "*recepta provincia*" or recovered province named Valentia. Sir J. Morris-Jones was of opinion that the term "*recepta*" survived in old Welsh as Reged, the name of an ancient British province which included Carlisle and, as I have suggested elsewhere, included also Galloway. While all this contains an element of speculation, it hangs well together historically and geographically.

That Ninian should turn his attention to the Southern Picts, who had been so prominent during much of his life, was eminently natural and worthy of a disciple of St. Martin. In all his labours, and among the Picts in particular, it is well to remember that he must have been greatly helped by the prestige of Christianity as the recognized religion of the mighty Roman Empire. In this connection an extract from the early Church historian, Socrates Scholasticus, is extremely interesting and instructive. He relates as follows the conversion of the Burgundians, which took place about A.D. 430:

"I must now relate an event well worthy of being recorded, which happened about this time. There is a barbarous nation dwelling beyond the Rhine, denominated Burgundians; they lead a peaceful life; for being almost all artisans, they support themselves by the exercise of their trades. The Huns, by making continual irruptions on this people, devastated their country, and often destroyed great numbers of them. In this perplexity, therefore, the Burgundians resolved to have recourse not to any human being, but to commit themselves to the protection of some god; and having seriously considered that the God of the Romans mightily defended those that feared him, they all with common consent embraced the faith of Christ. Going therefore to one of the cities of Gaul, they

requested the bishop to grant them Christian baptism: who ordered them to fast seven days, and having meanwhile instructed them in the elementary principles of the faith, on the eighth day baptized and dismissed them. Accordingly becoming confident thenceforth, they marched against their invaders; nor were they disappointed in their hope. For the king of the Huns, Uptar by name, having died in the night from the effects of a surfeit, the Burgundians attacked that people then without a commander in chief and although they were few in numbers and their opponents very many, they obtained a complete victory; for the Burgundians were altogether but three thousand men, and destroyed no less than ten thousand of the enemy."

When Ninian came to Britain the prestige of the Roman Empire was still undiminished in the eyes of the British peoples, and to the Southern Picts and to the people between the walls the religion of the Empire must have made a powerful appeal. Later on, when the Romans were forced to abandon Britain, the Christian religion must have fallen in esteem, and to this may be attributed, in part at least, the apostacy of the Picts in regard to which St. Patrick wrote so bitterly in his Epistle to Coroticus of Strath Clyde and his soldiers. There are, however, fairly clear indications, as I have mentioned elsewhere, that this apostacy was only partial, and that Ninian's labours bore lasting fruit. In this connection we should not overlook the mission of St. Cadoc of Llancarvan in the sixth century to the Midlands of Scotland. St. Cadoc's cult was specially strong in the Menteith district of Perthshire, where his name lives in Kilmadock (stressed on the last syllable), " the church of my Doc," and where landed families bore the surname of Dog, now extant as Doag, Doig, and in other forms.

In his system of church organization Ninian followed St. Martin, who introduced monasticism into Gaul. Candida Casa or Whithorn was long an important centre of religion and of learning, not only for Scotland but also for Ireland. The last Irish cleric, so far as known to me, to be trained there was St. Findbarr of Moyville, Columba's older contemporary. The reduced form of his name, Finnen or Finnian, was made into Gunnin or Wynnin by the people of Galloway and Ayrshire, then Welsh-speaking.

At that period, to judge by the well-known Preface to Mugint's hymn (*Liber Hymnorum*), the moral tone of Whithorn was deplorably relaxed.

Scotland does well to revere the name of Ninian, a man of apostolic character and of immense religious enthusiasm. If for a time his name and fame suffered comparative eclipse, it is well that it came again into honour. It is not well, however, that Ninian's claim to our reverence should be overstated and the sphere of his labours enlarged to an extent that he would have been the first to repudiate.

W. J. WATSON.

Edinburgh.

An Ogham inscription found on St. Ninian's Isle, Shetland, imperfect at the beginning and uncertain as to both reading and meaning, has been transliterated *lesmeqqnanammovvest* and divided as *les meqq Nan am Movvest*, translated " enclosure of McNan in Mobhaist " (E. W. B. Nicholson, *Keltic Researches*). The Rev. A. B. Scott, D.D. (*The Rise and Relations of the Church of Scotland*) would render this " Lis [i.e. enclosure] of the Community of Ninian the Baptiser," adding that " Mo-Bhaiste was one of Ninian's titles." It may be enough to say (1) that assuming Nicholson's reading to be correct, the words *les meqq Nan* could mean only " enclosure of the son of Nan " ; (2) that *am Mobhaist*, in the sense attributed to it by Dr. Scott, is an impossible combination at any stage of the language ; (3) that there is no authority for the statement that Mobhaist was one of Ninian's titles. The further assumption that Nan may represent the early form of Ninian's name is an impossible one. Nicholson's translation, " in Mobhaist," is also impossible.