Columba: Life and Legacy
Monk, *perigrinus*, pastor, or missionary?
Analyse the nature of Columba's religious vocation

Praefatio

In this (revised and extended) essay I will use a variety of approaches to illuminate the life of Columba. Not least will I incorporate my personal experiences of the island of Iona where Columba's vocation is mainly documented from, and from where he instated the seat of his monastic *familia* who were to influence the religious, political and social landscape of Britain and Ireland. Hence I will bring in the historical perspective where ever it serves to augment the subjective nature of my method. Because Iona had become a centre for artistic and literary development my tendency at times will be to take a pseudo-bardic approach in such a way as to eloquently relay the ecological, especially in view of the light that Celtic Christianity retained something of its pagan heritage. That my one week study trip allowed me to indulge in the environment whenever time allowed I feel that my ecological aptitude will bring one closer to the monastic experience, more so what the eremite monk sought to gain through his closeness to nature. By this the cultivation of my spiritual awareness has permitted this core experience of the closeness of nature to resonate with the closeness of God, and this from no particular religious background. All I can say is that the closer I search for the roots of my spirituality it seems I am drawn to the life of a monk who stands between the populated world and the wilderness.[1]

In no particular order will I denote the above four characteristics of the life of Columba drawing on various literary sources, adding his role as a 'statesman' from the course of my investigation. Not least will I look at some of the poetry produced from the island during the ensuing centuries after the saint's death, or at least from the *familia* that were to initiate several churches and take to heart the key roles that their founder had served. This is not to say that Columba was not considered to be a secularist also, especially when it came to diplomacy and kingly affairs. As such, Columba has been painted with many facets and to try and get to the centre of this 'stone' requires at times unpacking the cultural baggage of his commentators. I start then with a poem dedicated to Columba and my experience of Iona or *Hy* and will hope to enlighten the reader of the deeper context or meaning of my words (in the use of footnotes) along the course of this essay, especially in relation to historical events. The title came to me two months after I began writing it. Even now the poem feels incomplete and I presume to fulfil its didactic (and evolutionary) message only after I have studied more fully the facts of Columba's life.[2] It goes without saying that Columba travelled to Iona with 12 monks, in imitation of the life of Christ, and so five more double-line stanzas[3] beyond the initial sept would not be outside my ability.

Swimming with Dolphins[4]

Importuned, I felt the calling
A gathering had gone before me
Carrying forward a vestige of yesterday's encounters
But for sure this was something much deeper
Fluttering at the core with the rain and the wind

---

1 It is an interesting development that during the course of this essay I have discovered the equivalent of some sort mental pilgrimage. The poem which commences this essay depicts a series of plants that abstractly display a poetic order for the evolutionary stages in the ascent to Godhead, selecting those situated nearest the ocean and eventuating to those in the highest parts of the island. Without trying to read too much into this revelation the correlation to the ultimate Resurrection indicates to me a clear rapture of nature, within myself and within my outside experiences.

2 I use an interesting word play in the first four stanzas. Maybe I am trying to capture something of the quality of consciousness imbued in the monk whose sense of time is governed by natural cycles, not unlike the order of the offices. As such it may prove valuable reading to discover exactly how the Easter date was calculated (see fn. 97-98) according to the Celtic Christians. It should be remembered that mechanical clocks had not been invented until the 14th century. Thus one can assume that personal experiences took on a quality that allowed their relation to the environment to flow backwards and forward, not unlike the ebbing and flowing of the tide which would have been a fundamental mnemonic device for the ordering of the days activities. Bear in mind, these monks were foremost seamen, a point that Adomnán mentions quite regularly in the life of Columba, and were thus hugely influenced by the movement of water.

3 Stanzas are normally 4 lines or more. I cannot hope to follow the, at times, strict poetic protocol such as one might find in *Altus prosator* where each line falls into two halves of eight syllables, the end of each half rhyming with the end of the whole line. See Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* p41. This particular poem has been attributed to Columba's own hand and shows a theological comprehension that would have been usual amongst the learned monks.

4 My alliterative use of plant names and their habits is meant to be a poetic allegory of the monk's life. I throw greater light on these words as I progress throughout the essay. Most ecological data has been gleaned from Sarah Garland, *Wild Flowers of Britain.*

It drove me from my comfy pit
My sodden boots were already prepared
The journey would be an elemental carousel
Sensual to the bone I heeled into my landscape
Never could I imagine what surprises awaited me

Importuned I felt the calling
It drove me from my comfy fit
A gathering had gone before me
My sodden boots were already prepared
Carrying forward a vestige of yesterday's encounters

The journey would be an elemental carousel
But for sure this was something much deeper
Sensual to the bone I heeled into my landscape
Fluttering at the core with the rain and the wind
Never could I imagine what surprises awaited me

August, I call towards me my salient sept
Magnificent they stand in the face of a changing tide
Awaiting their prerogative of a God-given right
To the sound of a mulling wind
Humming from afar news from centuries apart

My first is thrift, fully festooned in flora,
the frugality of its furtive footfalls

My second is silverweed, this silky sand stealer,
seductive in its scribal scramblings

My third is thistle, thorny in its thew
thoughtful though, in its theological thanedom

My fourth is marram, moored and mechanical,
married in its measurable martydom

My fifth are the heathers, hearkening to the hills,
heaven is but a healthy hillock ahead

My sixth is knapweed, napping in the knoll,
kneeling to the knelling call of knowledge

My seventh is sundew, summoned to the sump,
sumptuous though, in its solemn silence

But I hearken to the call of winter with the Fall in my wake
For then the trees lose their autumnal hues
And the landscape returns to a geological primaevalness
The ancient rock rises as a monument to the passing of ages
My pagan inclinations are carried adrift on the wing of a crane[5]

These sacred oakling trees that spell yonder of my heritage
Proud as they stand among the 4 encompassing nations
Planted am I on the edge of the known world

5 See Ian Finlay, *Columba* pp23-24 for the Celtic reverence towards this bird.

My noble vision calling me to heathen ports
Where Christ abounds in the unearthing of time

Enraptured as I am in the moment of transfiguration
The logos beckons me ever further afield
With every step our saintliness carries a seed
The *familia* is the flora of our high heritage
The Scots a nation for the unification of our regal past

What brutality have brought Ireland within a stone's throw
The pillow of my meditations comforts me in my dreams
Upon the Hill of Tara my cousins sing the bardic songs
The ordination of a victorious line of kings
But as yet I renounce in light of the heavenly Father

On a recent trip to the new wing of the Victoria and Albert museum I stumbled upon an exhibit that threw a modern light upon an ancient thought. It was a basin for holy water made in Venice, Italy and dated to circa 1500.[6] Dedicated to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period the object was some 900 years past the life of Columba.[7] Yet the essence of Christianity had remained in the symbolic use of language. In this particular case it was the word 'ICHTHYS' which translates from Greek as fish. The imagery on the basin was of dolphins, considered in ancient times to be a type of fish. That the dolphin was symbolic of Jesus Christ can be understood from the Greek alphabet that spells the name *ICHTHYS* from the first letters of 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.' In symbolic terms then, the presence of Jesus Christ makes the water holy. Iona, situated where it is in the Inner Hebrides, looks out to the Atlantic. It is generously warmed by the Gulf Stream which makes the west coast of Scotland very habitable. Between Iona and the mainland is Mull and what divides these two islands is the Sound of Mull, a thin stretch of water. Situated as it is on the Gulf Stream the currents here can be very strong. Not for the first time did I put myself into the hands of nature.

My course tutors were returning from a day trip to Mull, climbing one of its highest peaks. The stories were humorous, not least the ram that goggled the pair into a partial furtive retreat. That the mountain was covered in cloud is not an unlikely tale. My own deepest recollection of my extended journey here was the wetness of the environment, notwithstanding the dry rhetorical, entertaining banter that went on between our lecturers. The story of the return ferry trip over the Sound had us all enraptured - dolphins were lapping the sides like children to ice cream. What a feast to treasure one's eyes upon. No doubt the monastic community over the course of centuries have experienced more than most mainlanders the sight of dolphins. The presence of Christ is all the more potent from this desert in the ocean now made holy and round, not unlike a halo. We all gazed from the guest house windows, wondering if the dolphins were still in the vicinity. I, for certain, got closer to the wilderness more than most. In fact, I swam everyday; my ensuing actions could have come as no surprise to the others when apparently the dolphins had been spotted again on the surf. The passion ran through my veins and within a jiffy I was in my swim wear diving into the water from the small beach cove. I thought I

6 Museum No. 2-1890 Victoria and Albert Museum, London

7 See Ian Finlay, *op.cit.*, p168. The spiritual environment between these two eras was totally different, the earlier was still very much coloured by the pagan world. Ian Finlay draws a parallel between the eremite movement and the reformer John Knox. He saw scripture and the Word of God as the common denominator where books like the *Cathach* were diligently copied by hundreds of monks in humble cells. The little oratories scattered around the Hebridean coast are testament to this contemplative life.

could see them, the white foam in the distance. There came a point when I realised an immanent danger. Swimming to stay still I could feel the current beneath me but strong as I was I remained confident.

Monk and Pastor

Now that I have made reference to some of the environmental themes circulating within the life of a monk, I will now focus upon the more domestic characteristics of Columba's Iona. My short personal account above points towards two major aspects of Columba's life. Firstly, I make reference to some of the conceptual themes circulating within the life of a monk, namely the role of the ocean and the association with animals. Secondly, the use of language, especially since Columba's Iona had access to various manuscripts. There is sufficient evidence of his scholarly attributes and teaching.[8] Bradley makes reference to Adomnán in *VC* iii, 20 but Richard Sharpes's translation of the *Life*[9]recounts no more than an incidental event here. More closely attributable to his scriptural teaching is *VC* iii, 18 in the context of his more general prophetic abilities, as Bradley quite rightly points out. He refers to the *Amra Choluib Chille,*[10] which depicts him taking an interest in Greek and showing an extended inclination beyond Biblical exegesis.[11] The authors state that it is indeed a contemporary poem immediately following the death of Columba and no later since it lacks any material from the Ionic mass of legend accrued to Columba within 50 years of his death.[12] In verse 8 there is a definite reference to his tendency towards languages, 'He studied Greek grammar.' Likewise verse 5 expounds Columba as the studious teacher of mysteries and scripture. The author is generally known as Dallán Forgaill and the poem was almost considered scriptural itself during the Middle Ages since it prescribed the life of Columba with such intimacy. The style of the poem is quite descriptive in the style of a eulogy to not want to doubt its authenticity. Indeed, incorporated in the preface to *Amra* is a legend that has Columba himself preventing its completion until after his death.[13]

Columba was an ardent scribe but it is not this that one is emphasising here, rather his overall life as a monk and knowledge *of* the scriptures. The heart of a monk's life involved chanting the psalms in church or alone. In the case of Columba the Irish *Life,* an 11th century document, portrays his duties and habits including rising before dawn and chanting all 150 psalms each morning on the seashore.

My first is thrift, fully festooned in flora,
the frugality of its furtive footfalls.[14]

---

8 Ian Bradley, *Columba* p55.

9 From now on all references to the *VC* are taken from Richard Sharpe's translation of Adomnán's *Life of Columba,* Penguin Books Ltd. London, 1995.

10 Of the earliest manuscript versions are included *Lebor na hUidre*, the *Liber Hymnorum*, and Rawlinson B.502 (now published in facsimile from the original manuscript in the Bodleian Library, with an introduction and indexes by Kuno Meyer. 1909).

11 What is indicative is its mixing of native poetic techniques with the vocabulary of the Christian church. For a full interpretation see Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.,* pp96-128.

12 *Ibid.*, pp96-98.

13 *Ibid.*, p98. The authors are of certain opinion that, though the legends bear little historical value, they nevertheless show the Columban *familia* attempting to reclaim the poem especially for the monastic centre at Kells which had later superseded Iona in importance in this respect. A version with preface was published for the Henry Bradshaw Society Vols. 13 and 14 *Hymnus 33,* J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (eds.), Harrison & Sons London, 1897

14 *Armeria maritima* is a common plant of coastal areas, especially craggy spots above the tide line. Its pink flowers and bracts become papery, almost everlasting. This plant is a sweet reminder of the year-round quality of the monks life – the flowers are symbolic of God's fecundity, and the robustness of its nature to live, at times quite singularly, in harsh environments is a testament to the monk's ordeal.

Though the document may not be a reliable account it hints at more than a fiction in its truisms. For instance the Irish *Life* recounts that as a young Columba he helped his tutor Cruithnechan by reciting the words for psalm 100 during Christmas mass not long after he had learnt to read.[15] One knows this resonates of the life of the bards who could recount stories from memory. The bardic oral tradition was still very much alive at the time. For example, Columba defends the poets at the convention of Druim Ceat in 575.[16] Here he shows clearly that he supports the creative arts, which was to be a legacy left to Iona, for example in the practice of manuscript illumination. The *filid* or bards were often attached to royal households. But with the growing influence of Christianity the monks put everything to written word and replaced the oral tradition whilst retaining the old tales and legends. This effectively accelerated the spread of Christianity through the monastic landscape.

The monks spent long hours praying alone in cells, often with arms outspread. It is of coincidence that the legacy of the Celtic inclination was to pray in poems and to express faith in imagery. One discovers a relational style here in the *Adiutor laborantium.* Its sequence of titles (first 15 lines) reflect not only the litanic prayers of the medieval church, but perhaps also the native Irish tradition of praise poetry.[17] The list of honorific titles given to God is then followed by the petitioner's request. Clancy and Márkus relate it more to the secular praises of Irish heroes.[18] Symbols and praise poetry have been a part of Christian poetry from the earliest beginnings.

Columba understood the role of prayer; the Divine Office occurred several times a day.[19] Daily offices of prayer involved the singing of psalms and canticles, and reading from scripture. This occurred both day and night. As such the psalms were central to the devotional and spiritual life of the Columban church – praise, protection and presence are all very strongly represented in the Psalter.[20] It is no surprise that the theme of praise, clearly enjoined in the psalms, should bulk so large in the writings of Columba and his successors.

My second is silverweed, this silky sand stealer,
seductive in its scribal scramblings.[21]

Adomnán's *Life* shows Columba spending many hours copying the psalms; the *Cathach* preserved in the Royal Irish Academy may be his own work, reliably dated to late 6th/early 7th century.[22] It depicts often the monks at daily prayer, singing the psalms and prayers of the Office, other times celebrating mass on Sundays and feast-days, usually at dawn.[23] Adomnán mentions the *ymnorum liber septimaniorum*, written by Columba's own hand. (See *VC* ii, 9) Despite many false attributions of poems to saints modern scholars do accept the authorship

15 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.,* p52.
16 *Ibid.,* pp75-76; Aedán accompanies Columba to Druim Ceatt, present County Derry, at a time of impending war with the High King. These troublesome poets made satire against Aed, son of Ainmure. (See *VC* iii, 5) Columba recommended that their order should be reorganised, their number and privileges curtailed. Columba's council appears to have been well heeded here. John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* pp307-308.
17 *Ibid.*, pp73-74.
18 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.,* pp73-74.
19 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.,* pp74-75.
20 *Ibid.*, pp74-77.
21 *Potentilla anserina* has a name that refers to its use as a medicine: *potens* means powerful. Its swollen root is edible and has been used in times of famine. It grows as a creeper all over the island, indicating something of the sandy nature of the terrain. In my analogy to the scribe I am showing something of the infectious nature of writing, particularly when the oral tradition was being stolen away and the written word was leaving its mark all over Christendom.
22 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.,* p52.
23 Clancy and Márkus, *op. cit.,* p22.

of *Altus prosator* to Columba.[24] There is also a tentative tradition that the *Adiutor laborantium* was scribed by Columba, it appearing immediately following the *Altus prosator* in an 11th century manuscript from Winchester.[25] (British Library Cotton Manuscript Galba A xiv.)

The monks gathered 6-8 times a day in the church chanting the psalms. It was a very busy and repetitive life. The psalter is going around in their head; their landscape is coloured by the images of the scripture and the idea that the last days could come upon them quickly.

My third is thistle, thorny in its thew
thoughtful though, in its theological thanedom.[26]

Thought: *What is the monastic movement?* Is it not an assertion of power? In anthropological terms, the early Christians were opportunists, migrating onto fertile soil. They were filling the holes left by Romans, converting peoples incidentally as a fraternity of support. This living on the edge was effectively the way they saw the Resurrection and rapture to heaven *en masse*. But this could not happen until Christianity had made the world known with the sense of 'the end is nigh'; northern Europe was then considered the last unknown land to be discovered and converted.

As abbot Columba fulfilled the roles of monk, priest, preacher, pastor and healer.[27] He often retreated to Hinba to fast and pray whilst daily he performs his monastic offices, celebrated in the simple wooden church with other monks. He regularly presided over the Eucharist and preached on both Iona and the mainland. The Irish *Life* portrays his duties and habits here as a monk as well as a pastor. This hagiographic material shows him washing the other monk's feet and bringing the corn from the field. A typical day on Iona was observing the canonical hours, offering the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood, preaching the gospel, receiving hospitality, baptising, consecrating and anointing. As pastor, as an ordained priest, he baptises pagans and the children of Christians, as well as visiting the sick and diseased.[28] In quoting the Irish *Life of Colum Cille*[29] he is unmistakably framed within the context of Jesus' life.[30] Adomnán recalls several healing miracles and instances of baptism. As a pastoralist there is the story of the woman who could not bear sleeping with her husband. He invites both the husband and wife to fast with him. The following morning the wife is reconciled to her

24 It is acclaimed to Columba himself in the preface of the *Irish Liber Hymnorum.* Clancy and Márkus, *op. cit.,* p39. The *Altus prosator* is proceeded by *In te Christe and Noli pater,* respectively hymns 14,15 and 16 in the version published in J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (eds.) *Henry Bradshaw Society* Vols. 13 and 14.

25 Clancy and Márkus, *op. cit.,* pp.69-70; see footnotes to Bernard James Muir (ed.), *A Pre-conquest English Prayer Book* for the Henry Bradshaw Society p32. A copy of the manuscript is contained therein.

26 *Cirsium vulgare* has fiercely spiny leaves and bracts. I have chosen this particular species amongst many other thistles because it is believed to be the Spear thistle emblematic of the Scottish flag. The Order of the Thistle is the Scottish order of knighthood, i.e. I am making reference to the royal lineage attributable to the *Scots* Irish of Dalriada for whom Columba was patron. Though he is disputed to be the father of Scottish Christianity he is also claimed to be the founder of modern Scotland. There is evidence available to negate both these claims. The *familia,* in particular the abbacy, had direct relation to the kings of Ireland, descended as they were to the northern *Uí Néill* tribe who vied for overkingship with the southern branch. Columba seems to be behind the convention that brought together the northern *Uí Néill* and the rulers of Scots *Dál Riata* in 575. See Ian Bradley *op. cit.,* p32. Columba had close connections with both Áed mac Ainmirech and *Áed án* mac Gabr'ain, kings of *Cenél* Conaill and Dal Riata respectively, cementing their alliance and making Scots *Dál Riata* independent of its Irish counterpart. The *Dál Riata* had previously settled in Scotland, the king himself crossed the water around the year 500. See Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.,* pp4-5. The overkingship was in permanent competition. The *Uí Néill* overking was considered king of Tara, sometimes considered king of Ireland. The political reality is that no one could achieve overall power. Exiled near-kings from all over Britain formed many cultural interactions if they were not fighting long-running battles. Hence the confusion as to who gave Iona to Columba, but it was more than likely bequeathed by the king of Scots *Dál Riata* and not from any Pictish order as was the assertion of the historian Bede. Thus one sees a thanedom here of sorts, one well protected.

27 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.,* pp53-54.

28 Clancy and Márkus, *op. cit.,* p23.

29 This is the most complete compendium of the Columba tradition, a 16th century production that has material datable to the Middle Irish period i.e., before 1200 AD. It uses the *VC* as a vernacular source. O' Kelleher and G. Schoerpperle (eds.), *Betha Colaime Chille* in Máire Herbert *Iona, Kells and Derry,* pp180-182.

husband. (*VC* ii, 41) Thus, the pastoral gift is almost always exercised through the medium of penance.[31] Columba seems to have established a special community for penitents at Mag Luinge in Tiree. The story is of the man who committed murder in Cannaught and should now spend seven years there. (*VC* ii, 39)

Bede portrays Columba as both missionary and pastor.[32] But a monastery is not primarily a pastoral mission rather a place of withdrawal for prayer and contemplation. The 6th century Penitential of St. Finnian actually forbids monks acting as pastors. 'They ought not to baptise, nor to receive alms'.[33] Yet throughout Europe Irish monasteries became centres of missionary growth. Adomnán uses discretion to describe Columba's missionary work; non-monastic pastoral care occurs outside of Iona. (See *VC* i, 35, 50; ii, 5, 6, 10, 11, 20-1, 32, 33, 41)[34] At any rate, any quasi-pastoral dealings are what any monk is entitled to provide including advice, receiving gifts, receiving penitents and pilgrims, burying the dead and aiding the poor. Subsequent evidence confirms the non-pastoral nature of the community. There was no bishop during Columba's time, not until 712 in fact. (See *VC* i, 44 where the arrival of a bishop causes Columba to change the normal practice of the Eucharist.) Those Iona monks that did become pastors – priests and bishops – were ordained and preached in other Columban churches, e.g. Aedán and Finán were bishops of Lindisfarne, and the Picts themselves became clergy in Columban churches. (See *VC* ii, 46 and ii, 9) Intrinsically then, Iona did not see itself as a centre of pastoral care since bishops are the main agents of such. Daughter houses like Hinba and Tiree probably followed the same *raison d'etre.*

I remember trying to engage the locals in the only pub of the island, wanting to gauge their sense of living here. 'Unfortunately' a tourist blundered into my conversation when talking about the topic of wilderness. He rather overstepped himself when asserting that there was no such thing as wilderness anymore. Of course, I only had to remind him to go for a swim in the sea or even close his eyes. The sense of outer wilderness here is matched by the inner sensation of being subjected to a loss of comfort. These two points had obviously not been considered by him, yet I must assert that those looking for the life of the monk must above all else rid themselves of their cultural baggage. Here then, one comes to the crux of the matter, of the inner and outer life of a monk. This can be understood in the three daily labours of *The Rule of Columcille:* reading, work and prayer.[35] Bradley is of the opinion that the sense of sacrifice that these people had has been lost. There was an intimate connection between self-sacrifice and self-fulfilment, martyrdom and resurrection.

I am reminded of my own inventions, not to lose the drift of my personal account on Iona as I swam out into the Sound looking for dolphins. I imagined everyone else eating supper but that was not the reason I gazed back towards Bishop's House. I was trying to gauge my direction and movement, and then I realised something. The line of buoys offshore demarcated, whether intentionally or not, the pull of the current. On the near side I was pulled inland, on the other towards the centre of the Sound. I had swum now continuously for close to half an hour and still no sign of my dolphins. I could see the fleck of the surf, but no *ichthys.* Could it be that those I

---

30 See *ibid.*, paragraph 63 p264.

31 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p54.

32 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, *op. cit.*, pp23-24.

33 Quotation no. 50 reads fully 'They ought not to baptise, nor to receive alms. Else, if they do receive alms why shall they not baptize?', which leaves a lot of ambiguity to resolve in this matter. Hence, I feel this alludes to a developmental period of the Christian Church, as was the case in the first few centuries after Christ. Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Irish Penitentials,* p92.

34 In the above example of the steersman who was hated by his wife, the location is explicitly outside Iona where Columba is a guest on Rathlin Island.

35 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp72-73.

left behind had not prayed for me enough[36] or that I could not see the fish for the water? Well, I managed the return trip from the Sound with relative ease, some strange power had guided me very quickly back. I was soon dried by the expected humour circulating amongst my peers. Apparently, they were discussing who was going to save me.

Stories abound in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* in which tales of the sea figure more prominently than many other themes. (See *VC* ii, 12, 13, 15, 34, 39, 42, and 45) These monks were seamen, not just agriculturists or travellers. They understood the temperamental climate, the sudden immanence of a storm, or the changing of a wind. They gave themselves time and time again to the vagaries of nature if only to enhance their faith in Christ; 'All things are possible to him that believeth', (*VC* ii, 15) Adomnán has us read.[37] The wilderness, the ocean, was critical then, to their understanding of God.

Peregrinus and Missionary

The ocean here was imbued with symbolism. The monk envisaged the battles against demons as St. Anthony did in the deserts of Egypt.[38] The *VC* composed by Adomnán one hundred years after Columba's death marks a testament to the circulation and existence of Evagrius of Athanasius's *Vita Antonii*. Here, one sees that St. Columba remains firmly in the prestigious company of Paul and Anthony as being called directly, *Ex Deo;* at the death of Columba when Diarmait held his holy head, a wonderful joy lit up Columba's face because he could see "the angels coming to meet him." (*VC* III. 23)[39] Jan Erik Rekdal reminds us that the *Betha Coluim Cille* (*BCC*) systematically informs one of the different categories of being called to the service of God as a monk into the life of pilgrimage.[40] The objective, an *eremum* in *oceano*, was the 'desert' that the ascetic monk sought. The hagiographic tradition is premised on this topos of 'desert' against the backdrop of unknowing expanse.[41] The thinking behind this is supported by the literature. The *BCC* elucidates the pilgrimage of Columba, 'oilithri toltanaid', as a voluntary desire brought upon him since his youth.[42] The text describes his attendants as 20 bishops, 40 priests, 30 deacons and 50 students, i.e. he was already in established company. The *VC*, on the other hand, illustrates the figure of an ascetic abbot on an island community.[43] Where the former depicts Columba as a greater founder of monasteries in Ireland, Rekdal is of the opinion that the text does not sit comfortably, and is rather vague. He affirms that this is not what some might call the 'perfect pilgrimage', ailithrí forptí,[44] of Abraham, in which the *peregrinus* leaves his homeland both physically and mentally.[45] In fact, Rekdal argues for pilgrimage being a restless state associated with exile, or the life of an outlaw.[46] The Irish Penitentials support this view of a penitent living outside of their tribe. If the Irish differed from the European mainland monastic tradition in which one tended to stay within their borders, the *Lives*

36 See *VC* ii, 42. That the life of the saint is depicted with continuous references to prayer and blessing goes without saying.
37 The biblical reference is to Mk. 9:23.
38 Thomas O' Loughlin, 'Living in the Ocean', p13.
39 Adomnán's *Life, footnote 399.* See also *VC* II. 28, 'My children, today is the last time you will see my face here at the Machair.', footnote 278.
40 Jan Erik Rekdal, 'The Irish Ideal of Pilgrimage of Colum Cille (Columba), p71.
41 *Ibid.,* p69.
42 *Ibid.,* p74; *Betha Colaime Chille,* O' Kelleher and G. Schoerpperle (eds.), (1.101), in Herbert, M., *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp399-401.
43 Ibid., pp75-76.
44 *Betha Colaime Chille,* O' Kelleher and G. Schoerpperle (eds.), (9,1), in Herbert, M., *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p86.
45 Jan Erik Rekdal, *op. cit.,* pp72-73.
46 Ibid., pp68-69.

maintain the impression of an exile (*deorad*) with God (*Dé*) that required going further afield in order to solicit peace. A *murchuirthe*, on the other hand, gained an even higher penitential value for its greater asceticism – an imposed punishment guided only by the will of God. That is, to be pushed out to sea, as a criminal may have experienced so in antiquity, and ending up on a hermitage - the 'desert' in the ocean.

Now, in Richard Sharpe's translation of the *VC* we have the depiction of Cormac looking for a retreat in the ocean. It is now with this example that one may be able to put in context the missionary activities of Columba and the tradition within which he followed. Where Rekdal downplays the missionary theme to a degree,[47] Sharpe mentions two other traditions in which Columba meets Cormac. With Adomnán's *VC* the association is related to Durrow.[48] The two Middle Irish poems depict a dialogue between the *peregrini.* Both poems, *Dia do betha, a Chormaic cáin* and *Cormac hua Liathaín li glán*[49] make a definite case for Columba's diplomatic nature, and in fact instates Cormac to Durrow, whether through divine revelation or political decree. It does indicate here though, a subtle development of the Columban tradition. Rekdal asserts that whilst both the *VC* and *BCC* implicate pilgrimage, missionary aspects remain hazy in light of the fact that the tradition was very strong.[50] As noted earlier, Colum Cille follows the vagrant tradition of moving around different monasteries, a preaching circuit, but which leaves the impression of unresolved success.

Now, this need not refer to a negative thing if one were to consider the fieldwork of Columba as on-going. In fact, Adomnán asserts the busy work rate of Colum Cille in the scenes preceding his death narrative. (*VC* III. 23) Book 1 gives a strong impression for his divine administration of events, "If ever you commit that sin, you will not be king over all the peoples." (*VC* I. 14) For a man who dealt in stately affairs one need not confine these solely to favourable lands. Carry forward the account of the two kings found dead in *VC* I. 12. Sailors arriving from Ireland bring, what could only be, diplomatic news, but here figured under the context of prophecy. It seems indubitable that as a direct blood link to the kings of neighbouring states Columba would have been a sought-after person. Markus and Clancy assert the family connections to succession in both the kingship and abbacy.[51] It would be hard to imagine how politics could be dis-engaged from the missionary work of the Church.

> 'Brethren, pray with all your might for Cormac, who is sailing out of control and has now passed beyond the limit of where man has gone before. There he suffers horrific terrors, monstrous things never seen before and almost indescribable. We should therefore share in our minds the sufferings of our brethren, members of the same body as ourselves, who are placed in unendurable danger. Now, behold, I see Cormac and his fellow sailors earnestly imploring Christ's help, their faces streaming with tears. We too must help with our prayers and call on him to have pity on our brethren, to turn the wind that has driven them northwards...' (*VC* II. 42)

47 Jan Erik Rekdal, *op. cit.*, p75.
48 Adomnán, *Life of Columba*, Footnote 323, pp341-342.
49 Both can be found in the Bodleian Library, MS Laud misc. 615.
50 Jan Erik Rekdal, *op. cit.*, pp75-76.
51 Markus and Clancy, *op. cit.*, pp11-12.

The Iona church was constantly on the move, physically as well as spiritually.[52] They did not take a vow of stability as their Benedictine counterparts did; many were itinerant clergy going around the country. In reference to Ian Finlay, they saw achievement as a legacy of presence, not a stone monument typified by the centralised Roman influence, but as the Celtic adaptation to nature.[53] The island itself was significant and is emblematic of the Celtic faith to seek a life of contemplation within the wilderness and not in any edifice. It is a point in fact that the major reason why the Irish saints were not martyred during Ireland's conversion was because they maintained something of the old beliefs, and that was the idea of life after death shared in common with their druidic heritage.[54]

My fourth is marram, moored and mechanical,
married in its measurable martyrdom.[55]

Aside then, from its diplomatic importance, the Columban Church was a pilgrim church rather than an institution or establishment.[56] Pilgrimage is intimately tied in with penitence. Columba's journey was never felt to have ended. There was a sense that only the wounded healer could bring wholeness to the broken. Pilgrimage was austere in distancing itself into the wilderness. It was a sense of life as a journey, a need to discard unwanted baggage whilst progressing through dangers. It was a witness to Christ; a way of experiencing anew God's glory.

This conveniently introduces the reasoning behind *perigrinatio*. In view of the Viking raids upon Scotland and Iona (795 was the first),[57] knowledge got back of the islands on the edge of the world – the accounts of discovered lands in the far north. For 200 years the monks of the furthest reaches of Europe had been looking for the end of the world - paradise. Columba *knew* the destiny of the Church. In the biographies of St. Brendan, a contemporary of Columba, he visits the Faro Isles amongst others.[58] Columba's Iona just happened to be in a strategic location, conducting the important work of God within the pagan world. One may argue that it is only metaphorical, going into the ocean to find the desert. But is this not the search for Creation, where the sun never sets? Or is it just a simulacrum?

---

52 Ian Bradley, p84.
53 Ian Finlay *op. cit.*, pp167-168.
54 *Ibid.*, p26.
55 *Ammophila arenaria* is essential to the 'life' of a dune - a veritable ecosystem dependent on the remains of the stems and roots. The Latin words give clear indication of their existence in sand. Dunes can get up to 60 feet tall. Marram is a keystone species that allows Scarlet Pimpernels, Pansies and Speedwells to get a grip on the leeward side. The alkalinity of the soil will also benefit Salad Burnet, Lady's Tresses and Restharrow. Effectively, without these plants the dunes would fail to exist. As such they are not static entities, they are very slow-moving. They also have a tendency to blow-out under heavy winds. I chose this plant as symbolic of the movement of the Celtic Church, building under natural phenomena in the face of harsh conditions whilst affording protection for its continued growth. One could make allegorical reference to the *Vallum* which formed part of the enclosure of the monastery. Though it served as a protective function it was also a legal and spiritual boundary. The evidence points to Columba using a natural existing structure before any major works were constructed to extend it after his death. Aidan MacDonald, 'Adomnán's monastery of Iona' p42 and Finbar McCormick, 'Iona: the archaeology of the early monastery' pp49-51 in Courmac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba.*
56 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p84.
57 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viking_activity_in_the_British_Isles
58 Brendan's voyages have been one of the most enduring of European legend. Much of his journey comes from the *Navigatio* and mixes both fact and fiction. Like an Irish immram, the *Navigatio* tells the story of Brendan, who, with some companion monks, setting out in a coracle to find the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*, the Promised Land of the Saints or the Earthly Paradise. The four main hagiographic sources of Brendan are the Irish Lives, the Latin Lives, the Latin *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* and many vernacular versions of his voyage, collectively known as the Voyage of Brendan. For an on-line copy of an eloquently styled essay of his journey see http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17343/17343-h/17343-h.htm#FNanchor_1_1 'Brendan's fabulous voyage' by John, Third Marquess of Duke, a lecture delivered on January 19, 1893, before the Scottish society of literature and art.

O'Loughlin states the point that Ireland's geographical location was then understood as the lands furthest from Jerusalem.[59] A picture of Augustine's and Ambrose's geographical understanding had been captured in the works of Patrick and Orosius. (Early 5th century) These were then subsumed into the *Etymologiae* and *De Natura Rerum* of Isodore, bishop of Seville, (died 636). Being a literary centre Iona would have had access to these documents, as used by Adomnán himself.[60] The ocean was a swelling, breathing mass surrounding the earth and its margins. And so this brings my point full circle. The primeval abyss is where the apocalyptic beast would rise, a place where a great battle takes place between good and evil.[61] These were as much imaginary demons (Luke 8:31) as they were real all the time the ocean remained unexplored. Hence, Iona (the 'desert in the ocean'), took on the significance that all these island retreats generally represented; the further one went afield he closer they drew to God and heaven.

My fifth are the heathers, hearkening to the hills,
heaven is but a healthy hillock ahead.[62]

Moving beyond the Machair[63] I remember the first time I hit *Dun I* in the northern part of the island. From there one sees views of the rest of the island. Up on the moorland the heathers bask in sunshine. Yet they were not the only occupants, for there is a dent in the hill where lies the remains of a circular stone hut known popularly as the Hermit's or Culdee Cell.[64] That this island can boast a geological rock formation that is some of the oldest in the world is suggestive of an ancient reverence towards the earth that has imbued the place with layered meaning.[65] There is evidence of Mesolithic peoples here, hunter-gatherers, which leaves one inclined to believe that in time the site would become part of a sacred landscape, indicative of a "destination".[66] The *peregrini* that were to follow considered themselves under the direction of God. The monks called it the "white martyrdom".[67] This self-imposed exile was a strong element in Irish monasticism but, as I have pointed out, Columba's pilgrimage differed in some respects. For a start most monks went further afield, and they did so as an act of penance. Columba's motive may have been hidden under a cloud of sorts, intentionally or not. Undoubtedly there were political and religious interests, the both camps serving each other. Early mediaeval

59 O'Loughlin, T. *Op. cit., p14.*
60 Ibid., p15.
61 Ibid., p13.
62 *Erica* Spp. and *Calluna* Spp. are the two main species that colonise moorland. Heather is more common on poor, lightly grazed soil. They are often mixed with grasses and sedges. On damper ground it is more likely mixed with Cross-leaved Heath. Without grazing or burning the heather is invasive, but they will survive fire and produce fresh tasty new growth. Any sign of trees would probably have been restricted to thin moorland in which the shallow, acid soils are well-washed. On my evidence there were no trees left but the records accord the island once forested. Finbar McCormick, *op. cit.,* pp56-57 points out that once the forest was removed so pigs would have been obtained from off the island. Likewise, sheep predominated over cattle with the Benedictine's and the increase in the wool trade. What this indicates is a fundamental human ecology centred around plants and animals that again dictated the measure of an islander's life.
63 When the Duke of Argyll divided the island into crofts during the 1800's the Machair was used extensively to grow food. It is a light sandy soil. It would have benefited from peat being washed down from the fells.
64 E. Mairi MacArthur, *Columba's Island: From Past to Present* pp12-15. Tradition has linked it with Cilline Droichteach, an abbot of the 8th century considered to be the first anchorite. The fact is, a monk's or crofters life has always been inextricably linked to cattle. The many stone foundations were undoubtedly used as shelter to herds in which milking or calfing would be served by its purpose. Adomnán mentions explicitly what the monastic diet was: bread, fish, fruit and milk. *(VC iii,23)* See Aidan Macdonald, *op. cit.,* pp35-36. Despite no clear indication whether meat was eaten by the resident community during this period of Adomnán, hide would have been needed for books amongst other things. Sea fishing is not mentioned, nevertheless, a fishing community never developed because of a lack of a natural harbour. But MacArthur forwards the assertion that they ate together in the refectory particularly from cattle and less so from pigs, sheep and deer. There was also a seal breeding colony on a nearby island. Overall, these would have been frugal days as maybe the butchering of horse bones indicate. See Finbar McCormick, *op. cit.,* pp56-57 for a breakdown that verifies MacDonald's assertion that most meat was contained for the ill and the guest-house.
65 The bedrock is Lewisian gneiss. E. Mairi MacArthur, *op. cit.,* p3.
66 *Ibid.,* p5. Farming communities moved in around BC 3500 and the ensuing Bronze Age indicates just one burial cairn. Neighbouring Mull on the other hand was dotted with standing stones indicating a community of sorts.

Irish society encumbered upon the *perigrinus* an asceticism that was bound to family ties and landed wealth, as well as to the local patriotism and legal travel bars in existence.[68] They sought out desolate places before moving on again. Gen. 12.1 and the wilderness stories undoubtedly influenced them. Such said, there is an unsubstantiated account of Columba first landing on Oronsay.

Thought: Looking for the Garden of Eden. The saints who voyaged through the open sea saw themselves as being on the edge, physically and metaphorically. In iteration of my own journeys and relationship to nature, and in reference to my earlier claims when engaging the local community on Iona in conversation, I personally see this as the wilderness, which is more than just a state of mind; it is our origins. Wilderness engulfs the mind into a state of displacement and the mind must corroborate this state with a sense of rehabilitation. This I believe is the mindset of a pilgrim, justified in terms of Christian theology that has as its model Jesus, and who re-interprets the meaning of the sojourn through the desert to mean God's protected people and missionary zeal of the New Testament. Of course, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness and conquered his temptations. He reverses the Fall and in doing so provides the backdrop of the desert in the ocean, the latter symbolic of wilderness. The desert is the select destination once wilderness has been 'conquered'. It represents no more temptation and a safe haven where rapture can be experienced accompanied with a sense of self-sacrifice. Thus one finds the need, not so much to conquer wilderness, but to assimilate it, vindicated within the theological exegesis for the expansion of Christianity and the Abrahamic legacy.

In the *Altus prosator* one sees a clear indication of the mind of the *perigrinus* and the sense of rapture so anticipated.

"The raging anger of fire will devour our adversaries
who will not believe that Christ came from God the Father.
But we shall surely fly off to meet him straight away,
and thus we shall be with him in several ranks of dignities..." (Stanza Z)

The apocalyptic expectation is absolutely apparent here in the mind of the Christian. This central belief is expressed more in Johannine writings in which those who reject the incarnation are to be burned.[69] (See 1 Jn. 4:15; 20:31; flying away is imagery found in 1 Thes. 4:17). Earlier in the poem the author makes clear allusion to the vicinity of the pagan world.

"The momentary glory of the kings of the present world, fleeting and tyrannical,
is cast down at God's whim. See, giants are shown to groan..." (Stanza K)

67 Ian Finlay, *op. cit.*, p46.
68 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp17-18.
69 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, pp66-67.

The use of the name "giants" by the author has many pagan inclinations, since early Christian writers had no hesitation in using the language of pagan mythologies as part of their repertoire.[70] A 'pagan' character is seen as a perfect natural metaphor to adopt, especially in describing evil and misery, or doctrinal disaster. In the following stanza one can visualise a Hebridean landscape; most of the biblical imagery is taken from the Book of Job.

"By the divine powers of the great God is hung the globe of the earth,
and the circle of the great deep placed about it... promontories and rocks as their
solid foundations..." (Stanza M)

And finally here is a clear example of a medieval theologian's play on diverse biblical texts for meditations on the mysteries of the Fall, the Kingdom of God, the search for righteousness, and the soteriology brought by Christ's death and resurrection.

"...from whose fountain-spring four rivers flow, … the Tree of Life
whose leaves, bearing healing for the nations, do not fall;" (Stanza P)

The Tree of Life (Gen. 2:8-10) is linked to the Heavenly City (Rev. 22:2), thus the beginning of history is linked to the end, the first paradise with the last.[71] (See also Ps. 1:3)

One can thus gauge the feelings and thoughts going through the minds of the *perigrinus.* According to the *BCC*, Columba's early life as a monk 'doing the ropes' so to speak in Ireland, is only the primer before founding Iona and subsequently going on to pilgrimage.[72] As such the poems attributed to Beccán mac Luidech, a hermit associated with the Iona community in the mid-7th century, is a typical example of Columba's journey as both an epic adventure and act of purgation and self-denial.[73] In such a manner it reflects Rekdal's claim that the wandering element of Columba's life was pertinent to his pilgrimage, as shared with the *VC* also.[74] Only here the *VC,* written by Adomnán in consolidation of the *familia's* claims, tends to place its main emphasis upon his pious and ascetic abbacy.

My sixth is sundew, summoned to the sump,
sumptuous though, in its solemn silence.[75]

70 *Ibid.*, p59.
71 *Ibid.*, pp61-62.
72 Jan Erik Rekdal, *op. cit.,* p74.
73 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.,* p18.
74 Jan Erik Rekdal, *op. cit.,* p75.
75 Sundews, *Drosera* Spp. were the most spectacular of my finds. I remember encountering these 'flower' heads, but on close up turned out to be leaves. As the insect lands on its stickiness so the leaf closes up upon it and digests it slowly. Carnivorous they are one could reflect on the nature of the Ionian landscape allowing us to dwell on a monks meditations. These plants live in bog. Quite literally my feet vanished below the surface on many an occasion. What one identifies here is a raised or domed bog, in which peat builds up over fen plants or valley bog, developing indefinitely. Maybe not quite the highest point on the island I chose this plant because it represents death in nature and in some ways a reversal of the common thinking that relegates plants as a lower species below animals. They also glisten with dew, a fair reminder of the morning during which time Columba would be rising early for his psalm recitals. The sense of 'death' must have been very obvious to the monks, in anticipation of the Resurrection. That Christianity is premised on the life that comes of death is reflected in the martyrdom of saints who lost their lives to the vagaries of the climate, or the brigandry of the Viking hoards. The stanza reminds one of the solemnity of a monk's life and the call of duty.

There was a definite sense of faith in God's plan. The *Altus*, as previously mentioned to have been scribed by Columba himself, depends heavily on its biblical sources. There are no signs of the reasoned efforts to understand the observed workings of nature that is apparent in other early Irish texts such as the *De Mirabilibus Sacrae* scripture of 'Irish Augustine'.[76] One may also refer to the *Adiutor laborantium* and its praise poetry;[77] the final lines depict the Lord as rescuer of the storm-tossed pilgrim at sea.[78] The image appears to be inspired by the Gospel story of Jesus; (See Mk. 6:47-52; also Jn. 6:19-21) from the earliest times it was used for the salvation of the storm-tossed church in a hostile world, or the individual requiring salvation. Adomnán's *Vitae Columbae* often portrays the role of Columba intervening to ward off catastrophe from voyagers, leading them to quiet waters. Irish writers made full use of the imagery of vulnerable sailors in a frail boat on the open sea for its Christian symbolism. But this was more than a literary device, for many monks entrusted their life to the waves and the mercy of God. The *Annals of Ulster* recall the drowning of many of them during the 7th and 8th centuries around Iona. (See *AU* 641(4), 691(5), 749(7))[79] This confirms what O'Loughlin says, that the abundance of references to the sea occurs in nearly every chapter of the *VC*.[80] Of the islands that are mentioned, Ireland, Skye, and of course Iona, are the mainland trips from Derry, Gaul and Britain. As such Adomnán presents the meaning of such a risky voyage as part of the pilgrim's intimate growth in faith. He shows Columba as a 'helper of workers'. (*VC* i, 29) Columba became, for many generations of monks, the image of God's servant.

He crucified his body, left behind sleek sides;
he chose learning, embraced stone slabs, gave up bedding.
He gave up beds, abandoned – finest actions -
conquered angers, was ecstatic, sleeping little.
He possessed books, renounced fully claims of kinship:
for love of learning he gave up wars, gave up strongholds
(Stanza 16-18 Tiugraind Beccáin – The Last Verses of Beccán)[81]

As earlier stated, Columba did not approach the tradition with the same severity as the desert fathers. But even though there are numerous references to his paternal solicitude he did advocate solitary confinement or the eremitical lifestyle in his monastic foundations.[82] As such Aidan MacDonald claims that the community was at first only symbolically cenobitic or community-orientated in which Adomnán shows Columba accompanied by twelve companions.[83] (*VC* iii, 3 and 23) In this context though, one should take on board the fact of his metaphorical and physical distancing of his homeland, returning at least twice in 575 and 585.

---

76 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, p41.
77 See *Ibid.*, pp69-70. Referred to in the preface of the *Irish Liber Hymnorum* as the second poem composed by Columba. This is not least a tentative tradition.
78 *Ibid.*, pp75-76. In a later work I refer to the *Chaoskampf* myth depicting the struggle against a chaos monster in the form of a serpent or dragon prevalent throughout the world's legends and which often includes a hero-type.
79 Iona is referred to as *Í*. In particular, *AU* 691 recalls the drowning of six of the community. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (eds.), *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131).*
80 Thomas O'Loughlin, *op. cit.*, p19.
81 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, pp146-151.
82 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p18.
83 Aidan MacDonald *op. cit.*, p27.

Statesman

So what was Columba's disposition or strategic location? The Strathclyde Britons were based at Dumbarton in south-west and west central Scotland - the highlands.[84] The Picts were located to the north of the Firth of Forth, in the north-east and east central Scotland, ruling from Inverness. The Lothians and Borders were part of the Anglian kingdom of Bernicia and ruled by the kings of Northumbria. And finally the Irish, known as the *Scoti* by the Romans, increasingly dominated Argyll and the Inner and Outer Hebrides. By the time of Columba, Anglo-Saxons (Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Friesians and Geats) ruled much of England.[85] Whilst the British, distantly related to the Irish, were pushed into areas known as Cumbria, Wales, Cornwall and Strathclyde, others established the area known as Brittany. By the mid-seventh century the Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians established a powerful overlordship. Competing kings spent much time in exile in Ireland, Pictland, Dál Riata, and even on Iona. Columba had much contact with all these rulers and would eventually play a part in the formation of a single monarchy for modern Scotland.[86]

In reiteration then, the *VC* was written, amongst other reasons, with a view to consolidating the *familia* and establishing a power structure between the Church and the ruling royalty of the surrounding nations. This was particularly important for both the Northumbrian and Irish kings whose support Adomnán wanted. It included legitimating their rule through their patronage to his monastery.[87] Irish monasticism was, in fact, fraternal and egalitarian, the *Life* depicting a variety of relationships with other founder-saints, bishops and abbots. This must have been important for the missionary work of the *familia*. The abbacy indicates a type of apprenticeship scheme; Baíthéne his successor had been in authority in Iona, Hinba and Mag Luinge, and his successor Laisrén at Durrow.[88] Virgno had also been close to Columba. Despite Adomnán's own perspective it was probably true that Columba was sought out by leading churchmen such as Comgall of Bangor and Colmán mac B'eognae. Columba had an important role in 'a conference of kings' in 575, with Áed mac Ainmirech, king of Cenél Conaill and later Tara, and Áed'an mac Gabráin, king of Dál Riata. By the time of his death the *Amra* paints a picture of wisdom, learning and holiness. In fact the *Amra* speaks of him as *c'et cell cust'oit*, 'guardian of a hundred churches'. Clancy and Markús consider Dalla'an Forgaill's language as hyperbole and alliteration. What is of more certainty though, are the foundations of Hinba (unidentified) for anchorites and Mag Luinge on Tiree where penitents were sent, bolstered by churches also mentioned on the island of Elen (unidentified) and a mainland place called Cella Diuni.[89] Likewise when Columba returned to Ireland he founded a monastery at Durrow in the territory of the southern Uí Néill. In 635 both Lindisfarne in Northumbria, and 'Rechru' in Ireland, most probably Rathlin Island or Lambay Island, were also founded from Iona.[90] Oswald, the new king of Northumbria, would also attribute his success to the patronage of Columba and his years of exile on Iona. It

84 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp32-33.
85 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, pp5-6.
86 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp32-33.
87 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, p28.
88 *Ibid.*, pp11-12.
89 See W. J. Watson *The Celtic place-names of Scotland* p170. The great majority of the dedications are characteristic of the early Irish Church, which had relations with Whithorn. One could infer that many saints did visit and found churches in this region; the greatest activity occurred after 635. But there is some evidence for the presence of the early Welsh or British Church, operating partly from Whithorn.

was the simple and holy life of the monk that deeply impressed him. Though one may not fully ascribe the growth of the Scottish church to Columba, there could be no doubt that his missionary work was *au fait* with its spiritual and political growth.

My seventh is knapweed, napping in the knoll,
kneeling to the knelling call of knowledge.[91]

In conclusion then, no commentators portray him as receiving a direct call from God.[92] Ian Bradley is of the opinion as to whether Columba saw himself as a missionary at all. One could say that he saw himself rather as a kinsman first and foremost. Because ecclesiastical establishments in Britain did not initially receive the same level of ostentation as did the rest of Europe, secular rule would have been no less important and required Columba to show more than an interest.[93] The 12th century *Life* vindicates this position in its portrayal of the setting up of numerous monastic settlements in Ireland as part of its attempt to assert the primacy of Derry over the *familia*. Máire Herbert shows that his career made it mutually beneficial a co-operation between church and dynasty.[94] In fact, what is clear is that it is difficult to disentangle secular affairs from religious ones in matters of *familia.* For instance, Adomnán does not set about portraying Columba converting the Pictish king Brude but that the king required Columba's abilities in diplomacy and was anxious to secure an alliance with the Dál Riata Scots during the time the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria was rising in power.[95] However, having said that, the picture largely given by Adomnán is one in which Columba spends most of his last 35 years on Iona between the duties of priest and pastoralism, scholar and monastic leadership. Regular trips to Hinba, Skye and Ardnamurchan diffuse this intensity as such. There are a number of individual conversions but no overall emphasis on missionary activity. Nevertheless the Irish *Life* conveys the impression that Columba was always on the move converting heathens. As such the *Amra* states strongly that Columba's missionary field lay among the Picts. Bede was influential here as an historian who assigned the northern Picts to Columba and the southern Picts to Ninnian; the latter has an even shadier basis of missionary influence of pro-British support.

To close on this point then, there is little evidence that Columba planted any monastic communities or churches in the Pictish regions of Perthshire, the Highlands, and the north and north-east.[96] Bede's remarks probably apply to a centenary period after the saint's death during a substantially powerful influence from the

---

90 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, pp12-13.

91 I could be accused myself of exercising alliteration to the point of exaggerated fantasy. In view of the quoted 'one hundred churches' under his patronage it is worth considering that Adomnán's Columba at the end of the second preface portrays an ideal monk who is only really conventionally ascetic. He does not practise formal periodic private retreats as senior members of the Iona community were later to do. In other words, Columba would have been an incredibly busy monk who perhaps played just as an important role in secular affairs. As such Adomnán accords only a very limited missionary role to him. See Aidan MacDonald *op. cit.*, pp26-27. Knapweed, *Centaurea* Spp. is more common on chalk soils. At this time of the year (September) the striking purple flowers are a blessing to see and quite ubiquitous. They tend to be thistle-like in appearance but spineless. Here I could be making reference to the ubiquity of Christian development.

92 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p16.

93 *Ibid.*, pp28-30.

94 Máire Herbert *op. cit.*, p35. A dual legacy of spiritual and temporal prerogatives appears to have been transmitted from Columba to his successors because his closest associates are blood ties. He bridges the divide between ecclesiastical and secular realms – his most important achievement. The Uí Néill benefited from ecclesiastical associates demonstrated by the role Columba played in the alliance between his Irish kin and the Dál Riata in Scotland. Further, the government of his monastic foundation seems to be based on secular concepts of overlordship, kinship and inheritance.

95 Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, pp33-35.

96 *Ibid.*, p39.

familia.[97] (See Bede, *HE* iii, 4) In fact, Bede was to recall Adomnán's reign as fulfilling Iona's fortunes.[98] (See *HE* iv 26; v, 15, 22) If one studies the text of the *VC,* on more than one occasion Adomnán mentions other saints out of context presumably not to detract from the primacy of the Columban *familia.*[99] (See *VC* iii, 17) These saints included St. Comgall of Bangor, St. Brendan of Clonfert, St. Cainnech of Aghaboe and St. Cormac. The latter is mentioned by Adomnán as been commended to Brude and travelling to the Orkneys. It has led some scholars to say that Columba sub-contracted his work out. Columba's missionary work seems to be entirely devoted to the Dál Riata; there is no evidence of foundations by Columba himself in the land of the Picts – they are all in Scots Dál Riata or Ireland. Mainstream evangelism happened in the northern lands from late 7th century to early 8th and is more likely creditable to Maelrubha.[100] Columba's activities were more contained to individuals in which the royal connection made all the difference. Bradley concludes on this point by asserting that he ran his monasteries like a kingdom bound together by ties of kinship and establishing a dynasty to rule over them. His uncle was abbot at Hinba, his first cousin at Tiree, and a second cousin at Durrow. Máire Herbert likened it to a secular overlordship so that the system had an in-built potential for survival and continuity in Irish society.[101]

As I have expressed, numerous poems and stories collected over millennia attest to the role Columba plays both in spirit and actual. At the root of this body of legend lies the account of Adomnán, which leads one to his final epitaph of Columba. Bradley commends this account as indicative of the diverse activities that explicitly show Columba as priest, pastor, scholar and manual.[102] From carting around the island visiting his brothers in the fields, attending Sunday mass, blessing the grain for the forthcoming winter months, the meeting with the horse as companion, blessing the island, and then writing out the thirty-fourth psalm. His final acts take him into his lodgings and wooden church, for he knew of his forthcoming death.

How oaken one stands in guardianship
It brings in ashen spirit my sylvan ancestry
For now I make a hasty return whence I came
with the resurrection of my brethren wildings
Rousing as the boar in the hazy wood[103]

---

97 The *familia* kept Easter not on the 14th day of the moon but on the Sunday of the wrong week. Bede accused these Celtic Christians of being barbarous and simple. See Bede in Judith McClure and Roger Collins (eds.) *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* Oxford University Press, 1994.

98 Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus *op. cit.,* pp14-16. It was not until 716 AD that the monks of Iona adopted the canonical Easter and the preaching of Egfbert. This coincided with the succession of Alfrid and the regaining of the Pictish territories, and the freedom of the Irish living in Britain. Adomnán was sent on a mission to Alfrid where he observed the English canonical rules. Bede recalls him as trying to convert Iona on his return.

99 Ian Bradley *op. cit.,* pp41-43.

100 *Ibid.*, p40 and G Frank Knight *Archaeological Light on the Early Christianising of Scotland* Vol. 1 p7. Frank Knight identified 80 men and women who were actively evangelising the country before Columba as far as the Shetlands. Educated from Candida Casa and elsewhere Scotland was already Christianised before Columba's arrival, and much has been credited to him including the work of Colm in the Pictish regions of Buchan and Aberdeen. Vol. 2 p30.

101 Máire Herbert, *op. cit.,* p35.

102 *VC* iii, 23 and Ian Finlay *op. cit.,* pp61-62.

103 This verse is a play on the names of the trees mentioned in the ensuing double line stanzas which themselves can be read as an account of the actions of his last day. (See *VC* iii, 23) I wanted to express the nature of life and death if I am to continue my abstract pilgrimage of plants that represent the life of Columba. As previously mentioned the evolution of species from the sea onto the hills is signified in ecological terms as climax vegetation. That Iona has no more trees is a point I allude to when I suggest an ethereal woodland. Thus, Columba's ancestry is poetically described as a movement back through different traditions and is eventually reclaimed as a Celtic phenomenon, hence the ambiguity of the very last line. (I am aware of the modern notion to frame Columba in romantic notions of druidry) The island, once forested, was predominantly inhabited by these trees. The interesting exclusion is oak, which has no ecological record but would have been cropped from the mainland. In the time of Columba Iona's dwelling were of wood, as those of other Irish monasteries. (See Bede *HE* iii, 25; and *VC* ii, 45) Adomnán also had supervised the felling of great timbers from the mainland probably in the valley of the River Shiel. The relationship to oak, amongst a few historians, would have been catalytic to the experience of Columba since one knows that the druidical tradition revolved around these sacred groves of which became centres of learning themselves. See Ian Finlay, *op. cit.,* pp31-32. The reference to the boar is likewise indicative of the old beliefs. The boar was a principle cult animal of the Celts, and Adomnán probably saw the encounter of Columba with the boar on Skye as a pagan-Christian one. Ian Finlay *op. cit.,* p26. Finally, in explanation of the word 'oakum', a material made from old rope traditionally picked by convicts and paupers and caulked into boat seams to make them waterproof, the woods are in fact the spiritual oasis upon which the ancestry sail their ships – the oaks are allegorical of these guardians.

An oasis upon which sails my oakum ships
Breaching the ends of the known world
A birth as assured as the rising sun
That not even snakes can usurp from the darkness
But only the bosom of nature that bears her milk on the surf

My eighth is rowan, redolent of royalty
redeemed upon the rock and raised in rapture[104]

My ninth is ash, assailed yet assuaged,
asked to assembly, assumed into ascension[105]

My tenth is birch, beauty of brightness
birthed at Bethlehem, bereft of Bethany[106]

My eleventh is willow, woven in wicker
wailing in water, a wintry wallowing[107]

My twelfth is hazel, hedged in hegemony
hewn as a haughty hero, a hatchment to heathens[108]

Endnote

Thought: What is the significance of the island of Mull? David, my tutor, said it represents the profane. For me it represents the other island that gives a fuller context to Iona. There is this concept of time. The Sound indicates the slowing of time, i.e. it allows for preparation when approaching messengers or threats are anticipated. It could represent chaos – the place where demons approach from e.g. the Vikings – my tutor thinks they would have been stupefied by its occurrence. Mull represents the this-world, a source of mundane news. I should just dwell here a moment longer, for the journey across the Sound has always been a transformational one. It recalls the recent account of the group of young men who died in a boat accident. Coming back one night from a football game, from what I could gather in conversation, they hit a sandbank. Only one survived, swimming as he did back to pier on Mull. The loss to the community was deep because to have so small a population and to see young men die to it reduces significantly a single generation and the prospect of more children.[109] One must bear in mind that the small community of monks would have lived with this fear continually, despite their numbers being bolstered through ongoing visits.

I remember the day I swam up to the pier and to the ferry where the passengers were disembarking. I generated a lot of interest because firstly, most people fear the cold of the sea and secondly, the amount of legend accruing to this island may even have had a deep resonance in the collective consciousness of our well-read visitors. My ability is to strike up an indigenous relationship to new environments with surprising ease. I

---

104 In Gaelic, it is *Caorann*, or *Rudha-an* (red one, pronounced quite similarly to English "rowan") The density of the rowan wood makes it very usable for walking sticks but tradition has it that magician's staves and druid staffs have been made out of it; its branches were often used in dowsing rods and magic wands. Rowan was carried on vessels to avoid storms, kept in houses to guard against lightning, and even planted on graves to keep the deceased from haunting. It was also used to protect one from witches. Its disappearance could be symbolic of the Christianisation of pagan Scotland. The rock is an obvious reference to the pillow upon which Columba sleeps and briefly rests.

105 The second line refers to his summoning of the brethren, commending them to God's infinite mercy, before he dies and is visited by angels.

106 I reclaim the tradition back to Christianity and make reference to the teaching of Jesus. In particular Bethany was the place in which he would reside outside Jerusalem and where, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus would preach from. (See Lk. 19:29;37, 22:39-40, Mk. 14:26 Mt. 21:1; 17) The road from here led past the Garden of Gethsemane and into the temple complex through the Beautiful Gate. Hence, heaven can be likened to the New Jerusalem.

107 Here I am remembering the tradition of Moses in which he is born of royal line but is cast out on a wicker basket into the water. The wailing is suggestive of both death and birth, as of women and babies respectively. My comments are suggestive of a rebirth.

108 See Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p49. His early biographers sought to portray him as a strong man and hero in the tradition of the Celtic warrior aristocracy. The eulogy commissioned by King Ainmirech shortly after his death entitled *Amra Choluimb Chille* draws on the language of pre-Christian Celtic heroes. (See also Clancy and Markus *op. cit.*, p123-124) This was mingled with Christian precepts of the holy life. The hegemony obviously refers to his *familia*. The reference to hazel, *Corylus avellana*, is analogous to the wood used as coppice in which it is periodically cut down and used in traditional woodlands before regenerating. In this way the tree will live significantly longer than if left to grow to its own devices.

109 This parallels the account in the Irish Annals of the 6 monks who died in a storm. (See earlier reference to the *AU* fn. 56) Bradley says there are several instances of boat wrecks reflected in the poem *Noli Pater* petitioning God for protection. The authorship is unreliable but it has been included in the *Irish Liber Hymnorum*. Bradley asserts that *ILH* is suggestive of Columba's authorship and that he composed it when he experienced an oakwood being set alight. Although it echoes of Celtic nature poetry Clancy and Márkus do not endorse this assertion at all. But there is an association of weather miracles appearing soon after his death as the *Amra* testifies. See Ian Bradley, *op. cit.*, p60 and Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *op. cit.*, pp81-95.

don't doubt that I could have appeared as a holy figure of sorts, a pilgrim. When I first came to this island the first thing I did was to swim naked away on the north-west side of the island, because it was an impromptu decision and I had no swimwear. The following day I swam to an islet some 100 metres away in the same area. This small mound of green and black land has probably never been inhabited – it is just too small. This was my birth into the island's sacred landscape and in retrospect set me up for my forthcoming experiences and initiation into Celtic Christianity. On my return journey home on a train from Glasgow to London a man overheard a conversation I had with a fellow passenger – he was sitting opposite me. It turned out that he had just been to Iona and was writing a book. It progressed that this book was about cultural conflict and that a certain swimmer who swam up to the boat was noticed from a guest house along the beach. Apparently, this swimmer was talking to some passengers from the comfy of his wilderness. He thought the sight almost romantic and mythical, enough to include him into his book.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae* (*VC*), trans. R. Sharpe, *Adomnán: Life of Columba* Penguin Books Ltd. (London 1995)

The Annals of Ulster (*AU*), Sean Mac Airt and Gearoid Mac Niocaill, G. (eds.), *The Annals of Ulster* (*to AD 1131*) Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies (Dublin 1983)

Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* Judith McClure and Roger Collins (eds.) Oxford University Press (Oxford 1994)

Betha Colaime Chille (*BCC*), O' Kelleher and G. Schoerpperle (eds.) Urbana (London 1918) in Herbert, M. *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* Clarendon Press (Oxford 1988)

Irish Liber Hymnorum (*ILH*), Bernard, J. H. and Atkinson, R. (eds.), *Henry Bradshaw Society* Vols. 13 and 14 Harrison & Sons (London 1897)

The Irish Penitentials, in Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Vol. 5 The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (Dublin 1963)

Secondary sources

Bradley, I *Columba:Pilgrim and Penitent 597-1997* Wild Goose Publications (Glasgow 1996)

Clancy, T. O. and Márkus, G. (eds.) *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh 1995)

Finlay, I. *Columba* Victor Gollancz Ltd. (London 1979)

Garland, S. *Wild Flowers of Britain* Artus Publishing Limited (London 1978)

Knight, G. F. *Archaeological Light on the Early Christianising of Scotland* Vol. 1. James Clarke & Co. Ltd. (London 1933)

MacDonald, A. 'Adomnán's monastery of Iona' in C. Bourke (ed.) *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* Four Courts Press (Dublin 1997)

MacArthur, E. M. *Columba's Island: Iona from Past to Present* Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh 1995)

McCormick, F. 'Iona: the Archaeology of the Early Monastery' in C. Bourke (ed.) *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* Four Courts Press (Dublin 1997)

O' Loughlin, T., 'Living in the Ocean'

Rekdal, J. E,,'The Irish Ideal of Pilgrimage of Colum Cille (Columba), in A Ó Corraín (ed.), *Proceedings of the Third Symposium of SecretsCeltologica Nordics* held in Oslo 1-2nd November 1991, G7-83.

Ryan, J. *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (2nd Edition) Irish Academic Press (Dublin 1972)

Society, The Henry Bradshaw *A Pre-conquest English Prayer Book,* Muir, B. J. (ed.) The Boydell Press (Suffolk 1988)

Watson, W. J. *The Celtic Place-names of Scotland* Birlinn Ltd. (Edinburgh 2004)