

APPENDIX ONE : THE MAJOR CELTIC SAINTS

The following pages contain notes on a selection of saints who played a foundational role in the establishment and growth of Celtic Christianity, and who were revered as heroes and examples by later generations of Celtic Christians. Many founded communities, or were the initiators of church planting ventures in Ireland, Wales, Scotland or England. The best known names have been selected, and a summary of the main events of their lives, in so far as these can be known at this distance in time, is presented here.

1. Patrick (c389- 461 CE)

With a heroic figure of the past, it is often difficult to separate fact from fable, but the following data are well attested:

Patrick was born around 389 CE to a Christian family in Britain. His father was Calpornius, a deacon and a town councillor (Clarke 1929:99) and his grandfather, Potitus, was a priest in the Celtic Church (which always allowed married clergy). The town of his birth is called *Bannaventa Taberniae*, generally believed to be on the Bristol Channel, near the Severn (Clarke 1929:99).

At the age of sixteen, Patrick was captured by Irish raiders and enslaved for six years. During his years of slavery, he began to think about Christianity for himself, and underwent a personal conversion experience. He became a very disciplined man of prayer, praying several times throughout the day, as he herded animals, as well as at night (Davies 1999:93). He managed to escape from his captors, and travelled to the monastery at Lerins, where he studied under Honoratus. After spending some years in the monastery, he returned home to Britain (Tucker 1983: 38)

He received his own version of the Macedonian call, when an Irishman summoned him in a dream, with the words, “Holy youth, we beseech you to come and walk among us once more” (Dowley 1980: 211). He then went to Auxerre in Gaul to study, and spent several years under Germanus.

Following his ordination, Patrick returned to Ireland as a missionary in 432 CE. Ireland was largely pagan at this time, and Patrick encountered opposition from the druids, who led the people in the worship of oak, ash and yew trees. He began in the North, in Saul, near Strangford Lough, Ulster. From there he went to Meath, and the capital of Tara.

It was his wont ... to challenge them to thaumaturgic contests ... in which each party tried to outdo the other in working wonders before the eyes of the dumbfounded crowd, the druids relying on the aid of the powers of darkness , Patrick on the grace of the Most High. This was the course he followed at rara, at the well of Findmag and among the sons of Amolngid (Gougaud 1992:40).

His strategy was to influence the leaders of communities, and through them to reach their followers. Latourette sums up the work of Patrick as follows: “..he sought at times to win the political heads of the community and through them to effect a mass conversion” (Latourette 1980:220).

Winning the support of local kings not only influenced their subjects to consider conversion to Christianity. It was also a necessity if Patrick was to establish a lasting Christian presence in an area:

The conversion of a king, the head of a *tuath* or several *tautha*, was an event of particularly happy omen. The masses often adopted Christianity in the train of their chiefs, drawn by their example. Moreover, since kings and nobles were the sole possessors of the soil, they along could provide the missionary with a site whereon to build a church (Gougaud 1992:38-39).

By 447 CE, most of Ireland was Christian. Patrick was not the first Christian missionary to Ireland, but he can be credited with establishing the Irish church (Douglas 1974: 515).

Two writings of Patrick survive: His *Confession*, which is a spiritual autobiography, and *A Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. Both of these writings have been included in Davies' work (1999) and are discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.2).

2. Columba (521-597 CE)

Columba, also called Columcille, was born in 521 CE to a noble Irish family, and was brought up in a Christian home. He is said to have written: ‘Christ, the Son of God, is my Druid’ , indicating a rejection of Celtic paganism, in favour of loyalty to Christ.

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He attended the schools of Finbar at Moville and Finnian at Clonard (Dowley 1980: 194), where he received both religious and literary training. He is also said to have received instruction from Gemman, an elderly bard (O'Flynn 1949:66). He soon had a reputation for excellence in copying and illuminating manuscripts. He was also known for his loud singing voice. His biographer, Adamnan, records that “his voice was so powerful that, when he chanted the Psalms, the words could be distinguished at a distance of several hundred paces, and that he once frightened the Druids by the loudness of his singing” (Clarke 1929:97).

Columba was ordained by Bishop Etchen and continued his studies at Glasnevin, near Dublin, until the Yellow Plague struck in 544. He established monasteries in Ireland at Derry, Darrow and Kells (Tucker 1983:41). These places are associated with learning, and with famous manuscripts. Columba was known for his artistry and love of literature, and according to one tradition was primarily responsible for the famous Book of Kells.

In 563 Columba left Ireland. He was involved in a controversy about a manuscript, and may have been involved in causing a civil war between his own clan, and the High King Diarmid. His decision to leave Ireland may therefore have been a self-imposed penance (Dowley 1980:194). Other writers dispute this, saying that according to the earliest and most reliable sources, Columba left Ireland simply because he desired to be an exile for Christ (Gougaud 1992:134).

His most famous community was established on the island of Iona. Together with twelve monks, he established his headquarters there. Columba's monastery was never considered merely a refuge from the world, but was a base from which evangelism of the peoples inhabiting the region was conducted.

O' Flynn (1949:67) describes Columba's venture graphically as follows:

... in the company of twelve others (the Irish, as a rule, conformed to the Apostolic pattern) he directed his course to “Alba of the ravens” – the leader of that intrepid army of *peregrini* who, with staff and satchel of books, clad in white woollen tunic, and having strange frontal tonsure, from ear to ear, and eyelids tinted blue, were to make Europe resound for five centuries to the *militiae Christi* – the warfare of Christ.

From Iona he travelled on missionary journeys to Scotland. He is credited with evangelizing the warlike Picts and the Scots, including the Hebrides, the Orkneys, the

Shetland Islands and the Faroe Islands (O'Flynn 1949:69) Like Patrick, Columba was opposed by the Druids, and overcame them by power encounter. He also trained his companions, and sent them out on missionary journeys.

Life on Iona consisted of a routine of prayer, fasting, meditation, study and manual labour. Columba himself was known as a man of prayer and holiness. There was also a strong tradition of welcoming and offering hospitality to travellers from far off places. Columba was a more extreme ascetic than his fellow monks, sleeping on the bare ground with a rock for a pillow, and constantly engaged either in prayer, study or manual labour (Clarke 1929:97).

Columba lived on Iona for thirty-four years. His biographer, Adamnan, called him *insulanus miles* (the island soldier). Many others joined Columba and his small community of monks, and soon similar monasteries were established on the islands of Ethica, Elena, Hinba and Scia (now called Skye). All these places became training centres for missionaries who evangelised the Picts, Scots and Anglo-Saxons (Gougaud 1992:135).

Columba's contribution to the Christian tradition is described as follows:

Columba combined deep visionary piety and a forceful involvement in the affairs of kings and chiefs with a concern for scholarship and a love of nature. He is a typical figure of the Celtic church. His achievements illustrate the importance of the Celtic church in bringing a revival of Christianity to Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire (Dowley 1980:194).

His life history was recorded first in a poem Amhra Choluim Chille and later in a "Life" written by Adamnam, the Abbot of Iona who succeeded Columba (O'Flynn 1949:65).

According to tradition, Columba died, as he had prophesied, in the monastery chapel at midnight on Sunday, 9th June, 597.

3. Brigid (born c452 CE -)

Brigid was born in Fochart, near Dundalk, and her mother was a slave in the service of a druid ((Douglas 1974: 155). It is possible that she was actually the illegitimate daughter of the druid. As an adult, she obtained her freedom, became a nun and spent time with seven companions and their leader, St. Mel of Armagh (Jones 1994:59). She later established a convent refuge for women in Kildare. This became a centre of spirituality and learning in

Ireland, and was a double monastery, so that Brigid exercised authority over both men and women. . Brigid is traditionally credited with establishing a school of art there.

She is the second patron saint of Ireland after Patrick and became identified with Bridget, the three-fold goddess of the moon, who's name means valour or might. Saint Bridget took over the feast day of the goddess Bridget on the 1st February (Rees 1992:85). There was a blurring in the tradition of Brigid with the pagan goddess of the same name, and also with Mary the Mother of Christ. As with other early saints, fanciful stories grew up around her:

Brigit was born at sunrise, neither within nor without a house, was bathed in milk, her breath revives the dead, a house in which she is staying flames up to heaven, cow dung blazes before her, oil is poured on her head; she is fed from the milk of a white red-eared cow; a fiery pillar rises over her head; sun rays support her wet cloak; she remains a virgin; and she was one of the two mothers of Christ the Anointed (Condren 1989:65).

The pagan goddess Brigid was associated with the sun, and this association has continued in the Christian tradition. A story is told that, when Brigid was an infant, her mother left her alone in a house. Neighbours saw fire coming out of the windows of the house and rushed to rescue the child, but found her peacefully asleep. She is also said to have hung her cloak on the rays of the sun (Condren 1989: 66). The traditional Brigid's cross has a sun-like formation, and is still used today to protect crops and animals.

Brigid was known as a person of compassion and strength, and became identified with Mary the mother of Christ, after Bishop Ibor saw a vision of Mary and said that Brigid was identical to her (Jones 1994:59). Brigid became known as the Mary of the Gaels. Her role as a peacemaker and mediator between rival factions is widely attested (Condren 1989:77). Her name is associated with several places in Ireland, testifying to her popularity, and she is known as one who protects those in danger, and as the patron saint of poets, blacksmiths, healers, cattle, dairymaids, midwives, newborn babies and fugitives.

4. Hilda (died 680 CE)

Hilda was descended from Northumbrian royalty. She was baptised with King Edwin in 627 CE as a member of his household. At the age of 33 she went to France to become a nun, but was recalled by Aidan, to run a community of nuns in Northumbria.

In 657 CE she founded the double monastery (for men and women) at Whitby, which she ruled for 22 years, maintaining Celtic monastic traditions (Jones 1992:136). Whitby developed a reputation as a seat of learning and had an impressive library. The Synod of Whitby was held there, at which the Roman Church imposed its authority and the Celtic Christians submitted.

5. Aidan (died 651 CE)

Aidan was an Irish monk at Iona. Little is known of his birth and early life. He was sent to Northumbria as a missionary to the Saxons there.

He established the monastery on Lindisfarne, also called Holy Island. The island became a base for missionary journeys by Aidan and others, as Iona had been for Columba and his companions. Lindisfarne became both a monastery and a bishop's residence, according to Celtic tradition (Gougaud 1992:137).

He was known for his prayerful life, and many miracles were attributed to him (Jones 1992:10). He died in 651 CE.

6. Cuthbert (died 687 CE)

The life of Cuthbert is recorded by the Venerable Bede in his history of the English Church. He was an orphan who worked as a shepherd. One night, as a young man, he saw a vision, which he later saw as a sign of the death of Aidan. He then became a monk at Melrose Abbey, and later helped to found a community of monks at Ripon.

He was known for his hospitality, for healing miracles and for widespread missionary influence in the North of England. He was involved in the Synod of Whitby and is said to have tried to reconcile the warring participants. He is also said to have escaped periodically to an island hermitage, where he made friends with ducks, now known as St. Cuthbert's ducks.

He was elected Bishop of Hexham in 684 CE at the Synod of Twyford (Jones 1994:81) and was consecrated at York on Easter Day 685 CE. However, he negotiated to exchange sees with his former abbot Eata, and then became Bishop of Lindisfarne. He cared for the

victims of the plague for two years, and performed many healing miracles, before his death in 687 CE on the secluded island of Inner Farne.

7. Columbanus (c 530-615 CE)

Columbanus was an Irish Christian who is credited with establishing monasteries at Luxeil, Annegray and Fontaine in France (Jones 1992:77). He was well educated in the Greek and Latin classics. He dedicated himself to following a monastic life at an early age. He became a disciple of the hermit Sinell on an island called Cluain Inis. Later, he went to Bangor, where he was a disciple of St. Comgall.

He left Bangor with twelve companions to begin a mission to Gaul. He came into conflict with the Frankish bishops, especially over the contentious issues of the date of Easter and following of distinctive Celtic rules and practices. He further angered the political authorities by denouncing King Theodoric II of Burgundy for immorality and refusing to baptise his children. He was therefore forced to leave the country in 610 CE.

While travelling back to Ireland, Columbanus was shipwrecked, and came under the protection of King Clotaire II of Neustria and King Theodebert at Metz. The missionary party began to evangelise the local peoples around Lake Constance. They remained there until King Theodoric conquered Neustria in 612 CE, when they fled to Lombardy, and were protected by the Arian king Agiloff. Columbanus founded a great monastery at Bobbio. He remained there until his death in 615 CE.

8. Brendan (c483-577 CE)

Like Patrick and Brigid, most of the historical records of Brendan's life are shrouded in mystery and legend. We know that he was the son of Findlugh of Tralee. He was fostered by a nun, Ita, and educated at St Jarlath's Abbey by St Erc, the Bishop of Kerry (Jones 1994:56). St. Erc ordained him in 512 CE, and Brendan began to found a series of monasteries. The most famous, Clonfert, became an important missionary centre.

He travelled extensively through Ireland, and also Scotland, where he became a friend of Columba. He also travelled in Wales, and possibly beyond, although this cannot be established for certain. He died while visiting his sister Brig in Annaghdown in 577.CE

His reputation as a traveller gave rise to a legendary work called “The Voyage of St. Brendan” , dating from the tenth century. In this story, he travels in a small boat to a land of promise in the West, variously identified as the Hebrides, Iceland or Greenland, or even North America.