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Columba – the Saint in Irish and Scottish Tradition

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Columba said, 'the generous will never go to Hell; the rich spurn a close fellowship with God'. So sang an Irish poet (Ó Baoighill and Ó Baoill, 17-18, my translation) and such, indeed, is the reputation our Saint enjoys in the tradition of Ireland's most northerly county, Donegal, 'Generous Columba', is how another song (Goan, 19) describes him, for gifts and bounty were ever a part of his image there. It was believed, moreover, that this was a gift the Saint had especially asked God for: *'You have given me sufficient but you didn't give me a heart to spend it.'* *'So long as the sun is in the sky,' the Saviour replied, 'the generous will never go to hell.'* (Watson, 99; my translation). His 16th century biography records how bountifully his prayers were answered: on one occasion *God miraculously turned the saint's sweat to gold so he could make gifts* (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 80). Nor was it only in later ages that folk traditions regarding the saint came to prominence for we note the influence of such elements in his earliest biography, that by Adhamhnán, a successor abbot at Iona.

1. The Saint as Hero

Whatever may have been the Saint's true character traits – and Columba's perceived humanity undoubtedly made him an appealing individual – we clearly have to do with a hero-figure as well as a saint. A traditional account from Gaelic Scotland describes him thus: *Colmcille was a very pious man, famous throughout the world. He walked in the way of God and Christ every step he took and everywhere he went. He was an outstanding soldier like David.* (Black, 95).

British commemorative postage stamp of 1997 depicting Saint Columba¹

His connection with the Gaelic hero Fionn is further discussed below but it should be noted that, like the other pre-eminent hero of Early Irish saga, Sétanta, our saint adopted a new name upon entering his chosen career. While the former chose Cú, signifying 'hound' or 'warrior' in Cú Chulainn, the saint opted for the contrasting *Columba*, Gaelic *Colum* (later *Colm*), signifying 'dove' i.e. symbol of peace. Despite his religious appellation, Columba, who was an important noble of a leading Irish dynasty, is traditionally associated with warfare and the advancement of his clan, a background out of which developed, no doubt, his heroic personality. Possessing such an identity, he was believed to have been in a position to respond to entreaties to heal people who had suffered physical harm, as well as to protect individuals from this, as illustrated by an incident where he is said to have given his cloak to King Aed mac Ainmire so that the latter could not be killed (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 94).

That great collection of lore, (*Carmina Gadelica/ Ortha nan Gàidheal*) (Carmichael I, 22-32), made in the 19th century by a revenue official, Alexander Carmichael, in western Scotland, contains many charms relevant to this subject – though it is now understood that Carmichael was given to 'improving' versions he received (Stiùbhart 2008). In the charm *Seun Sàbhalaiddh*

1. Source: https://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienK/Kolumban_der_Aeltere.html_viewed 2 February 2015.

or ‘Charm of Protection’ (Carmichael III, 94) the Saint’s help is invoked thus: *Colmcille’s cloak over you/ Michael’s cloak about you,/ Colmcille’s aid is with you and his own cloak is about you*, while in another charm, of the type called *Cuirim Fianais* (‘I invoke’), an appeal for the healing of wounds is made: *I invoke Columba,/ apostle of sea and shore/ who will heal my wound/ and leave me as white as bog-cotton*. Another charm recorded in Scotland implores protection in warfare as follows: *in the presence of Columba and with his mantle around you*, while another presents a picture of Columba as a soldier, beseeching that his suit of chainmail protect suppliants from fairy darts (Black, 215). Not unrelated to military valour either are other traits traditionally ascribed to the saint, namely, his valour, obstinacy, and ill-temper. Oft-cited scenes depict Columba attacking the devils of Glencolmcille Valley with his spear, or challenging the sea monsters who attacked his boat on his first mission to Scotland (O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, 187).

Columba’s heroic persona clearly owes much to that of the archetypal Gaelic hero of medieval Irish saga, Fionn mac Cumhaill. The two are overtly connected on a number of occasions as when the old hero, like Ireland’s premier saints, Patrick and Brigid, prophesies Columba’s birth (O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, 42) or when Fionn is mentioned as one who used a charm seeking Columba’s help for a relative (Carmichael II, 9). They are also symbolically linked when a visiting holy man is greeted by the yet unborn Columba who pokes a thumb through his mother’s navel (O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, 50), the thumb in question being the *ordóg feasa* or ‘thumb of knowledge’, inseparable from the image of Fionn, and one which is re-cast in yet another early Christian context – on a figure carved on a stone cross from 8th century Donegal (Ó hÓgáin 1988, 37). Depictions of the saint’s generosity, as we have seen, ultimately owe much to those Fionn, as when St Patrick in Irish literature is told: *If pure gold had been the leaf of brown/ cast from her by the wood,/ or silver the glistening wave/ Fionn would have given them away* (O’Grady, 96). Columba, however, was made to go one better, in that his body itself provided the gift: *His sweat was miraculously changed to gold to bestow*. (O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, 80). Another important connection between the Saint and the saga hero is to be found in the context of fish. There is, of course, every reason for Columba the voyager to be linked with fish and fishers. However, a particular folk depiction of him with a trout in his mouth (Ó Catháin, 75) surely points up a connection with Fionn’s alternative supernatural knowledge resource, besides the thumb, namely the ‘salmon of knowledge’.

2. Connection with Fish and Fishers

Columba is linked to animals of various kinds but his connection with fish, especially the salmon – and also, sometimes, the trout – are of special interest. In certain traditions the Saint treads on a fish and a conversation ensues between them as a result of which the fish inherits a physical blemish, as in this well-developed Scottish version:

‘Shift out of here, flounder!’
 ‘Grey Calum [Columba], I will put a twist in my mouth mocking you.’
 ‘I ask of God only that that twist be in your mouth never to come out.’
 ‘Big, nasty Calum, with your fat bandy legs,
 Great mischief you did me/ when you stood on my tail.’
 ‘If I am bandy-legged,/ be you crooked-mouthed!’ (Black, 377).

It may have been Columba's connection with wells which caused him to be associated with trout or salmon. Énri Ó Muirgheasa (143-62) notes the following places in Co Donegal alone with wells named for – or linked with – the saint: Béal Átha Seanaidh, Béal Leice, Leitir Fad, Inis Bó Finne, Gort an Choirce, Más an Easa (with a pilgrimage), Coill Darach on Loch Cholm Cille (with a Saint's day pilgrimage); An Dumhach Bheag in Fánaid (with Saint's day Stations), Mín an Lábáin (with the Saint's footprint where he leaped to escape his enemies), Bearnas townland, at Binn in Cluain Mhaine and two wells in Maigh Bhile (with Stations at the place whence he departed for Scotland). On the other hand there are other lines of tradition relating to Columba in which the fish is prominent as, for instance, when, having revived a dead trout, he places it in a well in his birthplace, Gartán (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 57); or in the image we have received of him in the folk tradition with a fish in his mouth as, while drinking at the Lónán in Donegal, when a small trout entered his mouth and almost choked him (Ó Cathain, 75), a motif connecting Columba strongly with Fionn. The spot in question was roundly cursed by the Saint to the effect that no trout or salmon would enter the six divisions of Urris for ever. The connection between Columba and the fish, therefore, is multi-faceted, and may, additionally, have been a reflection of Early Christian symbolism. It is also surely an attempt to set the Saint on a par with the most famous fisherman in history, Peter, prince of the Apostles. This comparison may be indicated in the tradition which claims that Columba during his lifetime used to 'line-fish' (*dubhánacht*) for his monks. (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 398). Moreover, in one particular anecdote, we are told that fishers who have caught nothing thus far succeeded once they cast their nets out in honour of the Saint (: 302). Other tales concern him putting the generosity of strangers to the test just as, in another story, his own liberality was tried by Christ himself. In particular traditions, fishing in an area where Columba is given fish by fishers as charity receives his blessing, while in other places where he has been refused, the stretch of water is laid under his malediction. In the case of Glencolmcille Valley, his last act in relation to the previous incumbents, a swarm of devils, we are told, was to turn them into monstrous blind, red fish (*madaidh gharbha*), and drive them like Gadarene swine over the cliffs into the sea where they are still abominated by fishermen in our own day (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 132).

3. Other Creatures

The Saint's connection with other animals, particularly water-fowl, is also worthy of close examination. Scottish Highland tradition mentions Columba healing a swan injured by the Fians (Fionn's warband of hunters), as here recorded: '*A white swan of Ireland I, from the Fianna my hurt*'. *Columba replied: 'I am a friend to the needy/ Christ's eye upon your hurt!*' (Carmichael IV, 28-31). Tradition also notes that, while druids reckoned the heron a bird of ill omen, Columba became intimately associated with the bird which virtually became his

mascot.² A pet heron, we are advised, kept watch as he made his unauthorised copy of St Finnian's gospel, pecking out the eye of a monk sent to spy through a keyhole (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 68). The name of the heron, we further learn, requires to be mentioned in charms connected with Columba, one such to be recited through a keyhole (Carmichael VI, 49). In this one healing is besought in Columba's name. Strangely, we hear of the Saint's anger when one queen compares his looks to a heron's (O' Kelleher and Schoepperle, 330).

Another tradition found not only in Ireland and Scotland, but also among the Scottish Gaels of eastern Canada, links Columba with the first coming of rats (and mice), though scholars trace its origin to the myth of the creation of the mouse and the cat (Carmichael I, 19). In a Donegal version (Watson, 99) the Saint's servant treats Christ, visiting incognito, churlishly so that the Saint has to follow him some distance on his knees. From the skin scraped off his knees in this exercise the pests in question came into being. A Donegal storyteller, wishing to relieve Columba of an abiding image of disgrace notes soberly: *this was the first start Columba made to be a saint*. His overarching prayer, however, as noted, namely to possess a generous heart, was granted in due course. (Ó Catháin, 5). The Saint's connection with animals also led to a belief that he had three tiny pets, to wit: a cat, a fly and a wren (O' Kelleher and Schoepperle, 118), all connected with his spiritual exercises. This motif, however, is associated with St Mo-Chua (Bergin, 35) who owned a rooster, a mouse and a fly. Mo-Chua lamented to Columba their passing during a harsh winter, to which the latter uttered a memorable reply: *'where there are no possessions there will be no loss*. Geoffrey Keating, recounting the event, solemnly avers: *I adjudge from this jesting between true saints that, unlike many of our contemporaries, they had no interest in worldly possessions*.

4. Cattle

Another stream of tradition connects Columba strongly with cattle. He is regarded in the Western Isles of Scotland as their guardian and, in particular, as a saint who had the power to heal them, as the following record from that area testifies: *Columba had in him the gift to heal people and the power to heal cattle and goats. There was no physician in Scotland or Ireland or in any reach of the world who could surpass or outstrip his gift* (Carmichael IV, 293). Among charms ascribed to him certain are recited to safeguard from the evil eye the work of churning, while others aim to augment its produce. Those who tend cattle are similarly placed under the Saint's protection through a charm entitled 'The Herding of Columba' (*Buachailleachd Chaluim Chille*): *May the Herding of Columba/ surround you as you go and return,/ Columba's peace to you in the grazing,/ Brigid's peace to you in the grazing,/ Mary's peace to you in the grazing,/ and may you return home safely!* (Carmichael IV, 46). There are stories from the same area and from Ireland which give testimony to the efficacy of the Saint's powers in healing sick cattle and these tales are linked particularly to the cure effected by him on the 'Black Hag's only cow'. This was first

2. One particular charm used for rescuing horses runs: *Ditch [or 'tendon'] of Mary, ditch of Mary; heron legs, heron legs; ... Heron legs under you, a bridge of warranty before you. Mary placed a wand in it, Brigid placed a hand in it, Columba placed a foot in it, Patrick placed a cold stone* (Black, 445).

accomplished, according to Glencolmcille tradition, for a woman from the Bánghort locality whose beast suffered from colic. The cure had to be undertaken, we are told, along with a ritual by the name of ‘the serpent’s knot’ (*Snaidhm na Péiste*) which is still known in the area today and whose tying cannot succeed without the recitation of the following words: *This is how Columba cured/ the Blag Hag’s only cow:/ a foot at sea, a foot on land/ tie and open the knot!* (Watson, 97, my translation).

According to a tradition known in Scotland, Columba only achieved the said cure in the face of certain obstacles, as the words of the charm itself bear witness:

“The Cow of Blessings” (Bó nam Beannachd): Columba was the chiefest of the world’s wise ones and head of healing on earth. Columba said to the wretched woman, ‘I have made charms for cows and prayers for horses all my life and my days. I had them in a hide-covered book in the window. The hide volume was stolen from me with its cattle charms and horse incantations and I haven’t one of them left for you or your heifer. And before the verse will be finished and spoken the heifer will take her calf.’ And the name of this charm is ‘the charm of the Wild Heifers’ and Columba sang it for the poor wretch of a woman with the tears streaming down his cheek. (Carmichael IV, 54, my translation).

5. Healing

Among material on the Saint recorded from the northern county of Tyrone in Ireland are a pair of charms (Ó Tuathail, 135-36, my translation) which invoke Columba to cure human sufferers. The first of these is aimed at healing scrofula (*an ruaidh*): *I see the scrofula and I wound the scrofula;/ poison in the scrofula that I hate./ The scrofula is in the spot and the thorn is in its outside./ Ask Columba what heals scrofula./ Milking on the middle and the milk to come whole/ and its harm from me, and its harm from me’*. The second relates to the eye and seeks to have a mote (*dúradán*) therein removed: *A charm Mary made for the eye of Columba: on quern, on droplet, on kiln dust, on mill chaff. I pray to Mary, whatever is in this eye, that it will come into my mouth, with help to that eye and no harm to my mouth*. In Scottish tradition there are numerous charms which have been claimed to secure the Saint’s assistance in obtaining a cure. In one such prayer the house, together with its inhabitants would be placed under his protection, along with that of Mary, Brigid and the Trinity. A believer might call on Columba to relieve him from toothache, rheumatism, scrofula, ankle-sprain and indigestion. It was recommended to say, ‘Columba bless you!’ when one sneezed and there was a special charm to avoid injury as the result of a law suit, viz. ‘... will free me/ and Mannanan son of Liath,/ and Gille Caluim (Columba) gentle cleric (Black, 219). It was believed also that the gift of eloquence could be obtained from the Saint on account of the reputation ascribed to his preaching. Tradition has it that he was an orator of great ability whose voice would carry for 1,500 paces, so that it was possible on the neighbouring Isle of Mull to hear his sermon being delivered on Iona.

Weavers, another profession of low esteem, were wont to ask Columba’s blessing on their loom (Carmichael I, 295-99, 305-07), and the gift of peace was one besought of the Saint by all and sundry: *God’s peace to me, the peace of men,/ the peace of gentle Columba, the peace of Mary ... the peace of Christ the King* (Carmichael III, 264). His assistance could, likewise, be invoked in the healing of one afflicted with mental illness and particular rituals accompanied this plea. On Columba’s feast day a strong man would place the person thus affected behind him on horseback and ride over a boundary mark and around a standing pillar (Carmichael

IV, 202). The Saint's festival day was, as it still is, especially honoured: in the Hebrides a housewife would make an oat or barley bannock on the evening before with a silver coin in it (Carmichael II, 244). Moreover, since it was believed that Columba had been born on a Thursday, this weekday was accounted to be especially propitious (Black, 431, Carmichael I, 163). Thursday was a favourable day to undertake particular tasks: *Thursday, gentle Columba's day,/ the day to assemble a sheep flock,/ to weave,/ to give calf to cow.../ [but] Saturday to clip hair, beard and nails* (Black, 429, 566). Thursday was a propitious day too for commencing a job of weaving or a pilgrimage, or for effecting protective magic, for *even the Furies, fairies and sorcerers have no power for evil on a Thursday* (Carmichael II, 244). This was all to no avail, however, should Mayday fall on a Thursday – or, according to another tradition, on the 3rd day of May, 'The Avoiding [i.e. 'Unluckiest'] Day of the Year' (*Là Seachnaidh na Bliadhna*). A saying about Mayday relates, *Many is the woman who will be without her tender young son/ when Mayday falls on a Thursday*. Like John the Baptist with his connection to locust beans and St Patrick whose emblem is the shamrock, Columba is identified with particular plants. His association with the oak ((O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 434) may represent the taking over of a previously powerful pagan symbol. In Gaelic Scotland, however, the herb St John's wort is called after Columba. Known in Ireland as 'John the Baptist's herb' (*luibh Eoin Baiste*), 'Mary's Sweat' (*Allas Mhuire*): or 'eternal life' (*beathnua*), it is in Scotland called *Achlasan Chaluim Chille*, ('Columba's little armpit package) with, once again, a connection to Fionn revealed in the following verse:

Varieties of *Hypericum* (St John's Wort)³

Pre-eminent herb of the fairy women,/ herb of the joyous party that was in Finn's lav-

3. Source: http://www.eplantscience.com/index/kingdom_plantae/classification_notes_files/family/Family%20%20Guttiferae.php viewed 3 February 2015.

ish court! It's a male herb, it's a female herb, a herb that would raise cattle and calf,/ the herb of gentle Columba of Donegal,/ noble herb of the fairy women./ Better its worth under my armpit than an assemblage of fine cattle;/ better its worth and effect than a collection of fair cattle (Carmichael IV, 116, my translation).

As a curative herb it was believed to be particularly effective on both humans and animals and its use entailed particular rituals. The Saint was believed to have carried it in his armpit as he went about preaching after the fashion of John the Baptist: *The Herb that John of the Streams had,/ the herb that the Good One [God] had in his need,/ and Christ in his wandering* (Black, 230, my translation). A further pointer to Columba's connection with cattle was the heightened efficacy the herb was said to possess when encountered in a cattle fold. It was necessary also that a person should discover the herb without having gone in search of it and that it should be plucked with the left hand and transferred then to the right, an act signifying the Saint's generous spirit, no doubt (see further below). One who had fulfilled such requirements could be assured of protection *against the hatred of the men of falsehood/ and the folly of mad women* (Carmichael II, 98). Though the latter reference very probably refers to the activity of witches, the Saint is, nevertheless credited in Scotland with a scurrilous adage to the effect that *Where there will be a cow there will be woman and where there will be a woman there will be trouble*. (MacArthur, 24).

6. The Poets

There is no doubt whatsoever in the historical record about Columba's literary credentials. He was clearly involved in the business of collecting and circulating manuscripts. He clearly also had a poetic bent and is celebrated for his defence at the Conference of Druim Ceat of the poetic order, then under threat of expulsion from Ireland, where he is said to have justified the poet's existence on the grounds that God had purchased thrice fifty psalms from David (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 317, 332). Viewed superficially, of course, Columba would naturally have treated poets bountifully, given that he had been endowed by Christ with the gift of liberality. The Saint's reputation, according to his 16th cent. biographer, claimed that nothing passed from his left hand to his right that he did not bestow or make a gift of, as is confirmed by the following account: *He was the most generous and feeling person and the one who most gave of the goods of this world to God's poor* (: 425). Divine assistance, moreover, was on hand to assure such a standing: *God would send an angel in advance to Columba to tell him of guests or strangers who would need hospitality so he would not be ashamed* (: 406, 409). On the other hand, however, Irish poets had an irrefutable claim for subsistence upon the nobility of the land – of whom our Saint was undeniably one – so that there was a requirement to avoid the censure of satire from them through having failed to honour them properly. It was, therefore, with the poets chiefly in mind that Columba specifically prayed that none should ever deprive him of his honour, a prayer which was clearly answered for, as we are told, *No-one ever assumed human form, except Christ in his humanity, ... who gave more to men of art and those who sought payment for fear of satire or lampoon* (: 150, 406). In case of dire necessity on the Saint's part supernatural help was forthcoming: in one instance we noted how God miraculously made gold from the Saint's sweat so he could offer gifts to poets about to satirise him (: 80), while in another he

received wine and supplies for a feast from on high to deter others of the same fraternity who were of a similar frame of mind. This event is testified to by the name the place of the feast bore subsequently, namely Ráith na Fleidhe ('The Fort of the Feast'). Columba is also credited with assisting in the recovery of Ireland's primary heroic saga, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), and its restoration to the chief poet of the land which he did by means of a prayer vigil at the hero Fergus' grave. The tale had been lost through St Marbhán's malediction upon the poets which this vigil then removed (: 157). Even after death the Saint's miraculous protection of his written heritage was believed to endure since it is recorded that a page from one of his books was retrieved after having been immersed for a period in water without damage being done to it (: 433).

7. Status of the Saint

Clearly Columba's extensive network of relations and later devotees would have been keen to ensure that their celebrated saint surpassed all others in spirituality, as in other qualities. So it is not surprising to find the Saint outstanding in his mortification of the flesh, and his biographer reveals that the usage he inflicted upon himself was so severe that the outline of his ribcage was discernible through his clothing and that, if wounded it was not blood which would issue forth but rather water – as with the crucified Christ – or a grey sap [*súgh glas*] (: 403). This latter attribute is, most likely, ascribed in order to demonstrate a fast-based regime of sustenance which would eschew rich food such as red meat. Indeed, modern folk tradition in Donegal records Columba's diet while in Glencolmcille Valley as follows: *the seagrass of Carraig Chormadáin, the water of Gort an Deochadáin, and the clover of Glas na Dumhcha*. It is also said that Columba blessed the seagrass of Carraig Chormadáin so that it grew anew overnight during the Great Famine, though every bit of it was taken from the rock by day (Watson, 99). However, a saint, and particularly one of heroic proportion, would be expected to take such privations in his stride and so it is recorded that Columba entreated God that *'his face not become wasted through severity of pious practice... so that it would ever be bright and cheery before the people* (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 405). In Glencolmcille tradition it is also said that no less a saint than the Patron of Ireland, Patrick himself, left the conversion of that abode of devils to 'one greater than himself' (Watson, 98), namely St Columba, a motif strongly reminiscent of John the Baptist's assertion in regard to the coming of Christ. Indeed our saint is not infrequently cited in the company of Patrick and the great female Patron of Ireland, Brigid of Kildare. (It may be more than fortuitous that both she and Columba appear to have arrogated to themselves as a symbol the oak, which was clearly pagan in origin (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 434). The Scottish folk tradition likewise exalted the Saint to the extent that he is pictured journeying to Rome in the company of the apostles, Peter and Paul (Carmichael II, 136), and his biography presents a number of celestial images related to him, as when his fellow saint, Canice, sees a column of fire above his head; the Archangel Michael in the sky over Cúil Dreimhne to support him in the fateful battle there; and the earthquake which seized the earth as far away as India at his death (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 102, 176, 364). And Columba's biographer, who was himself a relative, Maghnas Ó Domhnaill, clearly ranking his kinsman with the early fathers of the Church when he refers to him as 'noble father' (*uasathair*) (: 421), was at the same time keen to specify exactly where Columba's place lay in the hagiographical hierarchy as indicated by

the following account: *[H]e was better than Abraham and Moses; better in prophesy than Isaiah; better than a prophet; like John the Baptist; like Solomon, but better than he in wisdom; better than St John the Divine; better than Stephen the Martyr, better than Jerome the Confessor* (: 377). As we have noted, the herb, St John's wort, traditionally associated with the Baptist in other cultures, including Gaelic Ireland, was named after Columba by Scottish Gaeldom.

8. The Saint's Adventures

Columba is associated with a number of places in Ireland besides Donegal: Swords, for example, and Durrow, as well as Kells in Co Meath whither his monks betook themselves for refuge from the Viking onslaughts on Iona. Scholars have observed that traditions relating to the Saint pertain mostly to the north of Ireland and to Donegal in particular where they commemorate especially the north of the county and neighbouring Derry. It will be recalled that in Tory Island, where Columba founded a monastery, an ecclesiastical foundation survived until the end of the 16th century (Ó hÓgáin 1985, 29). Oral tradition from N. Donegal, as we know (Mac Gabhann, 15), tells of the attempts of three different saintly figures to secure the right to found a church on the island, but that it was Columba who won when his cross alone of the three thrown reached Tory, after which his cloak miraculously spread over the isle, bringing it under his protection. The Saint is also believed to have blessed the island's clay so that it will expel rats wherever they may exist (Ó hÓgáin 1985, 28). The miraculous white clay of Columba's birthplace, Gartan in N.E. Donegal, is said to have a different effect, namely that it will prevent a boat from being sunk, provided the earth be taken up by one of the descendants of the shrine's hereditary keepers (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 51). It is said that the Saint loved every spot in which he founded a monasteries, but especially Derry over which he is claimed to have discerned countless angels hovering (: 183). Ó Domhnaill's biography tells us that the Saint burned down everything in the vicinity apart from a single oak grove (: 77). Donegal folk tradition also claims to preserve a prophecy of his regarding the condition of Derry in a later age: *My wee Derry, my wee Derry, my choicest apple-nut and my jewel/ to think it is fated that the Invader/ will sit in the heart of my wee Derry* (Ó Catháin, 1, my translation).

When Columba departed on his life's mission to Scotland he sailed out of Lough Foyle in token of which occasion the literary – though not the folk – tradition preserves a beautifully poignant verse: *A grey eye looks back on Ireland/ which never more will see/ the men of Ireland or her women* (McLeod and Bateman, 4, my translation). As already observed, some of the Saint's maledictions have a tinge of humour about them and this is certainly the case as far as the story of his emigration goes. His biography relates (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 187) how displeased Columba was with the inept efforts made by his followers to launch his boat from the quayside, using branched staves and forked poles. According to Donegal tradition (Ní Dhíoraí, 139), however, members of the Scanlon and Devenny families, finally overcame the grief which had stricken the rest and succeeded in the enterprise. Such dedication in the matter earned their descendants, in consequence, the following curses: that no two Devenny family households could be situated adjacently; and that no two Scanlon dwellings would be similarly placed without constant wrangling between the respective inhabitants.

8.1. The Saint as Fugitive

A particular feature of Donegal folk tradition is the representation of the Saint as being ‘on the run’. In the case of this motif other streams of folk tradition have been drawn upon – a not uncommon occurrence, as will have already been observed – in order to augment his existing miraculous powers, and here the life of Columba is seen to be conflated with that of a Roman Catholic cleric during Penal Times in Ireland. The view of such a great saint in the guise of an ordinary cleric suffering persecution was undoubtedly both a powerful symbol and a consoling image. Examples of this genre of story are to be found from Inishowen in the north, and through the Bluestacks, for example, with instances surviving in Glencolmcille also, telling of how obstacles appeared in Columba’s path as he fled before his persecutors. In one of two such tales, we see the Saint, shod only on one foot with shoe and stocking, fleeing through a field of rushes, while in the other he attempts to ford a river and mistakes a salmon for a stepping-stone. In the first instance he cursed the area to the effect that rushes would never more grow there (Ó Cathain, 76), which was undoubtedly more of a blessing than a curse, so that an alternative tradition suggests that it was folk who would not properly secure their footwear who were cursed by him (Watson, 97). Scholars, however, opine that Columba’s single-shod state derives from an earlier legend about St Canice in such a condition stumbling as he hastened to church to pray for Columba who was in imminent danger of drowning (Ó hÓgain 1985, 31-32). In the case of the second tale, tradition records that the Saint’s curse forever deprived the river in question of salmon (Ní Dhíoraí, 138-39) and we are reminded that the same motif attaches to another saint, Enda, whose hagiographical writings provide a fuller version of the incident (Ó hÓgáin, 32). In Bluestacks tradition it is also recorded that Columba was once captured as he tried to evade his enemies by running along a peat-cutting bank, anticipating a getaway by running up a series of steps traditionally cut in its side. He was captured because the cutter had neglected to provide these. This resulted in a malediction on all who in future failed to provide such a stairway (Ní Dhíoraí, 137-38).⁴

9. The Valley of Glencolmcille, Co Donegal

The Saint is referred to in Scottish tradition as ‘Columba of the graves and slabs’ (Carmichael I, 246), a not inappropriate appellation since this connection with slabs is clear throughout his life, from the miraculous slabs of his birth and death to the stone columns he made of his enemies and detractors. Nor is his close connection with Glencolmcille as his mission field inappropriate for this area is famed for its Neolithic monuments (Ó hÓireachtaigh, 12-16, 44-51), including An Clochán Mór and Mainnear na Mortlaí to name but two. It was not without reason that a pilgrimage round or *turas* was instituted in the Saint’s honour, based on a series of impressive stones with Christian decoration (Watson, 21-30). Nor is it surprising that Glencolmcille has preserved traditions which relate specifically to the

4. Notable also in this connection is a well in Churchill, Co Donegal, where Columba left his footprint as he leaped to escape his foes. For a scholarly assessment of the Saint’s possible connection with a Columban foundation at Derry see Lacey, 30-34.

Saint's activities in the glen itself, to which he came directly from his base in Tory, immediately banishing the devils in possession of it. Like Moses, he was able to summon forth water from the earth, as at Umar Ghlinne for an open-air baptism, a source he blessed so that it would never run dry; that place and another at Glen Lough would be places of safety for the valley folk at Doomsday. Other spots are likewise mentioned as offering safety at that time when the 'Black Pig' would range forth. A final consolation the inhabitants were granted was that none should ever perish from lightning bolt or thunderstorm (Watson, 97-98).

10. The Isle of Iona (*Í Cholm Cille*)

The Saint's own island of Iona is, and always has been, his chief place in Scotland. His early biographer and successor as abbot there, Adamnán, made the claim that he blessed the island so that snake should harm neither animal nor man there (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 358). Like St Patrick in Ireland, Columba banished snakes – and toads too – in this instance from the neighbouring isle of Canna (Campbell, 1). One among the prophecies made by the Saint in Scotland would lead to the belief that he would save Iona, but not Ireland, from a flood in the latter days, as he said: *Seven years before Doomsday/ the sea will come over Ireland at once/ and over green, grassy Islay/ but Iona of Columba will remain afloat* (MacArthur, 3). This close connection of the Saints with Scotland's premier ecclesiastical site and with numerous sites in Ireland, as well as his rank and status in his native land and region ensured that there would be a dispute as to where Columba was laid to rest. It is asserted on the one hand that he stated his wish to be interred in Iona and, indeed, that he assured this by arranging a storm after his death which thwarted any attempt to remove his body from the island. However, a contrary tradition exists on the Irish side which claimed that it was here he wished to be buried. Donegal tradition claims that his monks made him a coffin of stone which they launched and that it landed in that county. The miraculous increase in milk supply obtained by a cow which was wont to lick the coffin where it lay on the beach made the event known, and Columba's remains were transferred to Down as had been prophesied (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 36) to lie, befittingly, with Sts Patrick and Brigid (Ní Dhíoraí, 139-40). Bluestacks tradition, however, maintains that the Saint's remains made landfall in Inishowen and are buried in that region of N. Donegal (Ó Catháin, 11). A further tradition disregards the claims of Donegal entirely and attributes to Viking intervention the return of the Saint's bones to Ireland. Having raided Iona in 825 and carried off Columba's coffin in the expectation that it contained rich jewels the despoilers found only skeletal remains within and set the container afloat in the sea which carried it thence to Down (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, 371).

11. The Saint's Portrayal

Wherever Columba's body may be buried there is no doubt about the vivid, human image we have of him in the folk tradition of both countries. Storytellers in his native county were in no doubt about what sort of man their beloved saint was: ... *a terrible one for the chatter, so that in the end people hated to see him coming by their houses, and There was none in the land who was so volatile in nature as he, one who was very easy to anger and when he was angry he would curse everything. He was very quick-tempered and at the same time kindly and when he would*

get over one of those fits of anger he would go off into a secluded corner to ask God's forgiveness (Ní Dhíoraí, 137). We may easily believe that the reason the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland were so fond of this man who achieved sainthood was that they recognised in him many of the same weaknesses common among themselves: irascibility, vengefulness, a volatile nature and, not least, the gift he besought God for himself, pride in his ancestry. If he was esteemed for this trait, however, he was held in no less regard for another characteristic which he also received from on high, namely, generosity. The folk are wont to endow their heroes with virtues they themselves value, proceeding to develop and elaborate on these: that quintessential hero, Fionn Mac Cumhaill was already revered for this very quality. We have already noted how his fellow warrior, Caoilte, had responded to St Patrick's enquiry regarding the old hero's character that, when it came to showering his gifts, gold and silver were of no more account to him than autumn leaves and sea-spray and even the memorable image we have heard recounted of Columba's sweat magically made into golden presents cannot surpass such eulogising of a generous spirit. Yet there remains one fundamental distinction between these two heroic figures and one which teaches a powerful moral message not to be learned from Fionn's story, namely that Columba had perfected this virtue in his life as the result of a hard, relentless personal spiritual struggle. True saint, true hero and true Gael, the image of Columba which has come down to us in the folk tradition is one that has been moulded over a thousand years out of honour and devotion to him, and is one which has offered both inspiration and solace. Most importantly, it is a picture of a man who is himself, at heart, one of the folk.

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