Colum Cille (Columba)

by Aidan Breen

Colum Cille (Columba) (c.521–597), founder of the monastery of Iona, was born into the Cenél Conaill, a branch of the Uí Néill, then Ireland's most powerful dynasty. His place of birth was reputedly Gartan in Donegal, though there is no contemporary evidence for this.

**Early life** His father was Fedelmid, who was said to be a great-grandson of Niall Nóígiallach (qv); his mother's name was Ethne. The Irish form of his name, Colum Cille, has been taken to mean ‘Dove of the Church’. He was fostered and baptised by a priest named Cruithnechán, who lived near his birthplace. It is reputed that he underwent schooling in bardic studies. His biographer, Adomnán (qv) (c.624–704), states that he received monastic training under a bishop whom he names variously as Findbarr or Finnio, who can most likely be identified as Finnian (qv) (d. 579) of Movilla (near Newtownards, Co. Down). Otherwise little is known of his early life.

**Iona** Adomnán states that he left Ireland in his forty-second year (c.563). Later tradition records that his departure was an act of penitence for instigating the battle of Cúl Dreimne (near Drumcliff, Co. Sligo; 560/61), supposedly because he surreptitiously copied a Psalter lent to him by his former master, Finnian. Adomnán simply states, however, that he left Ireland to become a ‘pilgrim for Christ’; he probably also wished to sever himself from the secular concerns arising from his family connections. Whatever the reason, Colum Cille remained in Scotland for the rest of his life, returning to Ireland only on a few occasions.

His choice of Iona, an island near Mull off the west coast of Scotland, as a monastic refuge was influenced by the contacts that his family had with the kingdom of Dál Riata and its rulers. Certainly it was under Dál Riata patronage that he subsequently founded the island monasteries of Campus Lunge (on Tiree) and Hinba, which more recent opinion takes to have been the island of Colonsay. He also founded churches in Inverness, probably following on his meeting with and likely conversion of Bruide, king of the Picts. All of Iona's foundations, on both sides of the Irish Sea, were under the headship of the abbot of the mother-house, and many of the abbots of the most important houses of the paruchia of Iona were of Colum Cille's kin-group. Although many foundations elsewhere in Scotland and in Northumbria were later attributed to Colum Cille, it is doubtful whether Iona evangelised outside of Ireland, Dál Riata and Pictland. Yet there can be no doubt of Colum Cille's political influence: we know from Adomnán that he ‘ordained’ Áedán (qv) king of Dál Riata (d. 609), and that his influence and connections enabled him to strengthen the alliance between the Uí Néill and Dál Riata.
Vita Columbae The principal biographical source for Colum Cille is the ‘Vita Columbae’ written toward the end of the seventh century by Adomnán, one of the later abbots of Iona (679–704). It was largely based on oral tradition at Iona and the ‘Liber de virtutibus S. Columbae’, written by a previous abbot, Cumméne Find (qv) (d. 669). Although it is a hagiographical work of considerable literary merit, it is deficient as a historical source, because, like most hagiography, it mainly focuses on miracles, prophecies, and visions. The portrait it gives of Colum Cille is that of a tall and striking figure with a commanding presence and ferocious temper, who combined the roles of stern monastic governor, ecclesiastical scholar, and poet (according to tradition, Colum Cille was a member of the highest grade of the poetic classes). Adomnán leaves us in no doubt as to Colum Cille's holiness and devotion to God's cause. The ‘Vita Columbae’ can be supplemented by Bede's ‘Historia ecclesiastica’ (iii, 4, et passim), which may be based on oral tradition communicated to Bede who had no direct knowledge of Colum Cille. Bede emphasises Colum Cille's missionary activity and the spirituality of the Iona monastic tradition. From these and other sources, Colum Cille emerges as a distinct historical figure, in contrast with which many other early Irish saints 'move as shadows in a land of twilight' (Kenney, Sources, 426).

Adomnán's account of the death of Colum Cille on 6 June 597, at the age of about 76, is one of the most evocative parts of the Vita: 'that night a bright light, like a comet, appeared in the sky'. He checked that sufficient stores for the remainder of the year were laid in store in the barn, blessed it and on his return to the monastery the community's horse came up to him, placed his head in the saint's lap and wept at his imminent departure. His last work was the copying of a Psalter, which ceased with the words of Ps 33, 'Inquirentes autem Dominum non deficient omni bono.' He collapsed and died in the church where he was attending midnight office.

Learning Evidence of the learning attributed in various sources to Colum Cille is sparse, though Adomnán tells us that he did much reading and copying of texts, and that his final but unfinished task was making a copy of the Psalms. The 'Amra Choluim Chille', a verse eulogy in Old Irish attributed to Dallán Forgaill (qv) and written about the time of Colum Cille's death, tells us that 'by his wisdom he made glosses clear; he fixed the Psalms; he made known the books of law.' This testifies to critical textual work on the Psalms in the early Irish schools, further evidence of which is suggested by the use of asterisks and other critical marks in the Cathach, an early fragmentary copy of the Gallican psalter once believed to have been written by Colum Cille, and one of the oldest extant Irish manuscripts. The 'Amra' also relates that he learned Greek in order to be able to converse with the angels. This may preserve some tradition of the cultivation of Greek in the monastic school of Iona. The difficult abecedarian poem ‘Altus Prosator’ and ‘Adiutor laborantium’ and some other Latin poems have been attributed to the saint.

Legacy The legacy of Colum Cille and Iona remained of the greatest importance in the ecclesiastical history of Ireland and Britain for many centuries. It also spread
to the Carolingian empire and later into Lotharingia, where it was engendered by
the devotion of Cadróe (qv) and his followers. The prestige of Iona as the hub of a
great confederation of monasteries extending from Ireland to remotest Pictland can
scarcely be exaggerated. Colum Cille and his successors, most of whom were his
kinsmen, maintained the political association between the Uí Néill royal dynasty and
the leaders of Dál Riata, which had first impelled Colum Cille’s choice of Iona as a
place of settlement. The wealth and influence of Iona and her daughter monasteries
may be gauged from the fact that Iona was the first Irish monastery to be attacked
and pillaged by the Vikings (795), Durrow and Kells later suffering a similar fate.

Devotion to Colum Cille and the veneration of his relics continued without a break
for many centuries after his death. Three especially venerated relics of his, listed as
Clog na Ríogh, a flabellum and two Gospel books, were brought from Tír Chonail
to Kells in 1090. Colum Cille is historically revered as a warrior saint, and his relics
were often invoked for victory in battle, both in Scotland and Ireland. This was
certainly the case with the reliquary box which contained the MS now known as the
Cathach. It is probable that there is some historical basis to the attribution to Colum
Cille, for a cumdach or box-shrine was made for it by the comarba of Colum Cille
and abbot of Kells, Domnall mac Robartaig (d. 1098), between 1062 and 1098, and
it subsequently remained in the custody of the Mac Robartaig family for generations,
being used as a palladium or battle talisman by its owners the O'Donnells.

**Manus O'Donnell’s life of Colum Cille** Three Lives of Colum Cille survive:
Adomnán's, a twelfth-century vernacular life which drew on Adomnán's, and
‘Betha Colaim Chille’ of Manus O'Donnell (qv), lord of Tír Conaill. While O'Donnell
employed research assistants to collect materials in Latin and Irish ‘scattered in
ancient manuscripts throughout Ireland’ (Bradshaw, 25), he personally composed
the final draft in 1532 ‘with great labour and time, studying how to arrange it in
proper order’ (ibid.). Brendan Bradshaw sees it as the work of a humanist man of
letters, who conceived it as primarily a religious text with a pastoral purpose (it was
written in the vernacular). In the twentieth century it was edited and published in
1919 by A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle.

**Nineteenth- and twentieth-century reputation** In the 1890s the catholic-romantic
hagiographer John Healy (qv) wrote of Colum Cille's name being ‘dear to every child
of the Scottic race both in Erin and Alba; and what is stranger still, monk and priest
though he was, his memory is cherished not only by catholics but by protestants and
even by presbyterians also’ (*Ireland's ancient schools and scholars* (1896), 291).
In his *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (1886), Thomas Hamilton (qv),
while asserting that Columba was a presbyterian, displayed some embarrassment
at his monasticism but declared that such institutions, though notoriously prone to
corruption, were founded by well-meaning reformers of genuine sanctity. These
two views reflect how, during the religious revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries, most major Christian denominations laid claim to the heritage of Colum
Cille and the early Irish church; many churches, buildings, and associations in Ireland, Scotland, and further afield were named after him.

The survival of folk-piety directed towards Colum Cille, especially in Donegal (such as the custom, recorded by Healy, of intending emigrants sleeping on the reputed site of his birth at Gartan to invoke the protection of a fellow-exile – or, more controversially, the continued circulation of prophecies attributed to him, the best-known of which in this period were forged by Nicholas O'Kearney (qv) in *The prophecies of SS Columbkille* [etc.] . . . or the gleanings of several writers who have preserved portions of the now lost prophecies of our saints . . . (1856)), is overlaid and complicated by more literate and theologically correct devotions. As with Armagh's rival cathedrals, nineteenth-century Derry witnessed the appearance of rival Columban sites, with the catholic St Columba's (the Long Tower Church) just outside the city walls and claiming to stand on the original site of Colum Cille's monastery, as a rival to the Church of Ireland St Columb's Cathedral. Successive nineteenth and twentieth-century catholic bishops promoted devotion to Colum Cille; particularly noteworthy in this respect was John Keys O'Doherty, bishop of Derry (1889–1907), who oversaw an elaborate 1897 centenary commemoration, popularised Columba's oak leaf as the diocesan symbol, and is the only modern catholic bishop buried at the Long Tower church.

More recently, the shared Columban heritage has been seen as an ecumenical resource, symbolised by the interdenominational Iona Community, founded on the island in 1938 by the Christian-socialist Church of Scotland minister George MacLeod (1895–1991) and initially focused on rebuilding Iona Abbey. It has also inspired many revivals of ‘Celtic Christianity’, often presented as quasi-pagan nature worship.

The tensions between devotion, pride, penitence and artistic creation in the legendary story of the saint's life continued to attract artists (sometimes implicitly paralleling the saint's supposed early political self-assertion with the worldly pretensions of later churchmen, and his later penitence and defence of the poets with a more aesthetic spirituality). Cecil Frances Alexander (qv) wrote a hymn in praise of St Columba (no. 202 in the *Church of Ireland hymnal*): ‘Not without his age's taint/ Fierce and unrelenting/ Stern apostle, weeping saint/ Sinful and repenting’. Other literary treatments of his story include *The legend of St Columba* (1935) by Padraic Colum (qv), a verse play *The Angry Dove* (written in the late 1940s, published in 1999) by John Hewitt (qv), *High sang the sword* (1959), a young adult's novel by Eileen O'Faolain (qv), and Brian Friel's early play *The enemy within* (1962), where the ageing Columba on Iona is shown as still tempted and tormented by the local loyalties and religious divisions of his native land.