

Pigeon that pops in and out of church

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TODAY, 9 June, is *Latha Fhéill Chaluim Chille*, St Columba's Day.

Columba is the patron saint of the Highlands and Islands. He was born in Donegal about 521 AD, founded his famous monastery in Iona in 563, and died in 597. This being his day, it seems a good idea to look in this article at the mark his fame has left on our naming practices.

Columba's real name, his Gaelic name, appears to have been Crimthann. *Columba* is the Latin for a pigeon or dove, while *cella* was the Latin for a cell or church, and from these two words came his Gaelic nickname *Colum Cille*, in Scottish Gaelic *Calum Cille*. It is not a very natural-sounding Gaelic name — *Colum na Cille* would fit the rhythms of the language much more comfortably — so I suppose it must be based on Latin *Columba Cellae*. It is usually translated 'Dove of the Church', which sounds very grand and symbolic, but this is misleading, for the church as an organisation is *ecclesia*, Gaelic *eaglais*. *Cella*, Gaelic *cill*, English *cell*, is a church building and nothing else, so it seems to me that *Calum Cille* really means a pigeon that pops in and out of holes in the sacred masonry. This fits nicely with the explanation given in the saint's Gaelic life (found in the *Leabhar Breac* and elsewhere) that the name *Colum Cille* was given to him in childhood by his playmates on account of his habit of making constant visits to the little church at *Tulach Dubhghlaise*, close to his birthplace, to read the psalms.

Now the first point to make clear about names derived from that of the saint is that the name itself was possessed of extraordinary sanctity. This means that to attach his name (with or without *Cille*) to a church, a graveyard or some other feature of the landscape, or to a fair held there, was to bring a great blessing upon that place or that event, but also a great responsibility to ensure that his memory was cherished and not brought into disrepute.

When a saint's name is attached to a place it is prefixed with a generic — *Cill Chaluim Chille* for a church or churchyard, *Inis Choluim* or *Eilean Chaluim Chille* for an island, and so on. Exactly the same happens — or rather, happened — when attached to a person. So a man named after the saint was *Mael Coluim*, or later *Gilla Coluim*. *Colum* or *Colum Cille* was out of the question because that was the name of the saint himself. In other words, the saint's name was as sacred to the medieval mind as that of Christ is today; to call a child *Colum* or *Colum Cille* was as blasphemous as calling a child 'Christ' rather than, say, 'Christopher', 'Chris', 'Christian' or 'Christine'.

The system was the same for other holy names, and the result was that the Gaelic language, and its legacy in English, is full of avoidance strategies. Mary the mother of Christ was *Moire*, a girl named after her could be *Màiri*, a boy named after her could be *Maol Moire* or *Gille Moire* or *Moirean*. St John was *Eoin*, a boy named after him could be *Iain* or *Seathan* or *Gille Eoin* or *Gille Sheathain*, from which we have the surname *MacillEathain* or *MacLean*. St Peter was *Peadar*, a boy named after him could be *Gille Pheadairor*, in recent times, *Pàdraig*. Which shows how complicated the system became, because that of course is the name of St Patrick.

Curiously, the system seems to have broken down in Catholic countries due to a thirst for sanctity, long before it broke down in Protestant countries due to a disregard for sanctity! I am thinking of the use of *Jesus* by the Spanish, which seems blasphemous to everyone else, and the use of *Eoin* and *Peadar* by the Irish, which must have seemed pretty blasphemous here in Scotland for as long as these were firmly understood to mean St John and St Peter. (It was never our habit to designate saints by means of a prefix like 'saint' or *naomh*, for the name itself was supposed to be sacred.)

But back to St Columba, to *Calum Cille*.

Columba lay at the heart of the Gaelic consciousness in Scotland. His name represented our awareness of who we were and what we were doing in this eastern land. If we chart the places and people who bore his name through history, we have a map of the influence of the Gael in our country — flow, then ebb, then flow again.

First of all we have churches dedicated to Columba all over the Islands and the Western Highlands. In Gaelic their name is usually *Cill Chaluim Chille*. Then we have outliers to the north, the east, the south.

To the north, we can start with *Eilean Chaluim* off the coast of Sutherland, and *Cill Chaluim Chille* in Strath Brora in the east of the same county. Columba is also commemorated in Dirlot and Olrick in Caithness and in Burness and Hoy in Orkney. Further out still, the Icelandic *Landnámabok* tells how a Norseman named Orlyg migrated from the Western Isles to Iceland shortly before 900 AD. From his bishop, a man named Patrick, he received consecrated earth and other things needed for founding and equipping a church. He landed in Iceland, built a church and dedicated it to Colum Cille, as directed by Patrick.

On another occasion Haldor, son of Illugi the Red, built a church thirty ells long, roofed it with wood, and dedicated it to Colum Cille and to God. Then in *Njals Saga* and the *Rykdaela Saga* we read of two slaves in Iceland called Melkolfr (Malcolm), and there is little need to doubt that they were of Gaelic stock, snatched away from their homeland like many others to help colonise the new country. To this day Iceland shares with Scotland and Ireland Europe's highest proportion (70-80%) of blood group O, compared with under 65% in most of Norway.

To the east, in Pictland, there were dedications to Columba at Glenmoriston, Auldearn, Petty and Kingussie in Inverness-shire and Nairn; at Fordyce and Alvah in Moray and Banff; at Daviot, Belhelvie, Lonmay, Deer, New Machar and Tannadice in Aberdeenshire; at Cortachy and Kirriemuir in Angus; and at Dunkeld, Arngask and Dollar in Perthshire and Clackmannan. In most of these places fairs used to be held on

this day. It was Columba in person who had first brought the gospel to the Picts. When the Vikings attacked Iona in the ninth century, many of his relics were brought to Dunkeld, and in notes written in Gaelic about 1150, the monks of Deer claimed him as the founder of their monastery.

To the south there are dedications to Columba at Rothesay, Cumbrae, Largs, Drymen and Kilmacolm, and further south still at Kirkcolm in Wigtownshire and Caerlaverock in Dumfriesshire. Inchcolm in the Firth of Forth is 'St Columba's Isle'. In 1123 King Alexander I was driven there by a storm, and was looked after by a hermit who served Columba in a small chapel; in gratitude for his preservation, Alexander founded an Augustinian abbey on the island in honour of the saint. St Columba's Well at Cramond on the south shore of the Firth, now an Edinburgh suburb, was first mentioned in 1601.

The name *Mael Coluim* or *Maol Cholaim*, now Malcolm, practically defines Scotland for us. It means, literally, a person whose head is shaved (*maol*, 'bald') in honour of Columba. There were four kings of the name. Malcolm II (Mael Coluim son of Cinaed) won the battle of Carham on the Tweed in 1018, thus annexing Lothian and fixing the border of Scotland where it runs today.

For three centuries after that, Gaelic-speaking people bearing the name *Mael Coluim* and its successor *Gille Caluim* ('Columba's Servant') are found all over the Lowlands and even further afield. The spot at North Berwick on which the Nunnery was founded in the 12th century was called Gillecolmstoun. A Gillecolm mac Chinbethin lived in Fife in 1150. About 1200 the smith of Peebles was named Gylcolm. In 1235 a Melcalmus was canon and priest of Whithorn in Galloway. In 1256 a Scot called Malcolumb was charged before an assize at Newcastle-on-Tyne for murder and robbery. In 1296 homage was rendered to John Balliol by Huwe le fiz Maucolum, burgess of Montrose, and Aleyn fitz Maucolum of Berwickshire. And in 1314 the sacred reliquary of Columba, the *Breacbhennach* or 'Speckled Peaked One', is carried before the troops at the Battle of Bannockburn.

After that, ironically, the Malcolms and Gillecolums are pushed back across the Highland Line by a tide of English-speakers. The name *Maol Chaluim* survived in the Highlands till the 17th century, and *Gille Chaluim* till the 19th, to be finally replaced by *Calum*. So one circle is complete. The old royal name Malcolm survived in English, however, and went from strength to strength. In 1545 there was a baker in Perth called John Malcum; sometime before 1850 the head of the MacCallums of Poltalloch, the *Clann MhicilleChaluim* or *Clann Chaluim*, changed the name from MacCallum to Malcolm "for aesthetic reasons".

In the present century we have had an Englishman called Malcolm Muggeridge, an American called Malcolm X, and a Jew called Malcolm Rifkind. And now *Calum* itself is coming back into its own, untranslated, for little boys all over Scotland. Some of them more saintly than others, no doubt.