

Power, faith and second sight

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS is the last of my three articles on the prophecies of Calum Cille (St Columba), who lived from 521 to 597. Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona, tells us of 99 such prophecies in his Latin biography of the saint, the *'Vita Columbae'*. In my previous piece, I concentrated entirely on certain prophecies which seemed capable of rational explanation. My analysis resulted in a curiously sinister picture of Calum Cille as a gangland leader, a sort of Saddam Hussein who brooked no opposition and must always be proved right.

There are a number of facts that would justify such a view. Calum Cille was a rural gangland leader, that is, warband leader, who got a Latin education and took holy orders. He made many enemies and was once excommunicated. Adomnán casts a veil over the entire first half of his hero's life, however, and begins with his arrival in Scotland in 563. His description of Calum Cille as a 'simple and innocent man' is deliberate propaganda, as is recognised even by one of the most respectful of recent commentators, John Marsden in his *'Illustrated life of Columba'*, who calls the saint 'as much a man of power as of faith'.

Now the earliest Irish monasteries were little more than a mirror image of secular society. They plundered, went to war, stole each other's cattle. Adomnán himself tried to put a stop to this. He drew up a 'Law of the Innocents' which declared that women and clerics should no longer bear arms. It is his provisions regarding women which catch the eye, but of course it is his provisions regarding clerics which reflect his distaste for some of the activities of his own founder, and it is interesting that his Law was promulgated in 697, the centenary of Calum Cille's death. It was vital to Adomnán to display that a man known to have been powerful and successful could also be simple and innocent — hence the *'Vita Columbae'*.

Out of the 99 prophecies, I have counted 44 which can be explained rationally, or which lack corroboration, and 55 which seem to provide evidence of genuine psychic power (that is, if taken as literal truth). Of these 55, fortune-telling (predicting the course of people's lives) accounts for 29, seeing a faraway event (which is conveniently counted as prophecy) accounts for 12, foretelling nature (wind, weather, tides, game, fish, disease) accounts for 11, and foretelling a human event (such as a battle) accounts for 3.

I will give one or two examples of each of these four categories in turn. Colca, son of Aid Draignich, was visiting Iona from Ireland and asked how his life would end. The saint said: "In your own beloved country you will be head of a church for many years, and if you happen to see your cellarer carousing with a group of his friends at supper, twirling the winejug round and round by its neck, you will know that you will soon die." So, Adomnán tells us, it happened; and I would not claim that this is anything other than the second sight, black humour though it may be.

Conversely, Calum Cille sometimes prophesied life where death was more likely. On a journey 'beyond the spine of Britain', that is, in what is now Inverness-shire or Perthshire, a young monk called Finten fell seriously ill, and his companions asked Calum Cille to pray for him. The saint prayed, then blessed Finten and said, "This young man will enjoy a long life. He will survive everyone here, and die at a good old age." He was proved right, and it is not enough to say that he had simply diagnosed the illness as non-fatal, for terminal illness or violent death could have struck Finten down at any other time. This, again, is true second sight.

Sometimes it is the highly detailed nature of the prophecy which precludes chicanery. A rich man called Uigene, who disliked Calum Cille, once refused him hospitality, and the saint declared: "The riches of that stingy man, who has despised Christ in the form of the strangers who expected to be his guests, will gradually decrease from today until they are reduced to nothing. He himself will be a beggar, and his son will go about from house to house with a half-empty bag. He will be killed by one of his enemies with an axe in the pit of a threshing-floor." And so it happened. It is a curse, of course, and a self-fulfilling prophecy to some extent; but it seems to me that there was a distinct possibility that he might die before any zealot could drag him on to a threshing-floor, so really the saint was asking a lot. I prefer to put it down to second sight.

The next category is 'seeing a faraway event': typically, something happening to a friend in or around Ireland, be it a battle, a birth, a death, a domestic accident, or the events of a voyage. In one case the roles are neatly reversed — it is Calum Cille himself who is in danger at sea with his monks, but he calls telepathically ('by the inner ear of his heart') on St Cainneach to pray for them, and they are saved.

In all such cases we are dependent on Adomnán's assurance that the event was actually taking place at the time the saint saw it, and he cites one instance of deliberate verification. Calum Cille turns to Colga son of Cellach, who is sitting reading by his side, and says: "Just now demons are dragging one of the chiefs of your district, a miserly person, down with them to hell." Colga notes the day and time on his wax tablet, and a few months later when he is at home in Ireland, he is told that Gallan son of Fachtna had died at the very moment that Calum Cille made the prophecy.

Foretelling nature next, and curiously, I find that John Marsden is more inclined than I am to find rational explanations for this category. The saint once prophesied that a certain field of corn sown in Iona in mid-June would be ripe in August, and Marsden points out that there are records of crops sown on the island as late as July and harvested in early September. On another occasion two monks, Baithene and Colmán Ela, had to set out from Iona on the same day in opposite directions, Baithene for Tiree and Colmán for Ireland. Calum Cille prophesied that if Baithene set off first he would get the south wind he wanted, then once he got to Tiree 'at the third hour of the day' the wind would wheel round to the north as Colmán required — which is exactly what happened. Marsden notes: "It might not be disrespectful to point out that an offshore wind at dawn is often succeeded by a returning wind when the morning sun grows warmer on the western coastline. Such

weather-lore would have been well-known to so experienced an islander as the abbot of Iona.” And he quotes from the poem called the ‘Amra Choluim Chille’:

*“Storms and seasons he perceived,
He used to understand when calm and storm would come.
He was skilful in the course of the sea.”*

What troubles me is that the marginally predictable shades into the marginally unpredictable. A cloud which has not yet appeared over the horizon will grow into a storm which will drown a particular man; a leather container which the tide has carried off will be returned by the next tide to the same place; an exhausted crane will arrive on the western shore of Iona after 9 a.m. three days hence, and when the monks have cared for it for three days and nights it will fly away again. How could the saint be so sure?

Finally, the small category of ‘foretelling a human event’. One day when the saint was sitting in his little wooden cell he heard a shout from the other side of the Sound of Iona and said, “The man who is shouting across the sound is not very smart, because when he is here today he will upset my inkhorn and spill the ink.” Adomnán goes on to tell us that Diarmaid, the saint’s attendant, went to the trouble of standing in front of the door and awaiting the arrival of the troublesome guest, in order to save the inkhorn. But for some reason or other he had to leave his post. While he was away the guest arrived, rushed forward to kiss the saint, upset the inkhorn with the hem of his cloak, and spilled the ink.

It is worth noting that in this particular case Diarmaid tried to prove the prediction wrong, whereas in my last article I showed how efforts were made by the great man’s followers to show that he was always right. Another person who tried to prove Calum Cille wrong, but much more desperately, was a rich man called Feradach who lived in Islay. Feradach had incurred the saint’s wrath by killing a high-born Pict called Tarain, a political hostage no doubt, who had been entrusted to his care. Calum Cille prophesied: “We are speaking these words now in the middle of summer, but in autumn, before he eats swine’s flesh that has been fattened on the fruits of the trees, he will be seized by sudden death and carried off to hell.”

Feradach was scornful. He had a particular sow that was being fattened on the kernels of nuts, and at the beginning of autumn he had it slaughtered before any of his other pigs, its entrails taken out, and a piece of its meat roasted for him so that he could eat it right away and falsify the prediction. As soon as it was roasted he asked for a little bit to taste, but before the hand which he stretched out to take it had reached his mouth, he expired and fell down as a corpse. “And all who saw or heard it were greatly astonished and terrified,” says Adomnán, “and they honoured and glorified Christ in his holy prophet.”

Sometimes the truth had to be stretched a little, however, to prove Calum Cille right. One such case is that of a man called Goire son of Aidan in Corkaree in Ireland who asked how he would die. “Not in the battlefield,” said the saint, “nor at sea. The travelling companion of whom you have no suspicion will cause your death.”

Who exactly, Goire wanted to know. One of his friends? His wife, for love of some younger man? But the saint refused to say. One day a few years later Goire was lying under his boat scraping the bark off a spear-handle when he heard the noise of fighting nearby. As he jumped up to go and stop the squabble, his knife slipped to the ground and made a very deep wound in his knee. “By such a companion,” says Adomnán, “was his death caused, and he himself at once remembered with surprise the holy man’s prophecy.”

Despite some small quibbles like this, these 55 of the 99 prophecies are full of solid evidence that Calum Cille had the second sight; the other 44 suggest that he and his supporters were willing to misuse the gift in the interests of gaining and retaining power. If we believe in second sight at all, then we must believe that this man had it, and we may wish to believe that second sight alone accounts for all 99 prophecies; if we do not believe in it, then we have seen some excellent examples of how cleverness can lead to chicanery and chicanery to folklore.

So finally, how was it done? Adomnán has a good deal to say about this. Through prayer and visions, Calum Cille conversed much with angels and with the Holy Ghost, indeed a later account claims that he visited heaven every Thursday throughout his life. Time and again Adomnán says that the Holy Ghost is using Calum Cille as its mouthpiece; that also was to be replicated in a much later prophet, the Lewisman Tormad Sona (1853-1945), who deliberately drifted through life letting God work through him.

Adomnán says that Calum Cille was highly favoured from his early years by the spirit of prophecy, and goes on: “When a few of the monks sometimes inquired into the matter, Calum Cille did not deny but that by some divine intuition, and through a wonderful expansion of his inner soul, he saw the whole universe drawn together and laid open to his sight, as in one ray of the sun.”

One ray of the sun? It is uncannily like TV, film or the Internet, which reminds us of how Tormad Sona (who similarly obtained prophetic insight from signs, visions and revelations through prayer) described his gift using a term from the era of wireless — ‘listening in’.

Adomnán was here referring to the words of Calum Cille elsewhere in the ‘Life’. When Lugbe mocu Blai asked him how he obtained prophetic revelation, ‘whether by sight or hearing, or other means unknown to man’, the saint swore him to secrecy until after his death, then replied: “There are some, though very few, who are enabled by divine grace to see most clearly and distinctly the whole compass of the world, and to embrace within their own wondrously enlarged mental capacity the utmost limits of the heavens and the earth at the same moment, as if all were lit by a single ray of the sun.”

The saint’s reticence with regard to his gift, his swearing of Lugbe to secrecy, is a consistent feature. To us it may seem like the canny exercise of power through the manipulation of information, but Adomnán points out that he had two good reasons: one, to avoid vainglory, and two, to prevent huge crowds flocking to have their fortune told.

So I will let Adomnán have the last word. “I have recorded only a few facts about this venerable person, for no doubt there were many more which could not come to men’s knowledge, from being hidden under a kind of sacramental character, while those mentioned were like a few little drops which oozed out, as it were, like newly fermented wine through the chinks of a full vessel. For holy and apostolic men, in general, in order to avoid vainglory, try as hard as they can to conceal the wonders of God’s secret working within them. Yet God sometimes,” he concludes, “brings some of these into view, wishing as He does to honour those saints who honour Him, the Lord Himself, to whom be glory for ever and ever.”

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