

Communion forever unbroken?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE been reading a very interesting new book by Donald Meek, 'The Quest for Celtic Christianity' (The Handsel Press, £9.95). It has raised a lot of questions in my mind. Apparently there are large numbers of people in many parts of the world nowadays who are in search of something which they call 'Celtic Christianity'. And apparently they find it above all in Alexander Carmichael's very dodgy English translations of traditional Gaelic prayers, charms and incantations in 'Carmina Gadelica', a book (or rather series of six books) which I have often mentioned on this page.

Donald Meek takes great exception to the direction being taken by this 'Celtic Christianity' movement, because, he says, what its apologists regard as 'Celtic Christianity' is a travesty of what 'Celtic Christianity' actually is. Or perhaps I should say *was*, because apparently (for some reason which I can't quite fathom) the issue is not what 'Celtic Christianity' is *now*, but what it *used* to be. Meek says that the fundamental issue at the heart of his book is 'the tension, if not the outright conflict, between a creative interaction with the past and fidelity to the record of the past as it has been preserved in surviving sources'.

In other words, he is accusing the devotees of 'Celtic Christianity' of making things up instead of taking the trouble to find out what good historical sources have to tell us. The heart of his book therefore consists of a basic lesson in Medieval Celtic Studies, with a helpful summary concluding that real Celtic Christianity involves "a heavy emphasis on judgement, retribution, penance, self-denial and mortification (the 'doing to death' of the flesh and its desires), leading to (sometimes) severe asceticism".

Perhaps I missed something in the book, but I don't think I came across any summary as neat as this of what the 'Celtic Christianity' movement regards as Celtic Christianity. But if I may be allowed to stitch a summary together from here and there: "The Celts . . . loved symbols, and were more concerned with expressing themselves through image and picture than through the written word . . . The people were . . . unable to see and careless to know where the secular began and the religious ended . . . Perhaps the most important factor was the Celtic temperament, dreamy and other-worldly, given to possessing second sight and experiencing premonitions and omens . . . Where pagan Celts had seen fairies and felt premonitions of impending doom, their Christian descendants saw angels and had visions of the Last Judgement."

Now obviously there is a polarity here. At one extreme (the Meek version) there is an emphasis on punishment. At the other the emphasis appears to be on 'seeing things'. Could that be, by any chance, the crime?

The same polarity can be expressed in other ways. For example, Meek speaks of his loyalty not merely to the history of the Christian faith but also to the discipline of Celtic Studies; and indeed, as I have said, mainstream Celtic Studies, of which he is a professor, is what the core of his book consists of. Fair enough; but Celtic Studies is only one academic discipline. In a terrace of Georgian buildings in Edinburgh, the west side of George Square, which forms part of the University of Edinburgh, Celtic Studies is taught at no. 19. A little bit down a gentle slope a subject called 'Scottish Ethnology' is taught at no. 27, the School of Scottish Studies. Those who teach 'Scottish Ethnology' would find the 'seeing things' version of Celtic Christianity more familiar than the 'punishment' one. It depends what you study.

The argument goes to the heart of what my writings on this page, every fortnight like clockwork for fourteen years, have been all about. I have been trying to get under the skin of history — clans, battles, politics, churches — and say, what was daily life like for ordinary people? What did ordinary people believe? In fact, on one occasion (29 October 1993) I wrote a piece about Hallowe'en under the title 'What does your flock really believe?'

Donald Meek makes his own position perfectly clear. Discussing the prayers, charms and incantations in 'Carmina Gadelica' he argues that there is little in them to suggest that their users 'had a positive view of the physical world around them'. He adds: "The *Carmina* may represent essentially 'folk religion', blending folklore and saint-lore, pagan and Christian, in ways which ought not to be confused with the formal teaching of any 'Celtic Church' or indeed with the theories of any modern philosopher. This is popular, demotic Christianity which has come down through the centuries, with inevitable reshaping and admixture."

Exactly. If the concept 'Celtic Christianity' is to have any meaning, it is about attempting to distinguish the continuing day-to-day beliefs of ordinary people who spoke Celtic languages from whatever beliefs were imposed upon them at different times by the centralised forces of organised religions. You can't do that properly without knowing what the official beliefs *were*, however, so Donald is quite right. I just take his argument further. You have to know your Celtic Studies, but also your Scottish Ethnology. The plus side of that, in Edinburgh University, is that you can do a joint degree in both subjects; the minus side is that, doing it that way, you may only learn half as much of each!

This principle of 'official' and 'unofficial' strands of belief is a familiar one in another sphere of human activity, medicine. And the sources work in a similar way. The medicine detailed in countless medieval manuscripts written in Gaelic (with revealing admixtures of Latin) consists of layers of tradition inherited from Greeks, Arabs and Continental universities. Many of the cures described are bizarre or downright dangerous; many of the medicines prescribed would be difficult or impossible to obtain in the Highlands and Islands; and the practitioners were male. However, if we find items here and there which don't appear in Greek, Arabic or Continental texts, that is likely to be 'Gaelic medicine'. Such manuscripts are studied in the Department of Celtic.

'Unofficial' medicine is in many ways harder to track down. It exists in oral tradition, or is scribbled on

scraps of paper, or is recorded in collections of material of a more miscellaneous kind, Martin Martin's 'Description of the Western Islands circa 1695' being an excellent example. Although it borrows much from 'official' medicine, it prefers commonsensical cures and medicines derived from native plants and herbs. It's hard to know how *old* anything is, but it can fairly be described as 'Gaelic medicine' whenever we know for sure that it was practised by Gaelic-speaking people. Many (if not most) of the practitioners were women; and it is studied as part of Scottish Ethnology in the School of Scottish Studies.

I would argue, then, that what Donald Meek describes is not the body of Celtic faith but the antibody. If theological writings are strong on punishment, there must have been a climate of liberalism to provoke them. Meek quotes Dáibhí Ó Cróinín: "There was apparently no crime that could not be thought of: heterosexual and homosexual relations (male and female), the regulation of 'proper' methods of intercourse, aphrodisiacs and potions, physical relations, bestiality (Columbanus has two canons on the subject, one for clerics or monks, the other for laymen), wet dreams, stimulation, abortion, contraception, abstinence from sexual relations, and an endless litany of reprobate behaviour that ranged from drinking in the same house with a pregnant servant woman to keening or wailing for the dead."

Again, if (at a later period) a poor woman appears before a Kirk Session to be punished for the crime of obtaining milk by means of a Gaelic charm from her neighbour's cow, on what side does 'Celtic Christianity' lie? The elders or the woman?

My own view of Celtic Christianity is that it contains within it a consistent strand of belief in an otherworld which is neither Heaven nor Hell. Perhaps because this otherworld is very close to all of us and time does not exist in it, the foreseeing and foretelling of the future — prophecy — remains a prominent feature of Celtic literature, religion and folklore from beginning to end.

Also connected with this otherworld is a belief in spirits (fairies) as well as angels. This belief was regarded by at least one Gaelic-speaking Episcopalian minister, the Rev. Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle (?1644–92), a translator of the Bible, as integral to Christianity, if we may judge from his book *The Secret Commonwealth*.

All this is realised as visions and dreams. Donald Meek repeatedly laughs off this aspect of Celtic Christianity, asking for instance: "Is the incessant 'dreaming of dreams' — a pastime of which the 'Celts' have no monopoly — fair to those whose memory we cherish?" Kenneth Macleod, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and other writers too numerous to mention have given dreams a bad name, but we mustn't throw out the baby with the bath-water. The Celts had no Rubens or Michelangelo but they retained a strongly visual aesthetic long after the monks in Iona who made the Book of Kells were dead and buried, and it came out, I would argue, as visions, dreams and prophecies.

Meek uses the term 'Christianity' quite advisedly, because what he is looking for is the attested teachings of the Church in Celtic-speaking lands. The agenda which I prefer to follow is perhaps better described as 'Celtic spirituality'. However that is also a much-touted expression nowadays. In his recent book 'Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition' Thomas O'Loughlin asks "Is there a Celtic spirituality?" He concludes: "We should not talk about 'Celtic spirituality' but rather the spiritualities that are found in the Celtic lands."

If what many people are actually looking for, as Meek suspects, is a Celtic text which sums up the concerns and aspirations of the post-modern age, they need look no further than 'Óran na Comhachaig' ('The Song of the Owl'), a long poem said to have been composed in Lochaber about 1600 by Dòmhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn. It is anti-war, pro-nature and contains all the feel of Christianity but none of its substance. A chief is praised not for his warlike exploits but for setting up a watermill. Deer (of all things!) are personified as a model for human family relationships, and are contrasted favourably with both men and cattle. Mountains move as if they were people, the litanies spoken are not of saints but of mountain names, religious terms like *faosaid* ('confession'), *trasgadh* ('fasting') and *tèarmann* ('sanctuary') are scattered around, and, above all, man partakes of the body of nature by means of fresh spring water.

*Is buan an comann gun bhristeadh
Bha eadar mise 's an t-uisge —
Sùgh nam mór-bheann gun mhisge,
Mise ga òl gun trasgadh.*

("The communion forever unbroken / Is the one between me and the water — / I drank without fasting or drunkenness / The juice of the lofty mountains.")

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