

## The unlikeable Irish statesman

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IF, like most WHFP readers, you get the paper on a Thursday, you'll be interested to know that today, Thursday 9 June, is doubly lucky.

The patron saint of the West Highlands is Columba, and 9 June – the day he died in AD 597 – is his feast-day, *Latha Fhéill Chaluim Chille*. In addition, every Thursday was sacred to his memory. So if 9 June falls on a Thursday, the day is twice as blessed. A medieval Gaelic life of the saint which appears to have been in the possession of MacDonald of Benbecula in Martin Martin's time, and is now in the National Library in Edinburgh, explains: *Doteghedh tra Colum Cille for nem gach dardain icein do bui 'na bethaid, intan dob ail leis*. "Calum Cille, moreover, used to go to heaven every Thursday while he was alive, whenever he wished."

The sanctity of Thursday in the West Highlands used to be second only to that of Sunday. Over and over we're told that if a charm is to be effective it must be recited on Thursday or Sunday. There's no intrinsic reason why this should be the case: the Gaelic name for Thursday, *Diar-Daoine*, is in origin *Dia eadar dà Aoine* "Day between Two Fasts", referring to the known fact that the Christian fathers fasted on two days a week, Wednesday (*Di-Ciadaoin* "First Fast Day") and Friday (*Di-Haoine* "Fast Day"). It could be that Thursday was anciently sacred in the West Highlands for reasons now unknown, and that Calum Cille's connection with the day was invented to explain it. Either that, or the sanctity of Thursday originated in some decree by the saint, or in some personal practice of his own, such as a weekly retreat.

For a long time now I've been intrigued by the ambiguity surrounding Calum Cille. No Scottish saint has had more written about him, beginning a century after his death with Adamnan's "Vita Columbae". The more I read, the more I wonder. The "Vita Columbae" is an account of the great man's miracles and prophecies noted from oral tradition, and some readers may remember that many years ago I devoted a whole series of articles on this page to a detailed study of the prophecies, and came to the conclusion that what lay behind them was not sanctity but megalomania. He was a prince and a politician whose task was to shore up and extend Gaelic influence in the west of Scotland, and this he accomplished, I believe, by the use and abuse of power – notably by predicting that things would happen, while deploying an elite force of strongmen to ensure that they did happen.

I turned this into a lecture, and gave it twice – once in Greyfriars' Church in Edinburgh, where it went down very well, and once in University College Cork, where it went down like a ton of bricks.

The promotion of St Columba as a symbol of Gaelic unity (he was born in Donegal) continues apace today. We now have *Iomairt Chaluim Chille*, *Àrainn Chaluim Chille*, *Ionad Chaluim Chille*. Nothing wrong or unusual about that – don't we already have place-names and dedications preserving his memory all the way from Orkney to Kintyre, not to mention Ireland?

In the middle of these is *I Chaluim Chille*, Iona, where he established his monastery and spent the second half of his life, from 563 to 597. So no one was more surprised than me to be told, at a conference in Sabhal Mór Ostaig the other week, that with the exception of the modern "St Columba's Bay", not a single place-name or dedication in that holy island contains his name. Why, we all wondered? My own thoughts drifted back to those sinister prophecies. Is it possible that, like Chairman Mao, he was not universally revered in the place where people had known him best? Could it be that oral tradition was as subject to periodic reassessment as party propaganda today?

So let me tell some Calum Cille stories which have nothing to do with prophecy, and we'll see what sort of reputation the great man enjoyed over the generations. The most widespread of them all, remembered in Iona and countless other places in Scotland and Ireland, puts him up against a flounder. In a South Uist version noted by Fr Allan McDonald, Calum Cille is wading through a sea-ford when he meets a flounder resting on the sand. She starts on hearing him come and Calum Cille says: *Imbrig á seo, a liabag!* "Shift out of here, flounder!"

The flounder replies, *A Chaluim Chille léith, cuiridh mise car 'nam bheul a' magadh ort!* "Grey Calum Cille, I'll put a twist in my mouth mocking you!"

The saint responds: *Chan eil mise 'g iarraidh air Dia ach an car sin a bhith 'nad bhial-sa gun tighinn ás*. "I ask of God only that that twist be in your mouth never to come out."

Alexander Carmichael's version in "Carmina Gadelica" has the saint treading upon the fish's tail, whereupon she exclaims:

*A Chaluim mhóir mhosaich  
Le d' chasan croma crosnach,  
Is mór a rinn thu mo dhosgadh  
Nuair a sheas thu air m' earball.*

("Big nasty Calum / With your fat bandy legs, / Great mischief you did me / When you stood on my tail.") The holy man replies:

*Ma tha mise croma-chasach  
Bitheadh tusa cearra-ghobach.*

("If I'm bandy-legged / Be you crooked-mouthed.") This is in line with the Tiree version given to me by Niall M. Brownlie. *'S tu seo a Chaluim Chille chamachasaich!* ("And you here, bandy-legged Calum Cille!") The saint replies: *Mas camachasach mise, is camabheulach thusa!* ("If I'm bandy-legged, you are crooked-mouthed!")

In another Tiree version, Calum Cille slips and falls when he treads on a plaice lying in the shallows, and condemns the fish to have both eyes on the same side of its head in future to avoid a repetition of the accident. When the story was told by the Kerry tradition-bearer Seán Ó Conaill, the saint turned into Patrick and the plaice, with a mocking twist in its mouth, was behind him. "St Patrick turned back when he heard it making fun of him, and saw the twist in its mouth. He said the mouth would remain that way, and so it has."

So there was nothing gentle or kind about the man; in fact, he was a great curser. There's a rock on the shore of Gott Bay in Tiree to which Calum Cille tied his *curach* when he came from Iona to spread the gospel. The seaweed gave way, the boat broke loose, and when the saint came back he cursed the rock, saying, *Chan fhàs feamainn ort gu bràth tuilleadh*. "No seaweed will ever grow on you again."

It's been known as *Mallachdaig*, the little cursed one, ever since. You can see it, bald as a coot, on the shore near the pillar-box. What is less well known is that Calum Cille rescued his boat and sailed across to Ruaig at the other end of the bay, where he tied it to another little rock. It held fast, so this rock is *Naomhag*, the little blessed one.

I'll finish with three more of Fr Allan's stories from South Uist. One day he asked Mrs Donald Morrison, Kilpheder, if she knew anything about Calum Cille. "She said that he was one day along with one of his monks saying his Office outside, when the monk, raising his eyes from his book, saw a boat coming towards the land, and drew the attention of the Saint to the fact.

"The Saint did not raise his eyes and went on with his prayers. The monk, ashamed for his irreverence, also resumed his prayers, but shortly afterwards a shower of rain fell, and while St Columba's book kept miraculously dry, the monk had to close his as the rain was falling upon it."

This is about the saint being cold, aloof, a man of rule. As for his book being dry, there was nothing strange about this. Books in those days were made not of paper but of vellum, well rubbed with pumice, and the inks which the monks manufactured were normally waterproof. As I see it, the saint simply had a better quality of book.

Fr Allan got this next story from his elderly mentor at Daliburgh, Fr Alexander Campbell. "St Columba calling one day at the house of a cleric, the latter proposed to offer St Columba an egg. It was a day of abstinence or perhaps a black fast-day. The Saint said he would as soon eat a piece of pork as eat the egg on such a day.

"The Cleric then went on to dispute with the Saint that it was quite lawful to eat the egg. The Saint was of the contrary opinion, but suggested that they refer the matter to prayer and ask God to point out which was of the more fleshy nature, the egg or the pork.

"The Cleric took the egg and a piece of pork and placed each under an upturned bowl, and then he and the Saint proceeded to pray. The prayer ended, the bowl over the egg was removed and a chicken stood before them. The second bowl being removed it was discovered that all the pork had dissolved into water. This left St Columba victorious."

The saint comes across here as highly opinionated. On a day of abstinence one should abstain from meat, on a "black fast-day" eggs and dairy produce should be off the menu as well. At the start he seems to be saying that eating an egg is as bad on such a day as eating pork. By the end he seems to have obtained God's authority to eat the pork but not the egg! This story would have us believe that when Calum Cille snapped his fingers, God came running. No wonder, as Fr Allan tells us elsewhere, that when people left their cattle alone on the hill they would say: *Buachailleachd Dhia 's Chaluum Chille ort!* "The herding of God and Calum Cille be upon you!"

Now for the saint's death. Martin Martin got into trouble over this. He wrote in 1703 of the monastery in Iona: "Near to the West-end of the Church in a little Cell lies *Columbus* his Tomb, but without Inscription; this gave me occasion to cite the *Distich*, asserting that *Columbus* was buried in *Ireland*: at which the Natives of *Iona* seem'd very much displeas'd, and affirm'd that the *Irish* who said so were impudent Lyars; that *Columbus* was once buried in this Place, and that none ever came from *Ireland* since to carry away his Corps, which had they attempted, would have prov'd equally vain and presumptuous."

Martin had struck a raw nerve. I'm not sure what distich he's referring to, but Fr Allan confirms that Calum Cille was "ever anxious to be buried in Ireland". John MacIsaac, North Boisdale, told him that the saint instructed his monks: "Make a strong coffin for me, and when my body is placed in it have the coffin placed on the sea-shore where the tide may reach it. Trust the rest to the sea."

That's what they did, and for years they heard nothing of its fate. But, said MacIsaac, in Ireland there was a town full of farmers, who were puzzled why they never got more milk from their fine herds than did one poor widow from her only cow. They accused her of witchcraft, and this charge she denied. So they asked where she grazed the cow. On the common pasture, she said, pointing out that the cow went down to the shore every day to eat seaweed as well.

They went to watch the cow, and noticed that it went to the same spot on the shore each time. There they found what looked like a long flat stone covered with seaweed. It was a wooden chest, and when they opened it they found the body of Calum Cille along with signs and writings which proved his identity. "The saint," concluded MacIsaac, "was thereafter buried with pomp in the Irish soil he loved so well."

Did this unlikeable Irish statesman have as little love for our bleak and rocky shores in death as he appears to have had in life?

10 June 2005