

Introduction

The 7th December 2020 marked the 1,500th anniversary of the birth of St Columba, or Colmcille. A self-imposed exile from Ireland, Columba was a key figure in the early Christianity of the Scottish mainland and western isles and left an indelible mark on the landscape. From the founding of Iona Abbey to one of the earliest sightings of the Loch Ness Monster, his legacy is both physical and cultural.

Fleeing Ireland after a dispute regarding religious texts, Columba was known as a scribe and has been linked (although likely erroneously) to one of the earliest illuminated manuscripts of Ireland. He was also a protector of poets and as the Patron Saint of Poetry, what better way to celebrate his varied impact than with the creation of poetry that explores his connection to Scotland and its historic environment. Poet in Residence Alex Aldred spent twenty weeks with us, exploring Columba's relationship to our sites and the Scottish landscape in order to create a new body of works in response to Columba's Scotland. We hope that these works inspire you to create your own responses to the historic environment and to reflect upon the ways that landscape, heritage and the arts intertwine.





ALEX ALDRED

Alex Aldred lives and writes in Edinburgh, Scotland. He has an MA in creative writing from Lancaster University, and is currently working towards a PhD in creative writing at the University of Edinburgh inspired by and responding to maps of the City of Edinburgh.

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6 Loch Ness

SCOTLAND

9 Dunkeld Cathedral

Iona Abbey

3

Eileach an Naomh Monastery

8

2 Dunadd Fort

5 Keills Chapel

4 Dumbarton Castle

1 St. Columbas Cave

7 Chapel Finian



1 St. Columba's Cave

Tradition has it that Columba waited here for a few days when travelling north from Ireland in order to meet with the local king Conall mac Comgail, based in Dunadd.



6 Loch Ness

Columba's travels in Scotland took him at least as far north as Loch Ness, where tradition has it he scared off a monster that had been terrorising locals.



2 Dunadd Fort

Columba is said to have visited here for the inauguration of his successor, King Áedán, performing the first Christian anointment of a British king.



7 Chapel Finian

Built in the 10th-11th centuries Chapel Finian was named after Columba's tutor, the Irish Saint and scholar Finnian.



3 Iona Abbey

The Island of Iona is closely connected with Columba, where he set up a monastery that created numerous churches and religious settlements across mainland Scotland.



8 Eileach an Naomh Monastery

There is a tradition that Columba founded a monastery here and that his mother, Eithne, is buried here.



4 Dumbarton Castle

Dumbarton Castle was once known as Alt Clut (Rock of the Clyde) and would have been an important stop in Columba's diplomatic and missionary work.



9 Dunkeld Cathedral

With frequent Viking raids along the western Islands, in 849 the relics of St Columba were removed from Iona and brought to Dunkeld for protection.



5 Keills Chapel

The stonework at Keills show the spread of Columba's legacy encompassing both the spread of Christianity on the mainland and the Insular artistic style that accompanied it.

St COLUMBAS CAVE





meaning *fox* – named ten centuries too soon
for Lowrence and his tricksome ilk (although
something of their subtlety, of eyes quiet-bright,
of padding steps on dry leaves and crumbling rock

shadows my stretch of wild coast at night). Of course
it's one name among many. Colmcille, Columba, a headful
of olive branches: the *dove of the church*. That fits
my myths snugly, and if you've no time for myths

I must question why you came here (where azaleas
bloom unparalleled yellows, even out of season,
where shorelines breathe majesty, where speckled isles
huddle and lurch across the horizon).

Well – sit at what's left of the altar. The basin
with which I once cleansed the hearts of buccaneers
lies stagnant as sin, but even so – hold a breath,
remember tradition rots slower than vellum,

and decide for yourself: is this sanctified ground?
In this shallow cocoon, did I spin myself a bed
from whole cloth? (I won't meddle with legend;
those stories are yours to tell). Then leave me

to transcribing canticles, to contemplating the route
winding north to Dunadd and all that comes after;
let fifteen hundred years unfurl and pass me by
so I might rest awhile, keep the steady company

of Muck and Eigg and Rùm and Canna and Skye.

Dunadd port



etroglyphic

A basin – this wide dank glen, cleft
from Dál Riata's fractured flank
by forces old as God and Death,
a far cry from Colum's humble pool.

Two footprints – odd, since the songs
herald Erc's three sons as conquerors
of this glim-lit land; odder yet, given
their reclusive step beneath the hill.

An incised boar – whisper-scratch
invocation of distant, druidic winter;
the chill's snout, blunt and fog-ringed,
snuffling at rotting fingers like roots.

An ogham inscription – inscrutable
graffiti or scrawling wartime cipher,
Finn Manach's blade-point signature
or, perhaps more likely, his epitaph.

And what may be a rock-cut throne –
where an exile's blood, wit, luck, or faith
won him wardenship of a windswept isle,
the reverence of chieftains, a home.

Тона дѳеу





of the water

Grass stalks dancing, rippling, shot through
with red against Mull's granite backdrop,

cascading foam flecks, spattered litanies
on the rocks – yes, even the tides are devout

to a fault, as they lap this numinous isle
christened by pilgrims, dolphin-call, salt –

place of the yew, the brown bear's den,
only ever itself: his own Jerusalem.

Dum̃barton castle





An echo at ALCLOITH

This rock we are standing on
once spewed skyward from the dirt
of a Scotland shuddering with rainforests
and cat-sized dragonflies. This rock
we are standing on once served Britons,
Picts, the *hostile rites* of King Ceretic,
exiled heirs, Vikings and pagans
and poets and saints. This rock we are
standing on once sheltered treasure,
sprawling power, stone and sawdust
swept from the annals by Olaf the White.
This rock we are standing on once
greeted Columba – sheer, rain-swept, grey,
littered with drifts of mist, upliftingly bleak
as he climbed its sloping steps, beheld
the mired flats and paused for a moment
as if to speak, or pray.

Keills chapel





Crossings

Picture a looming obelisk,
almost totemic, spiralled slate,
carvings casting silhouettes
in the shape of St. Michael,
of David in the lion's den,
of God's blue sanctuary.

See this monolith swaddled,
buried in tanned hides
or sheets of white linen,
bundled southeast by ship
on winds and waves once
blessed by Colum Cille.

Watch this *rock of safety*
take root in curious soil
like a Caledonian pine;
imagine the *sun of monks*
shining beneficently
as civilisations go by.

L Loch Ness





Go no further

This one's pure mythic. St. Columba,
bardic warrior and holy pilgrim,
walks the tufted lands of the Picts
spreading blessings, benedictions,
the holy ceremonies of conversion –
halts at the bank of the Ness.

A local burial. Whispered rumours
of something sleek, glinting in the river,
sharp as fire, deeper than most things
dare to sink. Our poet-priest gestures
to the water and commands an acolyte:

“Swim to the far bank of the Ness.”

His disciple gets maybe halfway before,
with a shapeless roar, the bristling epitome
of *monster* erupts from the riverbed,
its gaping jaws slick and primordial,
wider than the eye could hold.

The furious mouth of the Ness
threatens to engulf poor Luigne –
until Colmcille lifts his palm, signs
the cross, and speaks an invocation
in threes: talisman, warning,
banishment. The moment shatters;
the beast flees, deep into the Ness.

The swimmer makes his trip, returns
by wooden raft. Crimthann smiles,
slips this latest miracle into his cloak
and, with the matter put to rest, departs
that cryptic shore to spread his gospel
elsewhere.



Chapel Fíníán

A large, faint, light-colored decorative flourish or scrollwork design is visible on the left side of the page, extending from the top to the bottom.

Chipper

What to tell you of Symson's
ruinous little chapel – this edifice
to Finnian with its holy well empty
of coins, sinking in the sod?

When ancient pilgrims mulched
these paths, did they speculate
which psalters Colum stole
to so incur his mentor's wrath?

Did that dispute bubble
and blister? Was it a fissure
that bled rebellion? How many
died for an argument of saints?

It's too quiet, here, to parse all this.
Too peaceful for wonder. Just walk
the ruins – perhaps you'll find a spring,
lost and penniless, hiding in the marsh.



Éileach an náoimh
monastery



Dímínzendo
for Eithne

What started in dreamscapes of wildflower robes
that grew like a storm to blanket the land in joy
has ended here: a bare nub of stone, worn, adrift
amidst the shattered beehives. The blessed mother
of the blessed man rests, her heart filled
with the wave-voice of the strong-maned sea.

What started in dreamscapes of robes that grew
like a storm to blanket the land has ended here:
a bare stone, worn, amidst shattered beehives.
The mother of the blessed man – heart filled
with the wave-voice of the strong-maned sea..

What started a storm to blanket the land
has ended amidst beehives. The blessed
mother of man rests, her heart
the wave-voice of the strong sea.

What started dreams of wildflower:
a nub of stone, worn, adrift
amidst the strong-maned sea.

What ended amidst the beehives:
the blessed voice of the sea,
a dream that grew like a heart.

Dunkeld cathedral





ntwards

*"...me, a little man
trembling and most wretched,
rowing through the infinite storm
of this age..." – Auditor Laborantium*

There is a tunnel which skulks
through Edinburgh's Heriot Hill;
a disused railway, thick with spray-paint
and brick-dust. You will find me there.

There is a lone seal basking
just off Craignure Jetty, deft flurry
of colour, like a Redfern lithograph
or an emissary. You will find me there.

There is a solemn slope
round the back of Ferguslie Mills
where Tannahill paces what's left
of Paisley Canal. You will find me there.

There is a wave which crests
like a mountain cuts through clouds
off the shore of Aberdeen, skirting
the horizon. You will find me there.

There is an oh-so-familiar wind
whistling at Dunkeld's periphery;
newborn miracles rustle in the soil
like bones. You will find me there.