

DAVID MARSHALL

The CELTIC Connection

*The story of the
beginnings of Christianity
in Ireland and Britain*



DEDICATION

*To all those who bring an open mind
to the search for truth.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR ...

David Marshall has a first degree and a PhD in History from the university of Hull. He has visited all the sites in the British Isles connected with Celtic Christianity and tells the story of his travels in *Pilgrim Ways*, published by Autumn House.

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To Dr. Leslie Hardinge, whose monumental work *The Celtic Church in Britain* (SPCK) is unlikely to be replaced as the most authoritative book on the Celtic inheritance of the modern Christian Church.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For the reader's convenience I have used designations like "Ireland", "Scotland", "Wales" and "Cornwall" throughout the booklet. These names, even if they were in use in the Celtic period, applied to geographical regions different from those to which they apply at present.

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE CELTIC CHURCH

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The Celtic Church is a subject which still has value for the development of modern thought. The proud continental folk of the period of the Celtic Church spoke of the British Isles as 'on the edge of the habitable globe'. St. Columba, the greatest saint of the Celtic Church, is believed to have died in Iona in 597, the very year in which St. Augustine arrived in Kent, to inaugurate a different order and discipline in our country, one which had its headquarters and its organisation in Rome.

Before a century had passed, the end of the Celtic Church was already in sight.

In 731, when the Venerable Bede wrote the closing words of his *Ecclesiastical History*, he rested happy in the reflection that all the countries of Britain and Ireland, with the exception of the Welsh, had forsaken their former separatism and accepted the Roman obedience.

The Celtic Church had passed like a dream in the night.

For Bede, the sun shone on a new day. Yet, despite his loyalty and devotion to the Roman Church, Bede was himself in a large measure a product of the Celtic Church. His gentleness, his unworldliness, his idealism, his love of stories of pure lives, sprang from his boyhood memories of the Northumbria created by St. Aidan and St. Cuthbert and the early church of Lindisfarne.



What then do we mean by the Celtic Church? Wherein does it differ from the Church which claims to have superseded it?

Nearly a millennium-and-a-half has passed since it flourished, and it may well seem a far-off and fleeting memory, too remote from our troubled world to have a message for us today. Shall I confess the truth? It is because of its lasting beauty.

Bede tells us that when King Edwin was debating with his nobles of Northumbria in 627 as to whether they should accept Christianity, an unnamed member of the King's Council made a memorable speech. It is deservedly Bede's best-known piece of writing, but I beg you to forgive me for once again quoting it here, because it expresses my hope that the Age of the Saints in the Celtic Church is a subject which merits another book.



The Celtic Church of the Age of the Saints, as we see it in their gentle way of life, their austere settlements and their island retreats, the personalities of their saints, and the traditions of their poetry, expresses the Christian ideal with a sanctity and a sweetness which has never been surpassed.

The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like the swift flight of a sparrow through the room in which you sit at supper in winter round the fire, while the wind is howling and the snow is drifting without. It passes swiftly in at one door and out through another, feeling for the moment the warmth and shelter of your palace; but it flies from winter to winter and swiftly escapes from our sight. Even such is our life here, and if anyone can tell us certainly what lies beyond it, we shall do wisely to follow his teaching.

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in the Early Celtic Church* (1961).





Chapter 1

FRONTRUNNERS

Who was the first Christian missionary to the British Isles? No one knows.

There are, of course, plenty of legends. There are stories about Joseph of Arimathea and others of the first generation of Christians landing in various places.

Some believe Christianity was introduced by Roman legionaries. *A Life of Germanus*, written in AD 480, tells the story of legionary Alban, who became *Saint Alban*. Having been baptised as a Christian, Alban was executed in the third century for sheltering a Christian priest. But Alban must have been exceptional; both history and archaeology are against the Roman legions as a source of Christianity. The Roman army of occupation “seems to have been wholly uninfluenced by Christianity during the first three centuries AD”. Mithraism was the religion of the legions.¹

There is, however, no shortage of evidence that there were small Christian settlements in both Ireland and Britain relatively early in the Roman period. Traces of Christian churches built as early as AD 360 have been discovered. Those who led the reaction against Christianity in the imperial reign of Julian the Apostate found themselves up against a sizeable minority.² As early as AD 200, Tertullian of Carthage in *Against the Jews* boasted that “parts of Britain inaccessible to the legions” had been “conquered for Christ”.



So who *were* the earliest missionaries, if they were not legionaries? Merchants, traders, ordinary people. It is probable that most of the merchants came from Gaul (France). A large wooden church in Glastonbury survived for centuries and may well have been built before the end of the first century.³

Under Roman rule a man could travel from Berwick [the northernmost town in England] to Babylon [located in present-day Iraq] without crossing a single international frontier. There was an infrastructure of roads that would have been as useful to traders as they were for soldiers. Traders came to Britain from other parts of the Empire, and left Britain for regions

of the Empire where the religion of Jesus Christ had taken hold.

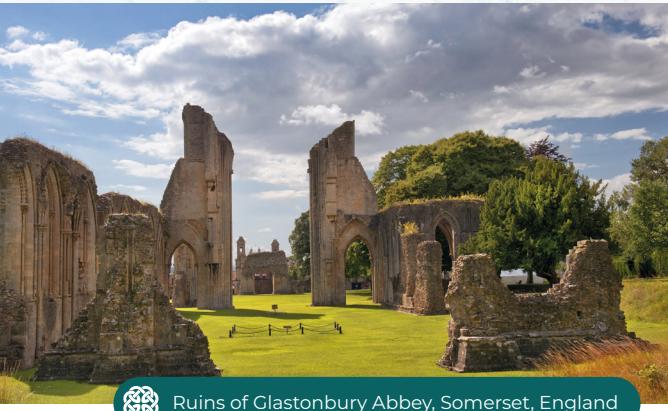
The Gospel of the Nazarene made compelling listening around the hearths of traders in many parts of Britain.

If this was true of Britain, was it true of Ireland, outside of the Roman Empire?

The Roman historian Tacitus was the son-in-law of Agricola, Governor

of Britain AD 77-84. In his *Life of Agricola* Tacitus paints a glowing picture of both the economy and civilisation of Ireland, comparing it favourably with Britain. He details the trade routes that linked Ireland with parts of the Empire, apart from Britain. Merchants brought Christianity to Ireland, as, perhaps, did Irish raiders returning from incursions into Wales and Scotland.

In the persecutions by the Roman authorities in the third century, many British Christians both suffered and died. According to *The Acts of the Council of Arles* five Britons attended the Council at Arles in AD 314. Third-century Roman writers Origen and Hippolytus both mention that Christianity had penetrated the British Isles. When Constantine called the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to define Christian belief, the British



Ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset, England



were among those listed by Athanasius as accepting its decrees. The prominent Christian heretic, Pelagius, was born in Britain (c. AD 380), though his reputation as a theologian and a heretic was made in far-away Rome. Nevertheless, the spread of the Pelagian heresy in the British Isles caused concern in church circles on the Continent. As a result of this concern, in AD 431 Ireland was visited by Palladius, a bishop from Auxerre in France.⁴ Palladius landed at Vatry in County Wicklow. He encountered Christian communities in eastern Ireland from Wicklow northwards to South Antrim.

Within a year Palladius was dead.

Soon another missionary had set sail from Gaul, bound for Ireland.

Palladius had been concerned with heresy in the small number of Christian communities that already existed.

The new missionary was on fire with an ideal.

The ideal?

To win the mass of the Irish people for the cause of Christ. His enemy was heathenism rather than heresy.

He stood in the apostolic tradition stretching back through to the very earliest champions of the cause of Christ.

His name was Patrick.



Merchants brought Christianity to Ireland, as, perhaps, did Irish raiders returning from incursions into Wales and Scotland.



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1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity From its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (1958), p. 353.
2. D. L. Edwards, *Christian England* (Revised Edition, 1989), pp. 18, 19; E. G. Bowen, *The Settlements of the Celtic Saints in Wales* (University of Wales, 1954), pp. 14-15.
3. Edwards, op. cit., p. 20.
4. Jakob Streit, *Sun and Cross: From Megalithic Culture to Early Christianity in Ireland* (1993), p. 67.





St. Patrick's Breastplate

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in the hearts of all that love me,
Christ in the mouths of friends and strangers.





Chapter 2

PATRICK AND CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

The story of the Christian evangelisation of the British Isles really begins with Patrick.

The Christianity that existed before his arrival in AD 432 was weak and esoteric: weak enough in Britain, for example, to have been ignored by the Anglo-Saxon invaders who rushed into the power vacuum created by the departure of the Roman legions. The heathen invaders found no problem in making a complete break with the Roman past. They even renamed the days of the week after their own gods.

That the invaders did not succeed in re-imposing heathen religion and culture was because, in the century in which the legions departed, a vibrant, missionary-minded Christian movement had taken hold of Ireland. It was rendered the more compelling because, in doctrine and practice, it was far closer to New Testament Christianity than the mix of paganism and bowdlerised Christianity launched by the Roman Emperor Constantine. Previously a worshipper of the “Unconquered Sun”, Constantine began to impose his new mishmash religion on the Empire after AD 313.¹

By contrast, the Christianity of the Celtic missionaries Patrick, David, Columba and Aidan was a great light in a dark age. The Celtic Church of these men and their successors was responsible for evangelising first



Ireland, then Britain. From beacon-light religious settlements like Iona (Scotland) and Bangor (Ulster), missionaries were sent into continental Europe to places as far distant as Switzerland, Milan (Italy), Galicia (northern Spain) and Kiev (Ukraine).²

Decades before Patrick, Eusebius, the father of church history, in his *Life of Constantine*, commented on the cynical motives that prompted “conversion” to the Emperor’s religion. There were few such hidden inducements to cause the Irish and the Britons to convert to the creed of the Celts. Two centuries after Eusebius another church historian, Bede of Jarrow (circa 673-735), “was conscious of the debt the English owed to saints such as Columba and Aidan, and loved to contrast their holiness with the ‘slothfulness’ of the Christians of his own day”.³ And this went against the grain for Bede. He was a legatee of Constantine, not the Celts. He was a spiritual descendant of Augustine, not Patrick.

The purer, Bible-based faith of Columba and Aidan to which Bede gave credit was introduced by Patrick. But, against the claims made for him by apologists writing centuries later, Patrick was emphatic that there were Christians in Ireland before his arrival. He wrote this in a letter: “In the days of old the law of God was well planted and propagated in Ireland; I do not wish to take credit for the work of my predecessors; I share the task with all those whom God has called . . . to preach the Gospel.”⁴

The letter of which this was part was written by Patrick to Coroticus, King of Strathclyde. The letter rebuked him for a raid on Ireland which had resulted in the death of some of Patrick’s converts and in the enslavement of others to the Picts. The letter to King Coroticus is one of only two primary historical sources generally accepted as having come from the hand of Patrick. The other is Patrick’s autobiography, *Confessions*.

So, who was Patrick?

Patrick was the son of a Roman British deacon, Calpurnius, and the grandson of a priest, Potitus. As a free-born provincial, Patrick was a Roman citizen.



The purer, Bible-based faith of Columba and Aidan to which Bede gave credit was introduced by Patrick.



In his *Confessions* Patrick identifies his birthplace as his father's estate at *Bannavem Taberniae*. There has been much speculation as to where this could have been. All we can tell from the context is that it was on or near the west coast of Britain – somewhere between the Bristol Channel and the Solway Firth!

In AD 405, when Patrick was 16, the Irish King Niall ventured on a warlike expedition to Britain. Among those captured and enslaved was Patrick. In Ireland he was bought by Milinc, a landowner at Slemish, near Ballymena in County Antrim.

For six years Patrick tended the herds of Milinc. Then he escaped. Taking advantage of a well-known trade route, he sailed to Gaul. While he was a slave Patrick discovered God in a fresh, new way. In Gaul this experience was further enlivened by a change in his life; a genuine Christian conversion. This gave him a hunger for biblical knowledge and theological training.



Lerins Abbey, France

In *Confessions* Patrick mentions the island of Lerins. Located in the Mediterranean off southern Gaul, Lerins was a centre “where monks from the Near East thronged”.⁵ It was viewed by Rome with great



suspicion. The Coptic Christianity of Egypt was the dominant influence there. Coptic Christianity was derived directly from Jerusalem, not Rome. Its beliefs and practices were distinctly dissimilar from those of Constantine's Church. Hence it is likely that Celtic Christianity owes something to the Copts. But if the foundation of Celtic Christianity was Coptic, the evidence suggests that Patrick and Columba built an imposing and distinctive edifice upon it.⁶ "The special form of sanctity



Auxerre Clock Tower, France

practised by the saints of the Celtic Church . . . could never have become a widespread movement without the communion and stimulus which they derived from the early Church through the written Word."⁷

Patrick's period at Lerins and his passion for Scripture almost certainly account for his independence of Rome.



After a period of years Patrick returned to his homeland. No sooner had he arrived than he received a vision that he was needed to preach the Gospel of Christ in Ireland, the land of his former captivity.

Patrick did not immediately heed the Macedonian-type cry, “Come over to Ireland and help us.” Though he described himself as “the bond-servant of God”, Patrick’s autobiography is full of indications that he had an acute sense of personal inadequacy. It was this sense that led him, prior to his expedition to Ireland, to seek a formal training for the task ahead of him. For this he went to Auxerre (Gaul, France), a Christian centre – most unlike those around it – noted for its piety.

After a period of training Patrick was ordained as a deacon by Amator, Bishop of Auxerre. Following his ordination, he shared his vision to carry the Gospel to the Irish with the bishop. It would appear that the bishop gave him no encouragement. Patrick’s Latin was poor, he lacked polish, and he, as he himself admitted, was “unsuitable for the task”.

When a bishop was chosen to go to Ireland in AD 431 it was Palladius, not Patrick. The untimely death of Palladius enabled Patrick to follow his vision.

Over 40 now, Patrick was about to embark upon his life’s work.


Patrick's period at Lerins and his passion for Scripture almost certainly account for his independence of Rome.

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1. See F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity From its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (1958), p. 293 et seq.
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