

**A COMPLETE HISTORY OF
THE BRITISH MARTYRS: FROM
THE ROMAN OCCUPATION
TO ELIZABETH'S REIGN**

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A complete history of the British martyrs: from the Roman occupation to Elizabeth's reign by
William Canon Fleming

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w/s

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OF
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From the Roman Occupation to
Elizabeth's Reign.

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IN MEMORY OF
THIRTY YEARS' UNBROKEN FRIENDSHIP
THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED BY THE AUTHOR
TO THE
REV. DEAN NORRIS,
RECTOR OF ST. HELEN'S, BRENTWOOD,
ESSEX.

PREFACE.

Britain's Title : " Primogenita Ecclesiæ."

THE voices of the Apostles announcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord were heard in every land, and their words re-echoed from the utmost confines of the known world. Such is the claim which the church makes in behalf of the Galilean fishermen whom Our Saviour sent to teach all nations.

Gildas, Britain's most ancient historian, whilst lamenting the subjugation of his country by the Romans during the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, finds consolation in the thought that during those dark days the light of the Gospel was spread throughout Britain. His words cannot be otherwise interpreted : they are as follows :—"In the meantime, whilst these things lasted, there appeared and imparted itself to this cold Island, removed farther from the visible sun than any other country, that true and invisible Sun, which, in the time of Tiberius Cæsar, showed itself to the whole world—I mean Christ vouchsafed to impart His precepts to the Britons." (*De excidio Brit.*, cap. 6.)

The Roman Army under Claudius, which did not set out for Britain until some time after the Prince of the Apostles entered the gates of the Eternal City, and was being constantly recruited from Rome during the long and tedious war that followed, must have numbered multitudes of Catholics in its ranks. It may well be supposed, then, that Christianity marched into Britain with the Roman Army.

Eusebius (A.D. 259), in his Ecclesiastical History, narrates that "some of the Apostles" passed over the ocean "to the British Isles." The names of SS. Peter and Paul, Saints Simon Zelotes and Joseph of Arimathea are mentioned as having preached in Britain by one or other of the following historians :—Gildas, Capgrave, Harpsfeld, Polydor Virgil, the Magdeburg Centuriators, Eysengranius in his "History of the First Century," Simeon Metaphrastes, and Baronius in his famous Annals.

It will be interesting to dwell on the reasons suggested for believing that St. Peter himself was one of Britain's Apostles. There are many reasons which lead to that conclusion. The presence of so many Christians in the Roman Army occupying Britain, the greater number of whom were possibly his own converts, may well have inspired the Prince of the Apostles with a great desire of visiting Britain. Other circumstances also contributed to excite his active interest in native Britons. In the year of our Lord 52 Claudius made a triumphal entry into Rome, leading captive Bran, Prince of the Silures, and his brave son Caractacus. Bran and Caractacus were detained as captives in Rome for seven years, during which time Bran was instructed and baptized a Christian, most probably by St. Peter himself. On their release from captivity in the year 59 St. Peter, at Bran's request, sent Aristobalus, his own disciple, as bishop, with two priests named Ilid and Cynvan, to preach the Gospel to the Cymry, who inhabited the province governed by Bran, now called Wales. It is stated in the "Triads" that "Bran, the son of Lear the Stammerer, was that Bran that first brought the Christian Faith to this Island from Rome, where he was detained a captive through the treachery of Cartismandrua, the daughter of Avarny, the son of Lud."

This statement is confirmed by the "Genealogy of the British Saints," which relates that "Bran, the son of Lear

the Stammerer, was the first of the nation of the Cymry that embraced the Christian faith." The same "Genealogy" informs us that Bran brought with him three missionaries, Ilid and Cynvan, Israelites, and Aristobalus, a native of Italy and a disciple of St. Peter. It is added that Aristobalus was the first Christian Bishop of this Island. These facts are at least sufficient to prove that St. Peter must have taken a deep interest in the welfare of the Early British Church, and prepare us to believe that he may himself have visited Britain. That he actually did visit Britain and preach the Gospel there is distinctly stated by authorities of repute.

Eysegrianius, in his "History of the First Century" (part 7, d. 8) affirms that the first churches in Britain were founded by St. Peter during Nero's reign. Simeon Metaphrastes (*Apud Surium*, 23 Junii, p. 362) directly, and Gildas indirectly confirm this statement (*De excidio Brit. Epistola Secunda*). Gildas calls Britain "The see of Peter," for when alluding to the fearful massacre of the British priests and to the desecration of the churches in Britain by the Saxons under Hengist, he charges them with "trampling on the see of Peter with shameless feet:" "quod sedem Petri Apostoli invericundis pedibus usurpassant."

Baronius (*Annales ecclae* A.D. 58) is of opinion that St. Peter visited Britain in the year 58, when the Emperor Claudius banished all the Jews from Rome. He fairly urges that St. Paul would not have written his Epistle to the Romans unless St. Peter were absent at the time, or, if he had written it whilst the Prince of the Apostles was still there, he would have sent his salutations to him as he did to St. Peter's disciple Aristobalus. (Rom. xvi., 10.)

Assuming the truth of Baronius's conjecture, it is clear that St. Peter visited Britain whilst his disciple was still in Rome, the year before Bran with Aristobalus, Ilid, and Cynvan, returned to spread the Gospel among the Cymry in Wales.

This theory may seem at first sight inconsistent with the statement already quoted from the "Triads," viz., "that Bran, the son of Lear the Stammerer, was that Bran that first brought the Christian faith to this Island." It must be noticed, however, that this declaration is considerably modified by what is stated further on, in the same ancient book, viz., that "Bran was the first person who introduced the Christian religion among the Cymry from Rome."

The "Genealogy of the British Saints" leaves this disputed question perfectly open, as it confines its statement to Welsh Cymry: "Bran, the son of Lear the Stammerer, was the first of the nation of the Cymry that embraced the Christian Faith." Any other of the British nation, the Brigantes for instance, might have the Gospel preached to them by St. Peter in the year 58 without infringing this statement. The exact date, however, of St. Peter's visit to Britain, though interesting in itself, is a matter of secondary importance. The really important point is that historians of credit declare that St. Peter preached the Gospel in this country.

As all the Christians in Britain at the time were altogether exempt from persecution, even during Nero's reign, the sacred writers would be no doubt prudently silent concerning the progress of Christianity in that country, and it is for this reason, perhaps, that no mention is made in the Sacred Scriptures of St. Peter's missionary labours there.

The whole controversy on this point is well summed up by Doctor Richard Smith, second Vicar-Apostolic of England and Scotland, in his "Prudential Ballance of Religion," published in 1609. The first chapter of this book commences with the question:—"What religion was in this land before the coming of St. Austin?"

"The ancient inhabitants of this Island were the Britons, whom we now call Welsh men. The faith of Christ was planted amongst them by the glorious Apostles