

**SAINT COLUMBA OF
IONA: A STUDY OF
HIS LIFE, HIS
TIMES, & HIS INFLUENCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649000999

Saint Columba of Iona: a study of his life, his times, & his influence by Lucy Menzies

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

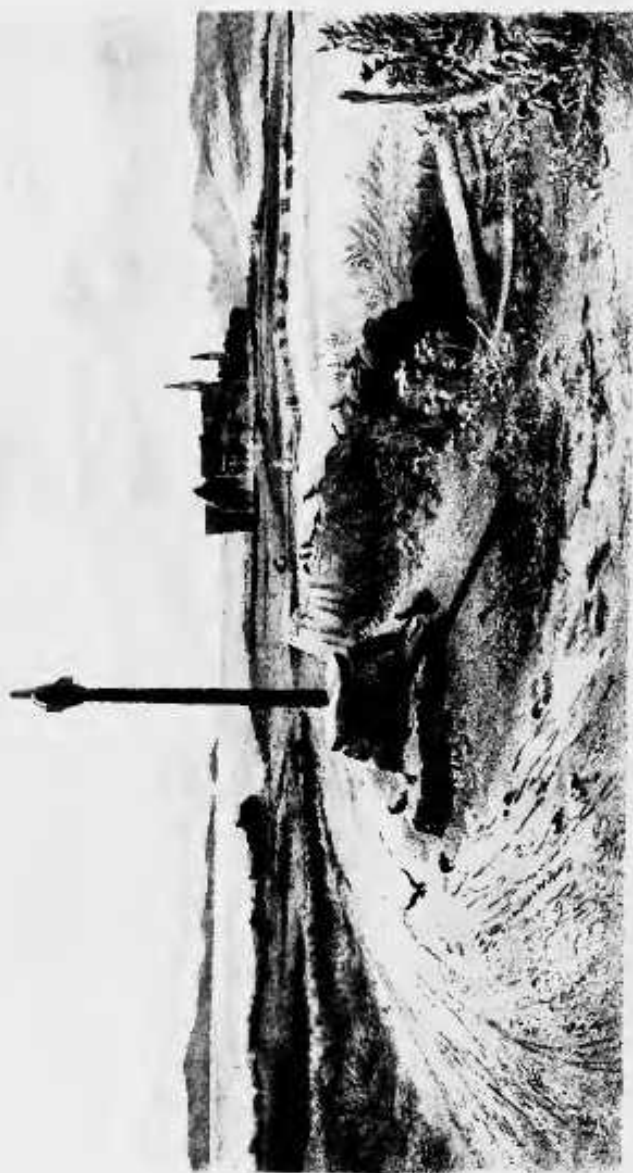
Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

LUCY MENZIES

**SAINT COLUMBA OF
IONA: A STUDY OF
HIS LIFE, HIS
TIMES, & HIS INFLUENCE**



IONA
Looking West

SAINTE COLUMBA
OF IONA

A STUDY OF
HIS LIFE, HIS TIMES, & HIS INFLUENCE

BY
LUCY MENZIES



REGIS
BIBL. MAJ.
COLLEGE

47686

LONDON & TORONTO

J. M. DENT & SONS, LTD.

NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.

1920

BR
1720
-0025M45
1920

THE DAY OF ST COLUMBA ¹

*Thursday of Columba benign
Day to send sheep on prosperity,
Day to send cow on calf,
Day to put the web in the warp.*

*Day to put coracle on the brins,
Day to place the staff to the flag,
Day to bear, day to die,
Day to hunt the heights.*

*Day to put horses in harness,
Day to send herds to pasture,
Day to make prayer efficacious,
Day of my beloved, the Thursday,
Day of my beloved, the Thursday*

¹ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, i., 163.

Seven years before the end of the world, a deluge
shall drown the nations : the sea at one tide
shall cover Ireland and the green-headed Islay—
But Columba's Isle shall swim above the flood.
Old Gaelic Prophecy.

PREFACE

My modest purpose in writing this book is to give a simple account of the life of St Columba, of the times in which he lived, and of his influence on the history of our islands. So far as I am aware, the facts contained in the various early lives of the Saint and the results arrived at by the researches of modern scholars have never yet been gathered together and presented in the form of a connected narrative. That seems to me a task worth attempting, for Columba was the founder of the Scottish nation as well as of the Scottish Church, and his labours and achievements deserve to be the more widely recognized, that the story of his battles, his voyages, his conquests, and his life at Iona, forms one of the most romantic pages of history.

Though the mists of time have closed down to some extent on those early days, Adamnan wrote his *Life of Columba* only a hundred years after the Saint's death. Cuimine the Fair was abbot at Iona when Adamnan was there as a monk, and Cuimine had known Columba, had been trained under him as a lad and had himself written a short *Life*, *De virtutibus sancti Columbae*, which Adamnan quotes almost entire in his Third Book. Adamnan had therefore every advantage for the writing of Columba's life: he lived soon after the Saint among those who had known him; he had all the manuscript records of the monastery to draw upon; he wrote at Iona amid the scenes and in the atmosphere in which Columba had lived, probably even in the very hut he had occupied. And Adamnan was a native of Connacht; he belonged to the same royal race as Columba and was born only twenty-seven years after the Saint's death.

Abbot of Iona from 679 till 704, Adamnan was a remarkable man for those times, a scholar who could write Latin and was acquainted with Hebrew and Greek, a diplomat who persuaded the Celtic Church to make several important changes in its government and who secured the "lasting liberation of the women of the Gaels" from taking part in battle. These points are mentioned to show that Adamnan was not merely a monk on a lonely island, but one of the representative men of his time. It was at the request of his brethren that he undertook to write the life of the founder of the Columban Church, a document which is the earliest piece of historical literature connected with the Highlands—"the most complete piece of such biography Europe can boast of, not only at so early a period, but through the whole Middle Ages."

It may be asked why, when that *Life* still exists, there is any occasion for this one. The answer is that Adamnan's so-called *Life* is not a biography. It is a collection of anecdotes not arranged in chronological order and not complete. Adamnan does not tell us all he knows; he tells us nothing he considers derogatory to his hero, and most of his stories are chosen because they lead up to a miracle or a vision. History is of little importance to Adamnan, what he wants to do is to give a portrait of Columba as he saw him. Consequently although his *Life* is a priceless document of antiquity, there is a great deal which it does not tell us as it might conceivably have done. To the student of Celtic antiquity, of early religion, and particularly of the pre-Christian religion of our own country, Adamnan's *Life of Columba* is as full of riddles as it is of information. It gives us a bright and fresh picture of one particular phase of Scottish life in those early times: we see the monastic system as it was practised in Ireland and then in Scotland in the sixth century of our era, painted in vivid colours with a considerable amount of detail, but as to what lay outside of monastic life we gain from it very little information. A bright

piece of real life with a great circle of darkness round it into which we would give much to be able to penetrate, that is what Adamnan gives us. By inference we learn much from his pages that he does not directly tell us, but his *Life* is incomplete, and must be supplemented by the old Irish *Lives*: that in the *Book of Lismore*, edited by Dr Whitley Stokes: that in the *Leabar Breac* or *Speckled Book of MacEgan* and that of Manus O'Donnell, a member of the clan from which Columba sprang, who in 1532 caused a *Life* of his illustrious kinsman to be compiled from every available source both in Latin and in Irish, in manuscript and in tradition.¹ But these *Lives*, too, are collections of stories and legends rather than biography.

Among modern works the student owes most to Dr Reeves' monumental edition of Adamnan, a scientific exploration of every source then known, a mine of information from which treasure is still to be extracted. And within more recent years the history of the Celtic Church in Ireland and Scotland has occupied the minds of many historians to whom I have acknowledged my debt more fully in the Bibliography. I have sought while offering as far as possible a complete and connected life of Columba, to illumine the main sources by the light of the history of early religious beliefs, of the folklore and observances of the Highlands, and of the monastic system of our islands in early times.

Though Adamnan baffles us when we turn to him for history, he rewards us generously with a living portrait of Columba. His life "even in its unconscious romancing has caught and reflected the varying tints, the light and shadows, the life and movement, the grace and mystery of the shifting currents of the ocean among the Western Isles. Whiffs of the sea-breezes reach us

¹ A fine edition of O'Donnell's *Life of Columcille* was brought out by the Irish Foundation of Chicago in 1918, edited and translated from MS. Rawlinson, B. 514 in the Bodleian Library, with Introduction, Notes and Indices, by A. O'Kelleher and G. Schœpferle, University of Illinois.

through their briny door. The authentic note of a dweller among the impressive surroundings of his island home may be caught in almost every page."¹ It seems almost as if a searchlight were shining back through the centuries, throwing the intimate domestic life of Columba at Iona into bold relief. We see him as he was, his quick temper, his passionate, impetuous ways, his nice dry humour, his love for his fellow-men and for every living thing, his unwearied labours in the service of his people. There was nothing small about Columba, his stature, his voice, his spirit, and his soul — all were big and strong. Religion was not a "solemn business of long faces" for him, but a very stirring mode of life, full also of brotherly kindness, of fine feelings and noble thoughts, of heroism, of spiritual exaltation, and of love. Not that Columba is to be represented as "surrounded from his very cradle with aureole and nimbus": rather do we see in him, in the words of Sabatier, "the finest and most manly of spectacles, that of the man who conquers his own soul, hour after hour, fighting first against himself . . . and then against the evils of his time."

Columba was the first Celtic Saint of the Celtic Church: he was a priest of kingly race, a leader who thus fulfilled all the ideals of his compatriots. He had a passionate love for his own country, "Carry my blessing across the sea," he said to a youth returning to Ireland: "carry it to the West. My heart is broken in my breast — should death suddenly o'ertake me, I die of the love I bear the Gael. Gael! Gael! beloved name!" And the Gaels loved and worshipped him. In the words of the old Irish eulogy, the *Amhra Choluimcille*:—

"He was their soul's light, their learned one . . . who was God's messenger . . . who dispelled fears from them . . . who explained the truth of words to them . . . a harp without a base cord . . . a perfect sage who believed Christ . . . he was learned, he was chaste, he was charitable, he was an abounding benefit of guests,

¹ Dowden, *Celtic Church in Scotland*, p. 126.