

CELTIC SAINTS

SAINT BRENDAN



Brendan (c. A.D. 484-578), an Irish saint and hero of a legendary voyage in the Atlantic, is said to have been born at Tralee in Kerry in A.D. 484. The Irish form of his name is *Brennain*, the Latin *Brendanus*. Medieval historians usually call him Brendan of Clonfert, or Brendan son of Finnloga, to distinguish him from his contemporary, St Brendan of Birr (573). Little is known of the historical Brendan, who died in 578 as abbot of a Benedictine monastery which he had founded twenty years previously at Clonfert in eastern Galway.

The story of his voyage across the Atlantic to the "Promised Land of the Saints," afterwards designated "Saint Brendan's Island," ranks among the most celebrated of the medieval sagas of western Europe. Its traditional date is 565-573. The legend is found, in prose or verse and with many variations, in Latin, French, English, Saxon, Flemish, Irish, Welsh, Breton and Scottish Gaelic. Although it does not occur in the writings of any Arabian geographer, several of its incidents - such as the landing on a whale in mistake for an island - belong also to Arabic folk literature. Many of Brendan's fabulous adventures seem to be borrowed from the half-pagan Irish saga of Maelduin or Maeldune, and others belong also to Scandinavian mythology. The oldest extant version of the legend is the 11th century *Navigatio Brendani*.

Saint Brendan's island was long accepted as a reality by geographers. In a Venetian map dated 1367, in the anonymous Weimar map of 1424, and in Beccario's map of 1435, it is identified with Madeira. Christopher Columbus, in his journal for the 9th of August 1492, states that the inhabitants of Hierro, Gomera and Madeira had seen the island in the west; and Martin Behaim, in the globe he made at Nuremberg in the same year, places it west of the Canaries and near the equator. During the 16th century the progress of exploration in these latitudes compelled many cartographers to locate the island elsewhere; and it was marked about 100 m. west of Ireland, or afterwards among the West Indies. But in Spain and Portugal the older belief as to its situation was maintained.

In 1526 an expedition under Fernando Alvarez left Grand Canary in search of St Brendan's island, which had again been reported as seen by many trustworthy witnesses. In 1570 an official inquiry was held, and a second expedition undertaken, by Fernando de Villalobos, governor of Palma. Similar voyages of discovery were made by the Canarians in 1604 and 1721; and only in 1759 was the apparition of Saint Brendan's island explained as an effect of mirage.

SAINT BRIGID



Saint Brigid (c. A.D. 452-523), one of the patron saints of Ireland, was born at Faughart in county Louth, her father being a prince of Ulster. Refusing to marry, she chose a life of seclusion, making her cell, the first in Ireland, under a large oak tree, whence the place was called Kil-dara, "the church of the oak." The city of Kildare is supposed to derive its name from Saint Brigid's cell. She may have been ordained a bishop. The year of her death is generally placed in 523. She was buried at Kildare, but her remains were afterwards translated to Downpatrick, where they were laid beside the bodies of Saint Patrick and Saint Columba. Her feast is celebrated on the 1st of February. A large collection of miraculous stories clustered round her name, and her reputation was not confined to Ireland,

for, under the name of St Bride, she became a favorite saint in England, and numerous churches were dedicated to her in Scotland.

SAINT COLUMBA

Columba (Irish, *Colum*) was born on the 7th of December 521, in all probability at Gartan in County Donegal, Ireland. His father Feidlimid was a member of the reigning family in Ireland and was closely allied to that of Dalriada (Argyll). His mother Eithne was of Leinster extraction and was descended from an illustrious provincial king. To these powerful connections as much as to his piety and ability, he owed the immense influence he possessed. Later lives state that the saint was also called Crimthann (fox), and Reeves suggests that he may have had two names, the one baptismal, the other secular. He was afterwards known as Columkille, or Columba of the Church, to distinguish him from others of the same name.



During his early years the Irish Church was reformed by Gildas and Finian of Clonard, and numerous monasteries were founded which made Ireland renowned as a centre of learning. Columba himself studied under two of the most distinguished Irishmen of his day, Finian of Moville (at the head of Strangford Lough) and Finian of Clonard. Almost as a matter of course, under such circumstances, he embraced the monastic life.

Columba was ordained a deacon while at Moville, and afterwards, when about thirty years of age, was raised to the priesthood. During his residence in Ireland he founded, in addition to a

number of churches, two famous monasteries, one named Daire Calgaich (Derry) on the banks of Lough Foyle, the other Dair-magh (Durrow) in King's county.

In 563 he left his native land, accompanied by twelve disciples, and went on a mission to northern Britain, perhaps on the invitation of his kinsman Conall, king of Dalriada. Irish accounts represent Columba as undertaking this mission in consequence of the censure expressed against him by the clergy after the battle of Cooldrevny; but this is probably a fabrication. The saint's labors in Scotland must be regarded as a manifestation of the same spirit of missionary enterprise with which so many of his countrymen were imbued. Columba established himself on the island of Hy or Iona, where he erected a church and a monastery.

About the year 565 he applied himself to the task of converting the heathen kingdom of the northern Picts. Crossing over to the mainland he proceeded to the residence, on the banks of the Ness, of Brude, king of the Picts. By his preaching, his holy life, and, as his earliest biographers assert, by the performance of miracles, he converted the king and many of his subjects. The precise details, except in a few cases, are unknown, or obscured by exaggeration and fiction; but it is certain that the whole of northern Scotland was converted by the labors of Columba, and his disciples and the religious instruction of the people provided for by the erection of numerous monasteries. The monastery of Iona was revered as the mother house of all these foundations, and its abbots were obeyed as the chief ecclesiastical rulers of the whole nation of the northern Picts.

At that time there were neither dioceses nor parishes in Ireland and Celtic Scotland; and by the Columbite Rule the bishops themselves, although they ordained the clergy, were subject to the jurisdiction of the abbots of Iona, who, like the founder of the order, were only presbyters (priests). In matters of ritual they agreed with the Western Church on the continent, save in a few particulars such as the precise time of keeping Easter and manner of tonsure.

Columba was honored by his countrymen, the Scots of Britain and Ireland, as much as by his Pictish converts, and in his character of chief ecclesiastical ruler he gave formal benediction and inauguration to Aidan, the successor of Conall, as king of the Scots. He accompanied that prince to Ireland in 575, and took a leading part in a council held at Drumceat in Ulster, which determined once and for all the position of the ruler of Dalriada with regard to the king of Ireland.

The last years of Columba's life appear to have been mainly spent at Iona. There he was already revered as a saint, and whatever credit may be given to some portions of the narratives of his biographers, there can be no doubt as to the wonderful influence which he exercised, as to the holiness of his life, and as to the love which he uniformly manifested to God and to his neighbor.

In the summer of 597 he knew that his end was approaching. On Saturday the 8th of June he was able, with the help of one of his monks, to ascend a little hill above the monastery and to give it his farewell blessing. Returning to his cell he continued a labor in which he had been engaged, the transcription of the Psalter. Having finished the verse of the 34th Psalm where it

is written, "They who seek the Lord shall want in no manner of thing that is good," he said, "Here I must stop: - what follows let Baithen write"; indicating, as was believed, his wish that his cousin Baithen should succeed him as abbot. He was present at evening in the church, and when the midnight bell sounded for the nocturnal office early on Sunday morning he again went there unsupported, but sank down before the altar and passed away as in a gentle sleep.

Several Irish poems are ascribed to Columba, but they are manifestly compositions of a later age. Three Latin hymns may, however, be attributed to the saint with some degree of certainty.

The original materials for a life of Saint Columba are unusually full. The earliest biography was written by one of his successors, Cuminius, who became abbot of Iona in 657. Much more important is the enlargement of that work by Adamnan, who became abbot of Iona in 679. These narratives are supplemented by the brief but most valuable notices given by the Venerable Bede. See W. Reeves, *Life of St Columba, written by Adamnan* (Dublin, 1857); W. F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, vol. II. "Church and Culture" (Edinburgh, 1877).

COLUMBAN



Columban, an Irish saint and writer, was born in Leinster in the year 543, and was educated in the monastery of Bangor, County Down. About the year 585 he left Ireland together with twelve other monks, and established himself in the Vosges, among the ruins of an ancient fortification called Anagrates, the present Anegray in the department of Haute-Saone. His enemies accused him before a synod of French bishops (602) for keeping Easter according to the old British and now unorthodox way, and a more powerful conspiracy was organized against him at the court of Burgundy for boldly rebuking the crimes of King Theuderich II and the queen-mother, Brunhilda. He was banished and forcibly removed from his monastery, and with Saint Gall and others of the monks he withdrew into Switzerland, where he preached with no great success to the

Suebi and Alamanni. Being again compelled to flee, he retired to Italy, and founded the monastery of Bobbio in the Apennines, where he remained till his death, which took place on the 21st of November 615. His writings, which include some Latin poems, prove him a man of learning, and he appears to have been acquainted not only with the Latin classics, but also with Greek, and even Hebrew.