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THE LIFE OF SAINT  
COLUMBA, APOSTLE OF  
SCOTLAND

Frances Forbes

**The Life of Saint Columba,  
Apostle of Scotland**

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# F. A. Forbes

## The Life of Saint Columba, Apostle of Scotland

**"The Kingdom of Heaven, O man, requireth no other price than thyself: the value of it is thyself: give thyself for it and thou shalt have it." – ST. AUGUSTINE**

### AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THOUGH more than 1300 years have gone by since the death of St. Columba, there are few saints whose memory is so living and so strong. This is partly due to his vivid and attractive personality, but in a great measure also to the fact that we have his Biography or Life written at great length by Adamnan, ninth abbot of Iona, who was born only twenty-seven years after Columba's death. Adamnan, who was very young when he entered the community at Iona, could have gathered the materials for his book from the lips of those who had personally known the great Apostle of Scotland, and who had been eye-witnesses of the events recorded. We know that these friends were many, and drawn from all classes, for Columbcille, above all the men of his time, had the gift of being loved, and many instances are related of the passionate devotion of the monks of Iona to their great abbot, no less than that of the multitudes with whom in his long and busy life he had come in contact. Adamnan is considered to be a sober and trustworthy author, and has not exaggerated, as many of the later writers undoubtedly have, the miraculous element in the life of the Saint.

Carlyle, who cannot be considered as an advocate of the supernatural, remarks of the Life of St. Columba: "You can see that the man who wrote it could tell no lie. What he meant you cannot always find out; but it is clear that he told things as they appeared to him."

There are many interesting relics of Columba still in existence. An ancient stone chalice which he is said to have used at Mass is still preserved in Ireland, together with the flagstone which formed the flooring of Eithne's room the night that he was born. A pathetic custom exists amongst the poor Irish emigrants of sleeping the night before they leave their country on this stone, in the hope that he who made himself an exile from his country for the love of God will by his prayers make the burden of their sorrow easier to bear. The stone which he used for so many years as a pillow is still to be seen amongst the ruins of the cathedral of Iona, which was erected in the twelfth century near the site of the old abbey church of Columba's building, while the ruins of St. Oran's chapel near at hand enclose the very spot where the Saint breathed his last upon the altar steps.

But perhaps the most interesting of all the Columban relics are the three manuscripts which are said to have been written by the Saint's own hand. That Columbcille was an indefatigable scribe we know from the witness of many of his contemporaries, and one of the greatest of modern authorities (Mr. Westwood) sees no reason for setting aside the tradition that the "Book of Kells" and the "Book of Durrow" are both mainly, if not altogether, Columba's work. The "Book of Durrow," indeed, bears an inscription stating that it was written by "Columba the scribe in the space of twelve days," while the "Book of Kells" has always borne the title of the "Great Gospel of Columbcille." To the objection that a busy man like Columba would not have had leisure to execute the exquisitely minute decorations which are the astonishment of all admirers of Celtic art, it can be urged that many old manuscripts which still exist in an unfinished condition bear witness to the fact that it was customary for the initial letters and ornamental parts of the manuscript to be sketched roughly in, and finished by another hand. This is especially to be noted in the "Book of Kells," the decorative work of which is certainly of a later date. Both the "Book of Durrow" and the "Book of Kells" are to be seen in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

The third manuscript, the famous Psalter which gave Columbcille to Scotland and which is preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, fell, after the battle of Cuil Dreimhne, into the hands of the O'Donnells, Columba's own clan, who treasured it as their most precious possession. It was called the "Cathach" or "Battler," and if borne into battle by "one of pure heart and of clean hands" was believed to ensure them the victory over their enemies. It is the least ornamental of the three, and bears traces of the haste with which it was executed. The existence of these pages, written with laborious care by the hand which has long since mouldered into dust, makes a living link across the centuries with Columbcille the Beloved, the great Apostle of Scotland.

## CHAPTER I

### CHILD OF THE MOUNTAIN AND THE LAKE

FOURTEEN hundred years ago, in the sweet days of autumn, when the woods of Gartan are clothed in crimson and gold, and the still waters of Lough Veagh reflect the deep blue of the skies above, Eithne, the wife of Fedhlimidh, Prince of Tir-Connell, had a strange dream. It seemed to her that an angel of God stood beside her, bearing in his hands a veil scattered all over with the Bowers of Paradise, and that, spreading it out, he bade her admire its beauty. Eithne was a daughter of kings, but never before had she seen so marvellously fair a web; she stretched out her hands to grasp it, but even as she touched it, it rose and fluttered lightly into the air. Over hill, mountain, and lough floated its shadowy loveliness, till it rested at last on the moors and mountains of a land that lay far away in the moaning seas. Then Eithne wept for the loss of the beautiful veil, but the angel comforted her.

"It is but a symbol," he said, "of the son that shall be born to thee in the days to come. He shall be a prince and a prophet; the world shall be perfumed by his holiness; and he shall bear the flower of the faith among the heathen far over land and sea."

When morning came Eithne told her husband of the dream, and the two took counsel together. That his son should be a great prince in no way surprised Fedhlimidh. Was not he himself a grandson of the great king Niall of the Nine Hostages, so called because he had subdued nine Kings of Ireland to his will and made them his vassals, and was not the reigning king of all Ireland his near kinsman? No strange thing would it have been in those turbulent days, when the lives of kings were short and uncertain, were the son of Fedhlimidh himself to be set on the throne as High King of Ireland.

But Eithne's dream seemed to point more to a heavenly supremacy than an earthly; was it an indication of God's will that they should dedicate their child to Him? They thought it was, and a few months later, when heaven sent them a fair and beautiful little son, they earnestly prayed to the Giver of all good gifts that He would take the child, if it seemed well to Him, for His service.

At Teampall-Douglas, a few miles from Gartan, there lived a holy old priest called Cruithnechan; to him they took the babe that it might receive at his hands the holy rites of Baptism. He was given the name of Columba, a not uncommon name in Ireland at the time, and while yet a little child was sent back to the saintly Cruithnechan that the old man might train him in the ways of wisdom and holiness.

In this Columba's parents but followed the custom of the time, for it was usual for the sons of chiefs to be brought up from their earliest youth by some great bard, soldier, or priest, according to their destination in life; and it was the duty of these foster parents to train their charges in all that had to do with their future profession.

The little Columba was an apt pupil. It was his delight to accompany his master to the Church, there to listen to the chanting of the Divine Office; and so keen of ear and quick of memory was the boy that he had learnt some of the psalms by heart before he could spell them out in the Psalter – the lesson-book of every young reader of his time. Cruithnechan himself was unaware of this until one day when he took the child with him on a visit to a brother priest near Derry. The two clerics went together to the Church to chant the Divine Office, and Columba, as was his wont, knelt to pray before the altar.

Now it came to pass that Cruithnechan lost his place, and was in great distress because he could not find it again. The office came to a standstill, and the pause would have been a long one had not the boy's clear treble voice taken up the psalm Where the old man had halted, and chanted sweetly the alternate verses until the missing place was found. It was Columba's love of the Church that won for him among his companions the name by which he became famous in after-days – "Columb-cille" or

"the dove of the Church." He would slip away from their games whenever he could, but they always knew where to find him. "He nestles beside the altar like a dove in its nest," they would say.

In spite of the boy's name, however, underneath the strong faith and love, the true and deep devotion that were always his chief characteristics, lay a nature that was in no wise dovelike. Loyal, great-hearted, and compassionate as he undoubtedly was, the blood of the fierce and haughty Hy-Nialls flowed in his veins. To be quick to take offence and slow to forgive an injury is a characteristic of the Celtic race all the world over, and Columba was no exception to the rule. Long and sharp was to be the struggle before that quick and imperious nature was wholly conquered by the grace of God, but great was to be the victory at last.

To Cruithnechan it was evident that the blessing of God rested in no small degree on the child of his fostering. Returning home one night he saw his house lit up as it were with a great fire, and fearing for the safety of his little charge he entered in haste. All was in darkness within, save over the head of the sleeping child, where there hung a globe of fire. The old man fell on his knees, not knowing what the portent might mean; but God reassured him, showing that the light of His Holy Spirit had been poured out abundantly upon Columba, who was to labour fruitfully in His service.

It has always been acknowledged by the Celtic races that among the children of men there are a chosen few who are gifted with the second sight. Strange instances are given of mortal eyes that have seen the invisible, and of men and women who have known things that are not to be discerned by the senses. A little corner of the veil that hides the spiritual world from the world of sense has been lifted. From the earliest ages, to those who are exceptionally pure of heart and holy, this contact with the spiritual world has been given in a supernatural degree. The materialist may scoff, but the voice of the Ages is louder and clearer in our ears than his.

From his childhood Columba seems to have possessed this gift in a very marked manner. His guardian angel, we are told by his biographers, appeared to him frequently, and the child would talk to him familiarly, and ask him if all the spirits in heaven were as radiant and beautiful as he. One day the angel bade the boy tell him what he would choose if any virtue might be his for the asking.

"I would choose purity and wisdom," answered he.

"Well hast thou chosen, Columba," said the angel, "they shall be thine, and God will add to them yet another gift."

So it came to pass in the course of time that there appeared one day before Columba three beautiful maidens, who would have embraced him, but he pushed them roughly away.

"Dost thou not know us, Columba?" asked one of them, and a celestial radiance shone from her face and garments as she spoke. "We are three sisters sent to thee from our Father, that we may abide with thee for ever."

"I know you not," said Columba. "Who is your father?"

"Our Father is God, the Lord and Saviour of the world," answered the maiden, and her voice was like the music of heaven.

"Truly a noble parentage," said the boy. "By what names do men call you?"

"Our names are Purity, Prophecy, and Wisdom," she answered, "and we have come never to leave thee more, and to love thee with an incorruptible love."

So among the peaceful hills and lakes of Donegal the boy Columba grew into manhood. Tall and fair and straight of limb was the son of Eithne and Fedhlimidh, with a voice clear and sweet as a trumpet-call, and a heart that was fearless, pure, and true. Cruithnechan had done his work well; he had taught Columba all that he knew of earthly lore and of heavenly; but the time of his fostering was over. He must go forth now into the great world that lay beyond the quiet mountains, the world of strife and of tragedy, of joy and of sorrow.

A strange world and one of many contrasts, that of Ireland in the sixth century. To the unanimous voice of Christianity she owed her name of the "Island of the Saints." From the days of St. Patrick the monastic schools, veritable cities of God in the midst of the strife and barbarism

of those early days, exerted their influence on the life around them in favour of piety, learning and civilization. Here were being formed a whole population of writers, theologians, architects, sculptors, poets, historians, and above all of missionaries and preachers, who were to carry the light of the Gospel far and wide into other lands. The founders of these schools were mostly of the noblest blood in Ireland, and kings and princes did not disdain to come to them for advice and help, or even to listen to their reproofs. Most powerful for good was the influence of the Church in Ireland, and well for her that it was so, for the times were wild and lawless.

To the Hy-Nialls, the kinsmen of Columba, belonged the whole north-west of Ireland. The sovereign rule over the entire country was theirs, in the Irish colony of Dalriada in Caledonia over the seas, as well as in the mother-country of Erin.

They exercised authority over the provincial kings, but an authority that was often hotly contested, and stormily maintained at the cost of much bloodshed. The king was elected from either branch of the great Niall family or clan, the Hy-Nialls of the North, to which Columba belonged, or the Hy-Nialls of the South, and the two branches were continually at war. Into the midst of these discordant elements the law of Christ brought peace and justice, and the Saints of Ireland were the pillars of the law of Christ.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SCHOOLING OF A SAINT

WHILE Columba was growing into manhood among the mountains of Tir-Connell, St. Finnian, "Finnian of the Heart Devout" as the old writers love to call him, was founding his great monastic school of Moville on the northern side of Lough Cuan.

Not on his piety and sanctity alone did the renown of Finnian rest. He had been educated at the famous monastery of Whitehorn, founded by St. Ninian in the fourth century in the British kingdom of Galloway across the sea. St. Ninian was the friend of St. Martin of Tours, and it was from him that he obtained masons to build the Candida Casa or White House, the first stone church erected in Britain. Later, St. Finnian went on pilgrimage to Rome, a difficult and dangerous undertaking in days when ships consisted for the most part of a framework of willow overstretched with ox-hide; and famine, pestilence, wild beasts and barbarians were only a few of the perils that beset travellers by land. There he remained for three months, when he returned to Ireland, bringing with him a precious and priceless treasure.

This was a copy of the sacred Scriptures, translated and corrected by the hand of St. Jerome himself, and formally sanctioned by the Pope as the authentic text. No copy of this first edition of the Vulgate had as yet found its way into Ireland, and to the scholars and scribes of the day it was of untold worth.

The school of Moville was founded in 540, and St. Columba must have been one of its earliest scholars, for he was born in the year 521, and was about twenty years of age when he left Tir-Connell. Here he was ordained deacon, and here also, at his prayer, was worked the first of a long series of miracles that were to continue throughout his life. One festival day, to the consternation of St. Finnian, it was found that there was no wine for the Holy Sacrifice. It was the turn of Columba to draw the water that was to be used in the sacred mysteries, and kneeling at the brink of the well he prayed earnestly to that Lord who had changed water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana to have pity on their distress. His prayer was heard; even as he carried the water to the church the miracle was worked.

"Here, my Father, is wine that God has sent us from heaven," said the young deacon, as he gave the vessel to his master, and Finnian marvelled greatly and gave praise and glory to God.

From Moville, Columba went to the great school of Clonard, there to pursue his studies under another St. Finnian – Finnian the Wise, the "Tutor of the Saints of Erin." Clonard was the most famous school in Ireland at the time, and even bishops and abbots, old in years and experience, did not disdain to come to learn wisdom at the feet of its holy founder. St. Finnian of Clonard had been himself the pupil of three great saints, St. David, St. Gildas, and St. Cadoc, at the College of Llancarvan in Wales. When Columba came to the school of Clonard it numbered, as the old writers tell us, three thousand scholars.

The problem of accommodation was very simple in an Irish school of the sixth century. A few precious manuscripts formed the whole library. The instruction was mostly oral, and given in the green fields round the moat of Clonard. A little hill or eminence formed the professor's chair, and the scholars sat on the slopes about his feet. They built their own little huts of clay and wattles in the surrounding meadows, and took their turn at herding the sheep and grinding in the quern, or handmill, the corn for the daily bread. They prayed and studied, learnt the exquisitely fine transcription that gave to the world the only books that were then to be had, and listened to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures expounded by St. Finnian with a power and eloquence that drew men from all parts of Ireland to listen.

The son of the Hy-Nialls took his turn with the rest at grinding the corn in the quern and in the humble daily labours, but he accomplished his task so rapidly and skilfully that his fellow-scholars, who may have heard the story of the celestial companion of his boyhood, would assert that he had been helped by an angel. When the daily work was finished, he was always to be found, as of old, before the altar, absorbed in prayer. Even the elders treated him with deference. There was something so noble and commanding in his bearing, so high and holy in the glance of his keen grey eyes, so strong and compelling in the clear tones of his voice, that half unconsciously men bowed before him.

But there was one at Clonard who long withstood his influence. To the gentle-hearted Ciaran "Mac In Tsair," or the son of the carpenter, temptation had come in the shape of an envious thought.

Why should Columba, he asked himself resentfully, be loved and privileged above all the other scholars? He was the son of the Prince of Tir-Connell it was true, but in a monastic community such as Clonard were not they all equal before God? He began to be jealous of the influence exercised so unconsciously by his young companion, and harboured bitterness in his heart. Ciaran's guardian angel grieved over the havoc that was being wrought in that pure and gentle soul. He appeared to him one day in a radiant vision, carrying the tools of a carpenter in his hands.

"See, Ciaran," said he, "what thou hast left for the love of God, to give thyself to Christ in the monastic life; but Columba has sacrificed the throne which would have been his, had he not, forsaking the world, chosen rather to follow his Lord in poverty and humiliation."

His words scattered the mist of envy from the heart of the carpenter's son, who humbly asked pardon for his sin. From henceforth he became one of the warmest friends of Columba, who in his turn loved the gentle-hearted Ciaran with a true and tender affection. It was while the two were at Clonard together that their master St. Finnian dreamt that he saw two moons, one of gold and one of silver, shining in the sky. The golden moon illuminated the north of Ireland, and its beams shone over the sea as far as distant Alba, while the moon of silver shed its soft light in the centre of the land. It was made known to Finnian that the golden moon represented Columba, who was to carry the light of the Gospel to another people, while that of silver typified Ciaran, whose holiness was to be a light to many in his own country.

It was at this time that Columbcille showed the first signs of that gift of prophecy that was to make him so famous in after days.

There came to Clonard an old bard called Gemman, who was a Christian. Columba, who had a passionate love for poetry, put himself under his tuition that he might not only study the old minstrel lore of Ireland, but learn also to pour out his own heart in song. One day when the old man sat reading at a little distance from his pupil in the green meadows near Clonard, a young maiden, crying piteously for help, and hotly pursued by one of the bloodthirsty barbarians who were the terror of the more peaceful inhabitants of the country, fled towards him for protection. Gemman called to Columba for help, but it was too late. Even as he tried to hide the child under the folds of his long cloak her savage assailant pierced her to the heart with his spear.

"How long, O Lord," moaned the old man, as he gathered the body of the little maiden into his arms, "how long shall the blood of this innocent cry unavenged to heaven?"

Columba turned to him with flashing eyes.

"Thus long," he cried in a voice that rang like the trumpet of the avenging angel:

"Thus long, and no longer. The soul of that innocent child shall scarcely have entered heaven before the soul of her murderer shall be cast into eternal fire."

The words had scarcely left his lips when the barbarian, who was not yet out of sight, fell dead, struck down by the sudden judgment of God.

On leaving Clonard, Columba went in company with the gentle-hearted Ciaran to visit the school of another great master of the spiritual life, St. Mobhi of Glasnevin. There they met St. Comgall and St. Cannich, and formed with them a lifelong friendship. It was during his stay at Glasnevin that Columba was sent by St. Mobhi to Etchen, Bishop of Clonfad, to be ordained a priest, and it is

characteristic of the simplicity of the times that the holy bishop, who was Columba's own cousin, and the son of a reigning prince, was found in the fields guiding the oxen of his plough.

It must have been also about this time that Ciaran and Columba journeyed together to the rocky Isle of Aran in the west, to visit St. Enda the Holy, the tutor of both Finnian of Moville and Finnian of Clonard. Aran was indeed a very nursery of sanctity, and Enda was revered as a father by all the saints of Ireland. They learnt from his lips the virtues and duties of a true monk, but they learnt still more from his example. He and his community slept on the bare ground in their stone cells, never warmed by a fire even in the coldest days of winter. Their frugal food was the fruit of the labour of their hands, but it was little enough that the barren rocks of Aran could furnish. To these men, whose hearts were on fire with the love of God, their desert island was a little paradise, where they lived in close communion with the unseen world, and from whence the voice of praise went up incessantly to the throne of God.

We are told that the gentle-hearted Ciaran, the son of the carpenter, was beloved by Enda above all his disciples, and that when the time came for him to leave the Isle of Aran to found his own great monastery of Clonmacnoise on the banks of the Shannon, the old man knelt and wept bitterly on the rocky shore. Perhaps he may have foreseen the early death of his beloved pupil, the sudden quenching of that light that was to shine so brightly during the few years that remained to him of his earthly pilgrimage.

For a few years after his departure from Aran the holy Ciaran exercised his apostleship in his native country, and then founded the monastery of Clonmacnoise, which in after days was to become the greatest and most learned community in Ireland. Four months later a terrible pestilence broke out, and the gentle Ciaran was amongst its victims. He asked the brethren to take him out into the open air that his eyes might see the blue sky once again before he died. The skin on which he used to sleep was spread on the ground and they laid him on it, weeping bitterly the while. The dying man then asked to be left alone with St. Kevin of Glendalough, his soul's friend (the beautiful old Celtic name for spiritual father – still in use among the Catholics of western Scotland), who blessed him and gave him the Holy Communion.

Ciaran bade him a tender farewell, for, says the old chronicle, he loved him much. Then, lifting his eyes to heaven with a smile on his lips, the pure and holy Ciaran breathed his last, and white angels came and carried his soul to Paradise.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **DERRY AND DURROW**

THE terrible outbreak of plague that carried off young Ciaran in the flower of his age found Columba at Glasnevin. St. Mobhi bade his disciples disperse to their homes, and Columbcille went northwards to Tir-Connell. When he reached the stream of Moyola he prayed earnestly that God might stay the plague on the southern bank of the river, and spare the country of his people. His prayer was heard, and the terrible scourge forbore to cross the water.

Columba was now twenty-five years of age, and his friends and kinsmen earnestly desired that he should found a church and monastery in their own country. His cousin the Prince of Ailech even offered him a piece of land on the northern coast, but Columba was deaf to their entreaties. His master, St. Mobhi, had given him no permission to found; and without it, so great was his reverence for the holy old man, he would take no steps in the matter. But Mobhi had fallen a victim to the pestilence and was sick unto death. One of his last acts was to send messengers in search of his beloved disciple, to take him his blessing and his girdle in token that the time had come for him to found his monastery.

The spot that Ailech had offered to Columba was altogether after his own heart and was now most gratefully accepted. The so-called "island" of Derry or Daire, surrounded as it was on two sides by the Foyle water and on the third by a marsh, consisted of a gently rising green hill, crowned on the summit with a beautiful wood of oaks. So dear was the oak grove of Derry to Columbcille, that rather than cut down one of its trees, he preferred to build his church in the space that remained between them.

The cells of the monks were placed at the foot of the hill by the water's edge, and it was not long before the young men of Tir-Connell came flocking to Daire to give themselves to the service of God under the rule of their young kinsman.

It was in this beloved church of Derry that it was given so often to Columba to behold the angels adoring their Lord on His altar throne, and to hear the melody of their voices as they sang the eternal song of praise.

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