SCOTTISH MONASTIC LIFE[1]

When one considers that there were monasteries in Scotland for over a thousand years, we know surprisingly little about the way of life that was familiar over that long time span to the occupants and their contemporaries alike. Indeed, in many cases we scarcely know whether there was a monastery there or not. Easson's gazetteer of the Scottish monasteries has many listed as uncertain or "supposed" foundations because the documentation for them cannot be found but one must remember that the nunnery of St. Evoca would have fallen into this category, but for a problem in the early 15th century which led to a papal rescript now preserved in the Vatican.[2]   There is, of course, a paradox in this, because the remains of all that human endeavour mislead us into thinking that the life is also familiar to us. It has been romanticised: the ruins have their own culture. Most visitors to Scotland are likely to visit at least one of the great ruins, the names of Iona, Melrose, Sweetheart abbey, Lincluden, Dundrennan, Inchmahome, Holyrood, Cambuskenneth, Dryburgh, Coldingham, Crossraguel, Arbroath, Haddington are all names inextricably mixed into the history of Scotland. Yet as you wander through the smooth and antiseptic lawns of the Ministry of Works at one of the sites, where the occasional tracery of the great windows and columns of the naves rise dramatically to the sky, while the outlines of the buildings razed and ruined have been carefully restored to a uniform foot or so above the land, to create the illusion that one is walking through a manicured ground plan, or skeletal framework, what are you really seeing? Is this reality, or is it finely created myth? What relationship does it bear to the daily life of that vanished millennium?

The first thing one has to remember is that most of these visible symbols are the symbols of the very last period of monasticism in Scotland. Monasteries in Scotland were peculiarly likely to suffer the ravages of siege and fire. If they lay on the borders or along the main routes from England into Scotland, they fell victim to the periodic invasion of the English. On occasion, monks, fleeing from their house in such circumstances, might find themselves, like the monks from Kelso, reduced to begging for food and clothing from other houses.[3] If they lay in the Highland zone, they fell victim to internecine strife and feud. Thus the great abbey of Melrose was pillaged and destroyed by Edward II. In 1385 Richard II set fire to it. In 1544/5 the English invaders desecrated all the abbeys they passed in the name of the new reformation of the church in England, and Melrose was twice one of the

---

[2] D.E. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses*, Scotland, (London, 1957), p. 125.
[3] *Ibid*. p.59.

victims, first of Sir Ralph Evers and then of the Earl of Hertford.[4] The buildings were never subsequently restored although part of the nave was later adapted to parochial use. The remains, however, are of the building erected after 1385, a magnificent example of late decorated and early perpendicular style designed to display costly stained glass windows in the kirk and with elaborate stone carvings of demons, devils and hobgoblins, dragons and other strange animals. Such a structure was far removed from the austerity and simplicity enjoined by Cistercian statutes.

Far to the north the cathedral kirk of Moray suffered similar disasters. It was burned in 1270; about a century later in May, 1390, the rebuilt church was burned again by the Wolf of Badenoch, Alexander Stewart, second son of King Robert II. The kirk was damaged again in 1554/5 at the "Bloody Vespers"; a fight in the kirk itself between William Innes of that ilk and Alexander Dunbar, Prior of Pluscarden and David Dunbar dean of Moray. Even so, George Buchanan, who ended an eventful life as James VI's tutor, considered it the 'most beautiful of all [cathedrals] that has been erected in Scotland'. This did not prevent the roofs being stripped of their lead in 1567 during Moray's regency to provide money for the soldiers and the rest of the building gradually fell into ruin, since the presbyterians needed them neither as cathedral nor as parish church.[5] Remains which date back as far as the 12th century, like Dundrennan, are rare.

This, however, is the very end of the story, and I would like to go back to the beginning and remind you that for the first five hundred years of our millennium, the monastic system in Scotland was basically Celtic, and quite a different thing from the later system. One can say this, at least, with some confidence, without getting embroiled in the longstanding debates about when Christianity first came to Scotland, what was the role of Ninian, or as it is now fashionable to correct the name, Niniau,[6] whether Candida Casa or Whithorn, was or was not a monastery and what was the role of later missionaries such as Kentigern, St. Palladius and St. Serf, and how far St. Columba got in converting the Northern Picts.[7]

What the archaelogists have been able to show us is the physical remains

---

[4] J.S. Richardson, *The Abbey of Melrose, Roxburghshire*, (Edinburgh 1938).

[5] J.S. Richardson, *The Cathedral Kirk of Moray*, (Edinburgh, 1934).

[6] W. Douglas Simpson, *The Celtic Church in Scotland, a study of its penetration line and art relationships*, (Aberdeen, 1935), devotes much time to attempting to justify the role of Ninian and his successors in troubled, uncertain and poorly documented times.

[7] For the traditional views of these things see, George Grub, *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland, from the introduction of Christianity to the Present Time*, (Edinburgh, 1861); or Thomas McLaughlan, *The Early Scottish Church from the First to the Twelfth Century*, (Edinburgh, 1865). These presentations, coloured as they are by presbyterian influences, the desire to show that the Celtic monasteries were free of the "evils" attaching to the continental monasticism, and national pride have been modified, sometimes severely, by more recent writers but they are a necessary basis for understanding the later arguments.

of many small early religious settlements, virtually unrecorded in documentary material, and very different in their lay-out to the later monasteries with which we are familiar. Some of them are simple burial grounds, surrounded by a circular ramp which also protects a small square stone church and a separate circular cell. Even these are probably not the earliest settlements for the foundations of the stone church sometimes overlie the traces of a wooden framework and a clay or wattle and daub building. Settlements of this type can be found in a range of sizes with no obvious discontinuity to distinguish them. There may be two, or more of the small round cells, and more than one of the larger square stone buildings. At the other end of the scale are the remains of the very large and well-known establishments like Iona itself, where the number of cells are infinitely multiplied as are the other buildings, and where the ramp protects internal divisions which probably relate to the farming and gardening activities which provided physical support to the settlement.[8] That they are now to be found in outlying and isolated places should not influence our thinking about them too much. The fragmentary remains of such settlements in what are now highly populous areas would in all probability have been long ago destroyed.

What went on in such settlements, then, what was the nature of church organisation in the area we now call Scotland? It used to be suggested that that organisation was primarily monastic and that bishops existed within the monastic structure to fulfil certain necessary religious functions but not the organisational function that we now associate with diocese and cathedral. This is now seen as an overly simple view. The Christian organisation of the church in this period was not the one familiar to us today in which parishes are smallish territorial units attached to a baptismal church served by a rector or vicar and perhaps a curate or two. Such a system did not develop in Scotland until the 12th century. In the early period a **parochia** was an area within which a bishop's authority was recognised and the clergy that served it generally lived in the bishop's household and were part of the bishop's **familia.** Such a household centred around a church, which might indifferently be called a **minster** or a **monasterium** and from this flow endless confusions.[9]

The question, therefore, remains, what went on in these religious settlements? What, at its most basic, is the def inition of a monastery? The idea is not particular to Christianity many of the great world religions have such institutions. Should we define simply as a group of people living together under an agreed set of rules for the purpose of worshipping God?

To see what that meant for the Celtic monastery we do have to go back

---

[8] C. Thomas, *Celtic Britain*, (London, 1986) Chapters 5, 7.

[9] I.B. Cowan, 'The development of the parochial system in Medieval Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review*, pp. 43-4; also, I.B. Cowan, 'The Parishes of Medieval Scotland', *Scottish Record Society*, (1967).

to the lives of the Celtic saints, and the other early written documentation about them, reading these works, not so much for the accuracy of their detail in relation to the particular subject but for the way the authors thought about what we can loosely term the ideal of their lives. It is clear from the early lives that many of the early Celtic monasteries were more like agglomerates of hermits than anything else. The monks were not collected into ordained communities and services grew naturally from proximity of men who were rarely clerical but who found themselves called to the **opus Dei.** There might be a hard core of rules but the individual houses were able to respond to a variety of needs as and when they arose. There may have been a vow of virginity, but this was not necessarily fundamental. Monks who sought greater solitude might retire, as did St. Cuthbert at the end of his life, to a **desertum,** a solitary hermit's cell.[10]

As and when the service of God seemed to demand it, then, the monks, at the order of their abbot, engaged in schoolmastering, in the work of the scriptoria, in the work of preaching to the community at large, in tending the sick, in entertaining visitors. Unlike the more inward looking Continental houses, these Celtic houses saw themselves as missionaries to the world around them. To support their many and varied activities, the monks, it is clear from excavations, ground corn in querns, kept sheep, goats and cattle, went fishing, smelted iron and carved, certainly in stone and probably also in wood.

All of this can be seen on the ground at Iona and in the acts attributed to Columba in the life of Adomnan. The enclosure around the monastery, the remains of the church, abbot's house, cells for monks, refectory and kitchen (where Columba is once depicted as sitting by the fire), smithy, carpenters shop, barn, stable, granary, kiln, all have been identified beside the later medieval monastery. The number of monks is always given in the hundreds. Though this may be exaggerated, it was evidently viewed as possible, and many of them may not have been permanently resident. The abbot is shown as having absolute and arbitrary power. He could summons his monks at will, even in the middle of the night; institute festivals or fasts; send monks to the ends of the earth, or to labour in rough weather. Disobedience was severely punished. Columba is said to have refused to have cows on Iona, because 'while there is a cow, there will be a woman and where there is a woman there will be trouble'.[11] Life in the house was dominated by the round of monastic offices, matins, Lauds, prime, tierce, sext, none, Vespers, and Compline.

The depredations of the Vikings and other disturbances in the late 8th and 9th centuries resulted in many of the Celtic monastic sites being abandoned, at least for a time, and the period between 900 and 1070 is one in which the history of Scottish monasticism is particularly obscure. There were a few communities of clergy at places like Iona, St. Andrews, Scone, Abernethy, Loch Leven, Monifieth, Monymusk, Muthill, Brechin, Dunkeld

10 E.S. Towill, *People and Places in the Story of the Scottish Church*, (Edinburgh, 1976) p.26.
11 Quoted in J. Bulloch, *The Life of the Celtic Church*, (Edinburgh, 1963), p.178.

and Dunblane. These are the communities sometimes all later lumped together as Culdees (possibly from a corruption of the Latin Caeli Dei). Whether they had a rule and whether they were true descendants of the Celtic monks is contentious as is the attitude towards them of Queen Margaret and other representatives of the reforming European clergy when they arrived in remote Scotland.

Some of the houses were stigmatised as no true monks and European trained clergy were put in to rule them and bring them into line with the rest of the church. The practices of these houses were regarded as unacceptable to the concept of monasticism as it was then defined. They were permitted to marry and they owned property (in some sense of that word; possibly only personal property). It was also thought that they took no monastic vows, but this may be a tautological statement given that their practices did not conform to the definition of monastic. It may be, however, that from our perspective, we should regard them as monastic, within a broader definition of monasticism as fundamentally relating to a communal life of prayer and worship and service of God. What is clear is that little practical difference was seen between minsters of clerks and those of ascetics. No accounts of their lives or ideals survive to help us appreciate their concept of monastic life and service of God. Not all writers, however, see the Culdees as necessarily comprising all these communities. Some, like G.W.S. Barrow, see the Culdees as a group who were distinct from the generality of these houses, descended from those who had sought to reform the church in the 9th century, perhaps still an elite who did follow a rule and who were permitted to survive until they were gradually assimilated or replaced by monks of the newer orders. There are some documents which relate to the Culdees, although the so-called rule of Mael Ruain is of doubtful origin. If it can be trusted, then the Culdees lived according to simple discipline. Loss of temper was punished by caning and fasting, fines were imposed for accidents, life was regulated according to prayer, labour and reading; confession and penance were heavily stressed. The monks might also expect to be sent out to act as priest for a congregation and to teach, recruiting boys to learn to read so that religion might not die out. We may perhaps choose to believe that they kept the Christian faith alive in times of great difficulty.[12]   Certainly Queen Margaret and her husband Malcolm III (Canmore) bestowed benefactions on one or two Culdee houses.[13] Yet others have suggested on archaelogical grounds that the Culdees may have been influenced by more Anglo-Saxon reforms than by Irish.[14]

Whatever the truth, by the 11th century they were more like communities of seculars, often surviving near the centre of the bishop's see. Their function in the community was not that of the cloistered monk and it is probably

[12] *Ibid.* pp. 183-5.
[13] G.W.S. Barrow, 'Scottish rulers and the Religious Orders', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser. (3) (1953) pp 77-8; Easson, *op. cit.* pp.2-3.
[14] *Introduction to Monastic Britain, Ordnance survey map* , (1978), p.11.

significant that when the sites were taken over by a new order, it was often by that of the black canons, the Augustinians, who have been described by James Wilson as a 'brotherhood, consisting mainly of priests, with a definite constitution specially drawn up for missionary work, or rather perhaps a college for the training of clergy for pastoral duties'.[15]   Such an ambience would have made the transition from Culdee to Austin canonry comparatively painless.

The Scottish monarch who brought European monasticism to Scotland was David I, inspired by his mother St. Margaret, the Saxon princess. David founded houses on a scale unequalled at any other time. His foundations include Melrose, Dundrennan, Newbattle and Kinloss (all Cistercian), Holyrood, Jedburgh and Cambuskenneth (Austin canons), Urquhart and May (Benedictine), Lesmahagow (Tiron) and he may have also introduced the military orders.[16]   He did all this, at a time when the changes had only just become established on the Continent, so that Scotland, though physically distant, was brought very rapidly, perhaps forcibly and against its inhabitants' wishes, into the mainstream of European intellectual and religious life.[17]

David I was also engaged in reorganising the whole ecclesiastical structure, in accordance which feudal notions, and in many cases he gave the new monastic houses responsibility for areas of land where local churches were needed, and where the house was expected to build a church, or for the existing churches, soon to be parish churches, from which the care of the souls of the local community was now to be exercised.

As a result of this, the monasteries, throughout the middle ages had the patronage of a disproportionate number of the 1100 odd local parishes and considerable influence over the daily religious life of Scotland. Over 85% of the parishes of medieval Scotland were served by vicars, while their ordinary revenues had been from the start collected by monasteries or bishoprics.[18] The way this came about was dictated by circumstances, probably beyond anyone's control, but the effect it had on the medieval development of Scotland was incalculable. The native clergy had not been visibly pleased at being required to adapt their established ways to the new ideas of the Gregorian reform, and were actively hostile to foreigners in any case, so that they reluctantly, if indeed really at all, assisted in the monarchical restructuring.[19]

The monarchs, thereafter, were founders of further monasteries for over two centuries, and they brought most of the orders which flourished in Europe to

---

15 J. Wilson, 'Foundation of the Austin Priories of Nestell and Scone' *Scottish Historical Review*, VII, (1910,) p.141.

16 *Ibid.* pp. 5-6.

17 Barrow, *loc. cit.* p.99.

18 See Cowan, 'Parochial System' pp.50-1.

19 Barrow, *loc. cit..* pp.83-8.

Scotland. The monarchial model seems to have inspired some of the great magnates, particularly the newer Anglo-Norman magnates, to follow the fashion in other areas, particularly where they were virtual rulers. Scotland thus acquired both the orders which were primarily cloistered, like the Benedictines, Cluniacs and Cistercians and the orders of Canons, primarily the Austin Canons, whose role was to be much more out in the community, themselves, for instance, serving the churches which were impropriated to them. There were also the military orders like the Templars and the Hospitallers whose primary duties were outside of Scotland, defending Christendom from the infidels.

These houses gradually overlaid the earlier ones. Melrose was established where a Celtic house had once been and where a Celtic church at least, still remained. At St. Andrews, once an Augustinian priory had been established in 1144, the Pope transferred the right to elect the bishops to the canons from the Culdees who had a separate physical site which was not assimilated to the new monastery but remained separate until in 1250 when a secular collegiate community was established there instead.[20] Fate might determine the moment of change. At Inchcolm in the 1100's, there was a solitary hermit who legend has it, entertained Alexander I and his followers when they were stranded there in a storm (shades of Prospero intrude). As a result, the foundation there of a priory for Austin canons (an odd choice of order for so solitary a site) which was raised to abbatial status a hundred years later is attributed to Alexander's gratitude (but the hermit's views are not recorded).[21] As is so often the case, however, there are doubts about both date and founder.[22]

The religious orders, it must be recognised, were in part one of the means the monarchs had for extending their control over the countryside. Such monasteries in Scotland were intimately connected with the royal house. At Dunfermline, for example, where there was an important royal palace, a Benedictine house was early erected on a Culdee foundation, and became very wealthy, and much patronised by the monarchs, eight of whom were also buried there.[23] On the borders, the significance of control over the monasteries was acknowledged by Edward I who, in 1296 in an incursion over the border, took the time to establish a pro-English abbot at Jedburgh. On another occasion abbot Kennock allegedly 'kept the peace between England and Scotland for ten years by unceasing prayer'.[24] Even when prayers were non efficacious, the monastery's local power and influence could tip the balance. On the whole, therefore, it is surprising how few prominent figures exist

---

20 Easson, *op. cit.* p.15.
21 Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain*, London, 1979, p.263.
22 Easson, *op. cit.* p.76.
23 Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.210.
24 *Ibid.* p.267.

amongst the abbots. There are hardly any whose activities and life are well known to us. Here and there there are lists of names of abbots, but little more. Where we know something of them, it is often because they have become involved in some struggle either with the monarch, the English invaders or their own order.

The establishment of European or Roman monasteries meant that the houses looked not only to Scotland, but also to the institutions of their own orders elsewhere in Europe. They were liable to be visited and disciplined by their own chapters. This can beclearly seen in the case of the Cistercians, where the central houses seem to have been continually concerned about the standards and practices of the outlying Celtic areas whose abbots or priors could often claim to be unable to attend the general chapters of the order because of distance, sickness and war. The central chapters sent various missions to investigate and reform, mostly with little or no success. Local vicariates for the different orders were also established, or local chapters of the orders, but on the whole they were not effective, because the numbers of houses in any one order were too small. The records of all these varying institutions have been only imperfectly preserved, so that we gain only intermittent and probably biased light on the internal life of the houses.

The structures of the buildings erected by the monks of the new orders that were established in Scotland from the time of King David I, however, and the excavations that have taken place, do show something of their function and nature and thus of the life style of the monk. If you look at the floor plans of any of the abbeys from this period you will find an overall similarity. There are minor but significant differences between the orders but the general layout is common and reflects a pattern common to houses throughout Europe. Indeed, some orders laid down the monastic structure in their rule. All the principal buildings lay around a main quadrangle or cloister usually to the south of the church itself, (Melrose is exceptional having a cloister on the north side). The east-west side was usually taken up by the church, the central focus of the life of the monastery. Alongside it would be the chapter house where the monks congregated to decide the issue of morals, practice and management. Then came the main living rooms, the warming house (much needed in the cold northern climate), the parlours, the frater, the dorter, workrooms and so on. Beyond the main cloistered quadrangle there might be another, lesser courtyard around which would be buildings such as the guesthouse and further workshops. Around the whole would be a precinct wall, cutting the house off from the world. That of St. Andrew's rebuilt in the early 16th century by prior John Hepburn is a particularly fine example of such a structure. It encloses nearly thirty acres, is almost a mile long and is guarded by towers at regular intervals.[25] Within the precinct, however, would generally be the workaday buildings which helped maintain the

---

[25] *Ibid.* p. 335.

monastic lifestyle. There might be a mill, there would be a brewery, barns and byres for cattle, sheep and pigs, barns for storage and workshops such as forges, tanneries and carpenters shops. Some of the orders, particularly Tiron, prided themselves on their skilled craftsmen.

The house was as far as possible a fully self-contained entity still. Often there would be a hospital attached to the house, even if of separate foundation, for lepers, the poor, the sick, or travellers. Some hospitals could be almshouses for bedesmen or bedeswomen. Hospitals, however, were not necessarily attached to religious houses and had their own endowments. These activities were often supplemented by activities which at first sight have little to do with the core of monastic life, prayer. The religious were often also quite large scale and innovative farmers. The Cistercians in particular had a well-deserved reputation for pastoral farming. The monks might also engage in such practices as trading in their own wool and might own the ships in which this international trade was carried on. The industries were in many orders primarily the responsibility of lay-brothers under the direction of a professed monk.[26] It may be that as the numbers of lay-brothers dwindled after the Black Death, so did the practice of direct farming: the monks to retain their own role, preferring to lease or feu their lands for a small but certain income and reduced responsibilities. Not that the great abbey lacked responsibilities. They were often the recipient of royal charters of regality, which gave them extensive jurisdiction in both civil and criminial matters. In this way, a man who became abbot of Crossraguel after the 1404 charter became almost sovereign in Carrick.[27]

The monasteries, however, were by the 14th century very wealthy entities. In Scotland, which was on the whole a poor country, the monastic wealth represented a large proportion of the wealth of the country. Donaldson has estimated that the church's revenues amounted to £400,000 yearly, four times that of the monarchy itself.[28] No wonder, then, that the abbeys found themselves subject to much secular pressure. The lay lords were not unwilling to control the monasteries and what that control could be may be seen in the well-known battle of Arbroath in 1466 when six hundred men were said to have died as Alexander Lindsay and James Ogilvie struggled to possess the office of bailie of the abbey's regality.[29]

The history of the monastic orders in Scotland was constantly changing. Nothing was set in concrete. This was a growing trend in the 15th century. Society seemed to feel a need for institutions which were more closely associated with the outside world and numerous houses of this sort were established as well as institutions like hospitals whose object was practical.

[26] For an example, see J.S. Richardson, *The Abbey of Dundrennan*, (Edinburgh, 1934), p.4.
[27] Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.195.
[28] G. Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation*, (Cambridge, 1960), pp-37-43.
[29] Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.141.

Alongside the houses of monks were also, from the early 14th century, houses of friars (the preaching orders) and from the late 14th century there begin to be foundations of secular canons, sometimes on the sites of religious houses which had withered or been suppressed. The first was the nunnery at Lincluden, which in 1389 was dissolved and its site re-erected into a college of secular canons. Such foundations continued into the 1540's and the buildings of such foundations often survived the reformation and became either parish churches or colleges in the more recent sense of university colleges.

The 14th and 15th centuries was also a period when the abbots, not only in Scotland but also all over Europe, became more divorced from their communities. The abbot had always had a degree of separateness, imposed upon him by his mediating role. From fairly early days, the abbot had usually had his own house in which he conducted business for his community, for the monarch and for the outside community, and his own table, at which he entertained distinguished visitors and travellers. Nevertheless, in the early days, the abbot participated on a daily basis in the services, the chapter and other routine aspects of community life. It was all too easy, however, for a busy man to leave these more and more to the prior, and to concern himself less and less with daily activities. Effectively, the abbot ceased to be a member of the community and the prior took his former role. This was possibly just as well, for disputes over provision to the abbacy could last for years.

Such a change was hastened when for political and financial reasons, the king took to appointing not abbots proper, but commendator abbots who often already had an ecclesiastical office and whose role in the monastery was simply to oversee its financial affairs and, in practice, to rake off a good deal of monastic revenue for himself. In part this was the result of growing tensions between the pope and the monarch over the right to appoint to such offices. The Scottish parliament in 1526, apropos of interference by Henry VIII which had caused the pope to reject the governor, Albany's presentation to Melrose and the bishopric of Moray claimed that "quhen prelacyis sic as bisheprykis or abbacys hapnis to vaik the nominacious thairof pertens to our soverane lord and the provision of the sammys to our haly fader the palp".[30] This did not prevent the pope pressing his rights to their limits encouraged by ardent benefice seekers. Controversies could rage for decades particularly where the monks also claimed the right to elect and the father abbot of the order also had rights of confirmation. A dispute at Melrose between David Brown nominated by the king and Bernard Bell, elected by the monks, lasted from 1486 to 1510 and was only solved by translation of Bell's successor Turnbull to the headship of Coupar Angus and a pension to Brown, the abbacy being given to Robert Beaton, abbot of Glenluce. Yet further complications can be seen in a similar dispute at Glenluce itself, when the pope refused to provide David Hamilton,

---

[30] Quoted in I.B. Cowan, 'Patronage, provision and Reservation, Pre-reformation Appointments to Scottish Benefices', in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland; essays in honour of Gordon Donaldson,* (eds). I.B. Cowan and D. Shaw.(Edinburgh, 1983), p. 76.

bishop of Lismore as commendator, but nominated an Italian cardinal instead. The monks elected and the father abbot of the Cistercian order confirmed, Alexander Cunningham, a cousin of the local potentate, the earl of Glencairn. The Italian cardinal was then persuaded to resign in favour of Cunningham, but this did not prevent Cunningham being imprisoned at the kings command. In June, 1516 he admitted defeat and resigned, but the litigation continued.[31]

The position by the 1520's was that commendator abbots, no longer had to be clerics at all. This development did not necessarily reflect on the conduct of the religious life in the community itself, however. Despite the problems, the monastic orders seem to have striven to maintain a life and work appropriate to them and to their position as groups slightly removed from the world. As Donaldson points out, there is little evidence that the monks were dissolute in character.[32] They acknowledged, also, it seems to me, a role vis-a-vis society. It was in the monasteries that the chronicles of events were maintained; Walter Bower, Abbot of Inchcolm, for instance, continued Fordun's Chronicle.[33] They also supported young scholars, even where they did not run schools. The Commendator of Inchmahome, Robert Erskine, for example, is said to have helped George Buchanan in his early education.[34] We know, however, all too little about what went on within those walls even when the happenings must have been dramatic. What is the history behind the effigy of an abbot preserved at Dundrennan, which shows him right hand on heart, and pierced by a dagger in the breast, with another partly clothed figure at his feet, a dagger in the abdomen?[35] There seems no certain explanation although we know far more of Dundrennan's history than we do of the history of Glenluce.

By the 16th century, enthusiasm for the religious orders in Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe, had waned. Sir David Lindsay's *Aine Satire of the Three Estaitys* makes play with the failures and complacency of the religious, but it did not need this to put them at risk. The disappearance of the monasteries in Scotland, however, had a much more complicated and protracted end than the dissolution in England or the supression of houses elsewhere on the continent. Whatever the underground support for reformation was, the movement did not become public until the very end of Mary of Guise's regency. Lacking backing from either Mary or her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, the reforming body in its convocation and other sessions might fulminate against monasteries and catholicism but had itself little legitimate power to overthrow them. Mary seems to have used the uncertain position to appropriate all rights of appointments to benefices which the

---

[31] *Ibid.* pp.78-9.
[32] G. Donaldson, *Scotland, Church and Nation through Sixteen Centuries*, (London, 1960), p.36.
[33] Butler and Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.263.
[34] M.E.B. Simpson, *History in The Priory of Inchmahome* , (Edinburgh, 1936), p.13.
[35] Butler and Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.206-7.

monasteries had had under their control. Mary thus appointed ministers to many parish churches who, if they did not confirm to the reformed church, drew their revenues and did much as they pleased about providing services of any kind. Mary also continued to appoint commendators or, as they were increasingly called *iconymus* or *oeconomus* : manager. Some of them also obtained provision from Rome.[36]

This was not of course to the liking of some people. Sometimes local lords or others took matters into their own hands and went out and threw down the houses, destroying buildings and driving out the religious. Elsewhere, however, they found local protection and survived a remarkably long time. The presbyterians appear to have been able to enforce the rule that no more novices be admitted but were not empowered to take over property and convert it to other uses. For this reason, some monasteries survived until in the late 16th or early 17th centuries, their lands were specially erected into holdings for those who as commendator abbots had often had the usufruct for fifty years or more anyway. Hospitals therefore often survived. Seen as useful activities, they frequently survived the reformation with their endowments even if they were originally attached to a religious house.[37]

The role of commendator abbot has on the whole had a bad press from historians. The facts are perhaps less damning. Abbots, as we have seen, were often by the end of the middle ages fairly remote figures from their houses, more concerned with matters of state and the running of estates. The lay commendator could be quite as devoted to religion as any bishop. Quinton Kennedy, one of the last commendator abbots of Crossraguel abbey, for example, was an ardent defender of the old religion, and held a disputation with John Knox on Maybole Green which lasted for three days.[38] Certainly, the last commendator of Sweetheart abbey must have helped keep the old religion alive in the south west of Scotland for fifty years or more. Protected by the Maxwells, to whom the abbey had feued its land in 1544 and whom the monks had subsequently made heritable bailie, and also by Lord Herries, warden of the West Marches and general justicar of the district, who supported a number of other houses in the area such as Dundrennan as well,[39] the buildings, and presumably their surviving inhabitants, were secure from the Lords of the Congregation. Maxwell refused to obey an order to destroy the buildings because they were the place "Quhair he was maist part brocht up in his youth".[40] The commendator Gilbert Broun had been granted the abbacy by Mary Queen of Scots in 1565 as "sumtyme professit bruthir of the abbacy"

---

36 J. Kirk, 'The Exercise of Eclesiastical Patronage by the Crown 1560-1572', in Cowan and Shaw (eds) *op. cit.* p. 96.

37 Easson, *op. cit.* pp.134-166.

38 Butler and Given-Wilson, *op. cit.* p.195.

39 Richardson, *Dundrennan*.

40 *Ibid.*

and was normally therefore simply described as abbot.[41] Because of the local protection, he was able to remain until by the Annexation Act of 1587 the abbey and its lands were formally vested in the king. He went, briefly, to Paris but in 1589 was back, debating with John Knox's brother-in-law John Welche. In 1594 the kirk assembly was demanding his arrest as a "perverting papist ... quho evir since the reformation of religion had conteinit in ignorance ... allmost the haill south-west partis of Scotland".[42] Nevertheless he seems to have returned to Sweetheart. In 1603 an attempt to arrest him was frustrated by "a convocation of a great number of rude and ignorant people armed with stones, muskets, and hagbuts, in a tumultuous and unseamlie manner". When he was finally arrested in 1608 he was allowed by the Privy Council to stay at Sweetheart under surety. In 1609 the Archbishop of Glasgow broke his lodging door down and removed Popish books, and the paraphernalia of catholic religious services which were publicly burned at Dumfries.

This may mark the end of monasticism in Scotland at this time. What is hard to find out is whether Broun was alone at this time in his monastery, or whether one or two monks survived alongside him. Certainly the monks survived in some houses and for some time. In 1556 there were still a sub-prior and three other monks surviving at Melrose who were confident enough to complain that the commendator there had refused to admit new brethren to keep up the number of sixteen monks who should be there for service, "naming one George Weir, whom they desired".[43] This whole document implies that there were at the time a number of religious still practising their rule and expecting to continue. It also suggests that there were also would-be novices, but that this was being discouraged. The monks at Melrose seem to have numbered twenty eight in the early 16th century, twenty two in 1539, twelve in the mid 1550's and still ten in the mid 1560's, two of whom are new names. The inability to take novices saw the numbers dwindle away to nothing and the last monk at Melrose embraced the reformed faith. The position at other houses seems comparable. Where the commendator abbot signed deeds concerning the monastic property, he was required to have the signature of the monks as well, and one can thus track the slow attrition which brought monastic life in Scotland at this time to an end. The monks in many places persevered a long time. At Glenluce there were still an abbot, prior, sub-prior and thirteen monks in 1560 and five monks remained in 1572.[44]

While this may have been the end of monastic life in Scotland, one can argue that it was not the end of Scottish monastic life. Over in Germany, in Franconia, at Wurzburg and Ratisbon, two Scottish houses were regained, or, as their most recent historian plausibly argues, acquired on the inaccurate

---

[41] Quoted in J. Kirk, *loc cit.* p.96.
[42] E.S. Towill, *People and Places in the story of the Scottish Church*, (Edinburgh, 1976), p.92.
[43] Richardson, *Melrose*, p.40.
[44] Easson, *op. cit.* p.64

premise that the term Scoti meant Scottish, and not, Irish.[45] John Lesley, erstwhile Bishop of Ross and Ninian Winzet, the most distinguished Scottish apologist of the catholic church in the latter 16th century, persuaded Pope Gregory XIII to put these houses into Scottish hands and envisaged them as contributing towards the springboard from which the counter-reformation in Scotland could take off. It took some years to prise them from the hands of the Germans who held them but by 1595 one could say that the spirit of Scottish Benedictine monasticism was preserved overseas. Unfortunately, although they made their contribution to missionary work, the abbeys had their ups and downs. Their missionary cause did not prosper and by the 18th century the abbots had to acknowledge that they could serve only as a home for such catholic Scots as sought a monastic life with their fellows abroad. They were secularised in 1800 along with most such institutions in Germany. Scottish monastic life vanished for some years, before restoration in the founding of some new houses in Scotland in the 19th century under the more tolerant emancipation rules.

Sybil M. Jack
University of Sydney

---

[45] M. Dilworth, *The Scots in Franconia: A century of Monastic Life*, (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 7-11.