

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH BRITAIN¹

This lecture was originally conceived as Early Christianity in Scotland, but that is, of course, a misnomer, in that there was no country called Scotland at the time of which I am speaking, the 6th to 8th centuries. Better to say North Britain, the area north of the Humber river, the southern boundary of the kingdom of Northumbria, recently formed by the union of two provinces, Deira and Bernicia. Some of the inhabitants of this northern area, those in Dal Riata, were certainly called Scots (or Scoti), but they had come from north Ireland. In our sources, Scotia signified Ireland, and the Scots were the Irish. In the east of modern Scotland there were Picts, in Northumbria there were Angles, in Strathclyde Britons. In this area, and at this time, there flourished a Scottish-Irish form of Christianity, Celtic Christianity, which in the 7th and 8th centuries was swallowed by a Christianity introduced in the south by Rome, Catholic Christianity.²

I am an historian, happiest when working with literary sources. In this case, that largely means Saints' lives, and the church history of one great writer, Bede. His *History of the English Church and People* proceeds from the first visit to Britain by Julius Caesar, to Bede's own time in the early 8th century, but Bede is concerned mainly with the kingdom of Northumbria, where he lived all his life, most of it in the new monastery at Jarrow. His *History* is undoubtedly the fullest and most easily accessible account of Christianity in north Britain.³

Bede is quite clear about the introduction of Christianity into what is now Scotland. In a short chapter (3.4) he reports that Ninian, a late fourth century Romano-British bishop who had studied in Rome, converted the southern Picts, and that the Irish Columba converted the northern Picts in the sixth century. Unfortunately, scholars are increasingly sceptical about both claims.⁴

Consider Ninian. Bede tells us he established a stone church called the White House (*casa candida*) at what archaeologists have identified as

¹ This paper was delivered as the Geoffrey Ferrow Memorial Lecture to the Sydney Society for Scottish History in February, 1994.

² For discussion of the Celtic church in general see, for example, N.K. Chadwick, *The Age of Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, (1961), and L. Bieler, 'Ireland's contribution to the culture of Northumbria', in *Famulus Christi*, (ed) G. Bonner (1976) pp. 210-228.

³ The most easily accessible translation of Bede is the Penguin edition. For a commentary see J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary on Bede*, (1988).

⁴ K. Hughes, *Early Christianity in Pictland*, (1970); A.C. Thomas, 'The evidence from north Britain', in *Christianity in Britain, 300-700*, (eds) M.W. Barley and R.P.C. Hanson, (1968) pp. 93-122; A.P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men A.D. 80-1000*, (1984) ch. 3; A.C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500*, (1981) ch. 11.

Whithorn, in Wigtownshire.⁵ There he set up a monastic community based on the pattern of and dedicated to Martin of Tours, whom he met in Gaul, and from there he converted the southern Picts. Bede says he is reporting what is believed, that is tradition, and one of his informants was probably his contemporary, the first Anglo-Saxon bishop, Pecthelm. Scholars have queried the link with Martin and Rome, and particularly the mission to the Picts.

There is, however, one piece of evidence that suggests at least some southern Picts *had* been converted as early as this; a letter from Patrick to Coroticus, king of Strathclyde, who had killed or enslaved some Christians during a raid into Ireland. Patrick refers to his soldiers as allies of the Scots and apostate Picts, which can only mean that the Picts had been Christian, but had lapsed.⁶ So if Ninian *did* evangelise, his conversions were obviously not lasting.

There is more evidence for the British influence and the continuation of Christianity in this Northern area in the rather shadowy shape of Kentigern, the son of a 6th century Lothian princess, who is probably better known today as St. Mungo, patron saint of Glasgow. Mungo means dear man, dearly beloved, the name he was called by his patron, St. Servanus or St. Serf (equally shadowy). I say shadowy, for our earliest extant evidence for Kentigern is a 12th century *Life* by a Furness monk, Jocelyn, (or Joceline) and, like most hagiographies, its purpose is to demonstrate the holiness of its subject, so is more concerned with miracles than biographical details.⁷ There is no reason to doubt Kentigern's existence, however, nor his role as bishop in the kingdom of Strathclyde, based on Glasgow, though you may be surprised at his longevity. He died, Jocelyn tells us, aged 185. Like Ninian, he is credited with converting the Picts (who obviously needed a lot of converting), as well as sending missionaries to the Orkneys, Norway and Iceland.

According to tradition, Kentigern in later life met Columba, and here we have the much more famous saint from whom Christianity undoubtedly spread throughout north Britain. Columba, related to the O'Neill kings of Dal Riata in northern Ireland, came in 563 with his disciples to settle on the little island of Iona in the British part of Dal Riata. The number of arrivals varies — from 12 disciples (an appropriate number) to 140 (40 priests, 20 bishops, 30 deacons and 50 youths — very unlikely). The reasons for Columba's departure from Ireland are disputed, involving excommunication for copying a manuscript, a battle and then departure, either as a penance or voluntarily,

⁵ For a discussion, see J. Wooding, 'St. Ninian at Whithorn', *Journal of Sydney Society for Scottish History*, 1 (1993) pp. 11-17.

⁶ J. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, (1966) Letter, ch. 2, p.356.

⁷ There is a discussion and partial translation of an early anonymous *Life* and that of Jocelyn in A.D. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, vol. 1 (1922) pp. 127-139. See also K.H. Jackson, 'The sources for the *Life of St. Kentigern*', in N.K. Chadwick (ed.), *Studies in the Early British Church*, (1958).

as part of *peregrinatio*, travel, the common Irish desire to get away from a settled community to find an isolated area, preferably an island. In either case, Columba established in Iona a monastic community whose influence and importance was profound. But did he convert the Picts? Our fullest source is not Bede (whose reference to Columba is very brief) but the *Life* written by Adamnan (or Adomnan), ninth abbot of Iona and an older contemporary of Bede.⁸ I have already mentioned the problem of using a saint's life as an historical source. It is particularly acute in this case, for Adamnan wrote on Iona with the encouragement of his monks, to publicise Columba's holiness, and information on Columba and Iona has to be gleaned from the three parts of his work dealing with Columba's prophecies, his miracles and his angelic visitations. In the context of miracles, Adamnan writes of Columba making journeys to Pictland, converting individual Picts, debating with pagan priests, meeting King Brude (V.C.,2.32-35). One of the miracles, incidentally, concerns the Loch Ness monster (2.28.) The first record of Nessie. In all this, however, there is no reference to the king's conversion, only that Brude held Columba in great honour (2.35), and the conversion of any kingdom involved the conversion of the king. The pagan priests were still active when Columba left. By Adamnan's time there were Columban monasteries throughout Pictland (2.47) — their presence saved the country from plague, he said, but they may have been founded by Columba's successors.

We are on much firmer ground with Columba's immediate and personal influence in Dal Riata, for Adamnan tells us he ordained Aidan as king (about 574), at God's command, and then became the protector of the royal family (3.5). This latter story Adamnan quotes from an earlier hagiography.

Columba died in 597, and by one of those historical coincidences almost too good to be true, in the same year Augustine arrived in Kent on a mission from Pope Gregory the Great (of Angels not Angles fame). While Augustine converted the south, it was Paulinus, one of the second wave of Gregorian missionaries, who, according to Bede, went north and after considerable trouble finally baptised the Northumbrian king, Edwin, in the new church dedicated to St. Peter at York (2.9-14).⁹ Christianity did not last long, however. Edwin was killed in battle by the British (Welsh) king Cadwalla, Paulinus fled, the kingdom split into its two provinces and both kings apostatised. They too were killed almost immediately by Cadwalla, who was in turn overthrown by Edwin's nephew Oswald, returning from Dal Riata, where he had been baptised by Ionan monks. His victory is a dramatic moment in Bede, for Oswald set up a cross before the battle, and he and his whole army prayed for success (3.2), a scene reminiscent of Constantine

⁸ A.O. and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, (1991). The inflated number of arrivals comes from the sixteenth century *Irish Life of Columba* by Manus O'Donnell, ch. 198.

⁹ There is a Celtic tradition (not in Bede) that Edwin had earlier been baptised by a Celtic Christian from Rheged in the Solway area. Rival national claims are obviously involved. See Wallace-Hadrill, *Commentary*, p. 65.

before the battle of the Milvian bridge in the early fourth century, where the cross also promised victory. Thereafter, the site became a centre of annual pilgrimage from the nearby Hexham monastery, and the scene of miracles. Adamnan is even more dramatic, for he tells how Columba, angelically bright, appeared to Oswald in a dream, standing in the middle of the camp, his head touching the clouds, covered the whole army with his cloak, and promised Oswald victory as a result of his protection (V.C. 1.1) Adamnan heard this story from his predecessor as abbot, who said he heard Oswald himself report the vision to the abbot at the time.

Whether Columba presided in person over the crucial battle is perhaps open to doubt. What cannot be doubted is that his spirit presided over the reintroduction of Christianity into the reunited kingdom. Oswald, on becoming king in 634, immediately sent to Iona for someone to come to Northumbria. The first monk was not a success. He was, as Bede tells us (3.5), too austere (he complained, on his return, that the Angles were uncivilised, obstinate and barbarous). The second monk was a success. This was Aidan, a man, Bede says, of outstanding gentleness holiness and moderation (3.3). Oswald made him a bishop, and gave him the little island of Lindisfarne, nearly opposite the royal stronghold of Bamburgh, where a monastic community was established. (Still today called Holy Island, on road signposts, bus routes, etc. The ruins are of a later monastery, however, not the Celtic one.) From Lindisfarne, Aidan's influence, and that of his monastic Celtic Christianity, spread throughout the kingdom as waves of Ionan monks set about converting (or reconverting) Northumbria; Oswald acting as Aidan's interpreter. Oswald and Aidan thus replaced Edwin and Paulinus as founders of Northumbrian Christianity. Under Aidan's successor, evangelism among the Mercians and east Saxons was also carried out. For Christians in all these areas, Lindisfarne was much more important than Canterbury, and Iona much more important than Rome.

Unfortunately, Canterbury and Rome differed from Iona and Lindisfarne. There was no question of heresy, both kinds of Christians were orthodox, but there were differences in custom. One concerned the type of tonsure a priest wore (the whole centre of the head shaved, *à la Rome*, or across the front) and, of greater importance, the date of Easter (which had bedevilled Christianity for centuries). These differences, Rome insisted, had to be settled, in Rome's favour. The other difference was in organisation and life style, for Celtic Christianity was essentially monastic, with an abbot in charge of administration and a bishop with purely spiritual duties. This meant a simple ascetic way of life. Roman Christianity also had monks, but the organisation was diocesan, with Sees administered by bishops.

Roman Christianity prevailed in the south. In the north and centre, Celtic Christianity flourished. Bede's treatment of the Celts is very interesting. On the one hand, he is adamant that they were wrong about

Easter. Running through his History is the complaint that they insist on going their own isolated and wrong way, For example, letters from two Popes: Honorius to the Scots (i.e. the Irish) warning them not to imagine that their little community, isolated at the uttermost ends of the earth, had a wisdom exceeding that of all churches ancient and modern throughout the world; and John IV similarly complaining that in the dark cloud of their ignorance they refused to observe the Roman Easter (2.19). Honorius' comment is, of course, the crucial issue. Everyone was out of step but the Scots. Bede was a good Romanist. But he was also a monk, and he greatly admired the simple asceticism of the Celtic monks, which contrasted with the lax worldly attitude of his own time. Bede's attitude is clearly revealed in his description of Aidan, a man whose simple virtues Bede greatly admired, but whose failure to observe Easter at the proper time Bede could not commend (3.17). But perhaps Aidan was misled through ignorance, or by deferring to the customs of his own nation. Bede certainly approved of his beliefs.

The question of the right date came to a head under Oswy, Oswald's brother, who became king of Northumbria in 651. Something had to be done about Easter, Bede tells us, because of the awkward problem of Oswy following the Celtic date, while his queen Eanfled, Edwin's daughter, had a Kentish chaplain and followed the Roman date. While he was celebrating Easter she was still fastin's son Alchfrid (Alfred), and a very ambitious and political priest Wilfrid. (Internal political conflict?) Wilfrid studied at Lindisfarne, but decided the way of life there was, in Bede's words, very imperfect. Off he went to Rome, where he learnt about the right date for Easter from the Pope himself, Boniface.¹⁰ Back in Northumbria, he met Alchfrid, who was greatly impressed — he felt as if he was almost talking to an angel, Eddius tells us. Alchfrid made Wilfrid a priest and gave him the Celtic monastery at Ripon, which he promptly changed to the Roman rite. In 664 (663? revised date) he led the Roman side at a synod held in the monastery at Whitby and presided over by Oswy to settle the question of Easter once and for all. Bede devotes a very long chapter to this famous event (3.25) giving the two opposing arguments, but devoting considerably more space to the Roman side. For the Celtic church, Colman, bishop and abbot of Lindisfarne, spoke of Celtic tradition. and the authority of St. John. For the Romans, Wilfrid produced as witnesses Peter and Paul and the whole of Christendom: 'The only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are these Scots and their partners in obstinacy the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these the two most uttermost islands of the ocean'. The Picts had presumably been finally converted when defeated by Oswy (Bede 3.24). Colman tried to counter with St. John and Columba, but Wilfrid pointed out that Jesus founded his church on Peter, not Columba; and for Oswy that was the clinching argument. Peter held the keys of the kingdom of

¹⁰ *Life of Wilfrid*, by Eddius Stephanus can be found in *Lives of the Saints* (transl. J. Webb), Penguin edition, (1965). See ch. 5.

Heaven, and Oswy did not want to find the gates barred when he died. The king accepted Roman practice. Colman left Lindisfarne, taking with him all the Scots and 30 of the English monks, plus some of Aidan's bones. He was replaced as bishop by a man trained and consecrated by the Scots in south Ireland, who had accepted Roman ways in the 630s. He was presumably chosen as a good compromise — Scots/Irish, but Roman. As abbot of Lindisfarne, Oswy appointed at Colman's request a monk from Melrose, trained by Aidan. The king was obviously no fanatic.

Colman went first to Iona, then to a small island off the west coast of Ireland, where he established a monastery. A dispute arose between the Scots and English monks, and a separate monastery for the English was then set up on the mainland at Mayo. In Bede's time it was still occupied by English monks, but, he says, its constitution was improved (4.4); obviously it had become Roman. Today the ruins are still called Mayo of the Saxons.

Iona still held out after Whitby. According to Bede, abbot Adamnan, Columba's biographer, was persuaded to accept Roman ways when he was sent on a diplomatic mission to Alchfrid in Northumbria, but was unable to impose Rome on his monks. He had better success when he visited northern Ireland, and was able to celebrate Easter on the right day. He died back on Iona the next year, in 704, providentially, according to Bede (5.15) before Easter, which would have been on the wrong day. But we must remember Adamnan wrote his *Life of Columba* on Iona, at the monks' request. His purpose may well have been to demonstrate that Columba was still deservedly held in high esteem. Adamnan's concluding sentences are a ringing tribute to the memory of a saint whose fame had spread throughout Europe even to Rome itself (V.C.3.23).¹¹

In 710 the Pictish king Nechtan IV decided to adopt the Roman Easter and the Roman tonsure for his kingdom, asking the monastery at Jarrow for religious justifications, and asking also for architects so he could build a stone church in the Roman style, which he would dedicate to St. Peter (no mention of Columba). Why he made this decision we are not told: it may have been for political reasons. The abbot of Jarrow, Ceolfrid, replied at great length, and it is generally agreed that Bede drafted the letter, in which Nechtan was addressed as a god-fearing king (5.21). The king received it, we are told, with great joy, and immediately ordered the introduction of Roman rites.

The monks at Iona were finally persuaded to accept the Roman Easter by bishop Egbert, an Angle living in Ireland who had planned to convert the Germans but was diverted to Iona by the dream of a fellow monk (Bede 5.9). Providence therefore sent him to Iona, in 716, and it was Providence, Bede

¹¹ J.Picard, 'The purpose of Adamnan's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia*, 1 (1982) pp. 160-177; M.H. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, (1988) ch. 12.

tells us (5.22) that saw him die on Easter Day, 729, after celebrating the sacrament on the right date. Everyone now followed Rome except for the Britons in Wales, who were, in Bede's words (5.22) obdurate and crippled by their errors, going about with their heads improperly tonsured, and keeping Christ's solemnity without fellowship with the Christian Church.

Since I have been basing this lecture very largely on Bede, there is one more individual I must mention, and that is Cuthbert, the subject of two *Lives* by Bede (one in verse, one in prose) as well as featuring in his *History* (4.27-32). (There is also an earlier anonymous *Life* written at Lindisfarne.) Cuthbert's world was that of Northumbria's Celtic monasteries — Melrose, Ripon (before it became Roman under Wilfrid), Lindisfarne, but he accepted the decision of Whitby to follow Rome. Cuthbert retained the true Celtic ascetic desire for solitude, and even Lindisfarne was not isolated enough, for after a few years there he moved to an even tinier island in the Farne group, (Bede *Life* ch. 17) yearning for solitude. Bede records his great reluctance to leave the little island to become bishop of Lindisfarne (in 685), and after two years as bishop he retired to Farne again, where he died. Cuthbert obviously represented for Bede all that was best in English Christianity (Celtic simplicity and virtue brought into harmony with Roman thinking).¹² It is entirely appropriate that both men are commemorated in the Cathedral at Durham, where Cuthbert's uncorrupted body was laid to rest in the 12th century.

It was Rhett Butler, alias Clarke Gable, who said, as he joined the southern states and Scarlett O'Hara, 'I've always been a sucker for lost causes'. So have I, particularly when those causes are rooted in local tradition (and I find Wilfrid very unlikable, despite his becoming a saint and the subject of a biography). My sympathies are to a large extent with the Celtic church. So, I think, are Bede's, despite Celtic stubbornness over Easter. It is good to know that Celtic saints are still remembered today, and the Celtic holy places still survive, especially the holy islands of Iona and Lindisfarne.

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¹² R.A. Markus, 'Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography', Jarrow Lecture (1975) reprinted in his *From Augustine to Gregory the Great*, (1983).