

Frances Alice Forbes: *The Life of Columba, Apostle to Scotland* (excerpt) Published 1919

“A Bitter Penance”

We have already spoken of the pilgrimage to Rome of St. Finnian of Moville, and of the treasure that he had brought back with him from over the sea—a copy of the Scriptures translated and corrected by the hand of the great St. Jerome himself. Columba, when at Moville, must often have seen and perhaps even have handled the precious volume. In later days, so great was his desire that each of his monasteries should have its copy of the Word of God, that he would seek out and transcribe with his own hand all the most carefully written and most authentic manuscripts to be found in Ireland.

The love of these old books, regarded by the Saints of Ireland as their most precious treasure, amounted almost to a passion with Columba, so that we are hardly surprised to find him journeying to Moville to ask permission from his old master to make a copy of his rare and valuable manuscript. But he was met by an unexpected rebuff; St. Finnian guarded his treasure with a jealous eye, and feared to trust it in any hands but his own. He firmly refused the request of his old pupil, and no entreaties of Columba could move him from his decision. But the determination of Columba was equal to his own, and he resolved to obtain the object of his desire in spite of St. Finnian's prohibition.

He waited until all had gone to rest, and then, armed with parchment and pigments, went softly to the church, where the precious book was kept. Night after night, in spite of weary hand and eye, he laboured at his self-imposed task until the day broke, and men began to stir. To undertake the transcription of the whole book would have been an impossibility, working thus secretly in the night; he therefore confined himself to copying the Psalter. To Columba, poet as he was by nature, the psalms of the "sweet singer of Israel" were particularly clear, and the wording of the new version gave the force and the melody of the original more perfectly than any rendering up till then in use.

The lonely vigils in the church passed quickly, in spite of the weariness that assailed but could not daunt the enthusiastic scribe. One night, one of the scholars of Moville, happening to pass the door of the church, was astonished to see a bright light shining through the crevices of the door. He stooped and looked through the keyhole. Keyholes as well as keys were on a large scale in the sixth century, and he obtained a good view of the interior, and of Columba bending over the reading desk with a pile of parchment before him, copying with skillful hand the treasure of Moville. The whole chancel was shining with a brilliant light, which fell directly across the page on which the writer was at work.

The young man, awestruck at the sight, crept softly away, and warned his master of what was taking place. St. Finnian knew Columba's skill in transcription. He made no move until the Psalter was completed, and his old pupil was preparing to depart. Then he accused his guest of having taken a copy of his book without his permission and against his will, and claimed the work as his rightful property.

This was to touch Columba in a tender spot. His nocturnal labours had cost him many weary vigils, but he had borne the weariness gladly for the sake of the prize—to give up the fruit of so much toil was more than could be expected of him. He flatly refused to yield to Finnian's claim. The old man was determined; Columba was firm; neither would give way. It was agreed in the end to appeal to the King at Tara, and to hold his judgment as final. Diarmaid might be considered as a fit judge in such a matter. The friend and patron of the great monastery of Clonmacnoise, founded by Ciaran in his presence and with his help, the King was looked upon by all the Saints of Ireland as their friend.

Moreover, he was Columba's own cousin, and had treated him on a former occasion with reverence and consideration. Columba himself had no doubt that the judgment would be in his favour, and went readily at Finnian's suggestion to lay the matter before him.

But Diarmaid's position on the throne was more secure than it had been in former days. He may have thought that he had less reason to fear the enmity of the Hy-Nialls of Tir-Connell. He had heard much of the sanctity of Columba, and may have supposed that in spite of his high lineage he would be ready to bear with patience an adverse judgment. He may have been actuated by the old enmity between the two branches of the family; or he may have decided according to his own conscience as he thought right and just. Be that as it may, the judgment came as a thunderclap to Columbcille.

"To every cow," said the King, "belongs its own calf." Since the copy of Columba was the "son-book" of the manuscript of Moville, it belonged by rights to its mother, and therefore to Finnian.

Columba's indignation knew no bounds. The judgment was unfair and unjust, he declared; Diarmaid should bear the penalty. With dashing eyes and burning heart he turned his back on King and courtiers, and strode from the royal presence.

He was now a man with a grievance, who considered that he had been most unjustly treated, but the resentment which was as yet but smouldering in his heart was soon to be fanned into a flame.

It came to pass that Diarmaid made a great feast at Court and invited all the princes and nobles of Erin to attend. Games were held for several days in the green meadows of Tara, that the young athletes might show their skill in wrestling. Now, brawling and quarrelling at these royal games had been strictly forbidden by the King on account of the serious accidents that had happened on former occasions. But the blood of young Ireland was hot and undisciplined and, in a moment of anger, Curnan, the heir of the Prince of Connaught, struck the son of the King's steward and felled him to the ground. The act was altogether unpremeditated, but the blow had struck the lad in a vital spot; when they tried to raise him, they found that he was dead. Young Curnan dared not face the wrath of Diarmaid, and fled for protection to Columba, who was his kinsman.

It was an acknowledged thing that an abbot or the founder of a religious house had the right to give sanctuary even to great criminals, and the claim was universally respected. But Diarmaid was very angry and sent messengers who dragged the boy from the very presence of Columba and put him to death on the spot.

This fresh insult was more than Columbcille could bear. The rights of the Church had been violated in his person. His own people, the Hy-Nialls of the north, should judge between him and Diarmaid, he declared, and set forth on his journey northwards, breathing vengeance as he went. The King himself was not a little apprehensive as to what might be the results of his arbitrary action; he stationed guards on all the roads that led northwards, and even tried to detain the fugitive in prison. But Columbcille successfully evaded the traps that had been set to catch him, and by a lonely path across the mountains went his way to Tir-Connell. As he journeyed he sang a song of confidence in the God in whom he trusted to protect the right.

*I am alone upon the mountain
Do Thou, O God, protect my path.
Then shall I have no fear,
Though six thousand men were against me.
What protection shall guard thee from death?*

*The Son of Mary shall cause thee to prosper.
The King who has made our bodies
He it is in whom I believe.
My Lord is Christ the Son of God,
Christ, the Son of Mary, the great abbot,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

So singing he went speedily and in safety to his own country, where he recounted his wrongs to the men of his own race.

Aedh, Prince of Connaught, the father of the lad who had been so cruelly put to death, was already preparing for vengeance. The chiefs of Tir-Connell joined him, hot in Columba's cause. The men who gathered to avenge the insult made a formidable army, and Diarmaid on his side lost no time in gathering his forces for battle.

The encounter took place at Cuil-dreimhne, between Balbulbin Mountain and the sea, and the fight was long and bloody. Columba, say some of the old writers, was himself present, and prayed with outstretched arms for the victory of his people.

Three thousand of Diarmaid's men fell on the field of battle, while the losses of the Hy-Nialls of the north, such was the efficacy of the prayers of Columbcille, were comparatively slight. The victory was complete, but Diarmaid was not the man to take his defeat meekly.

He appealed to the Church to judge the conduct of Columba. Did it seem right and good, he asked, that a priest and an abbot, the founder of religious houses, and one who had dedicated his life to the service of Christ, should have provoked a bloody war which had been the death of thousands of innocent men? The churchmen looked grave. The case thus stated did not promise well for Columba.

He was the friend of all: the zeal and fervour of his life, the charity and generosity of his heart, were known throughout the length and breadth of Erin. There was but one weak point in that noble nature—the haughty spirit that had come to him with the hot blood of the Hy-Nialls; and certainly he had been sorely tried by circumstances. Yet—the fact was incontestable—his conduct as an abbot and as a priest was open to the gravest censure. He was ordered to appear before an ecclesiastical council, which was summoned to meet at Teilte in the heart of the King's domains to hear the judgment that should be pronounced upon him by the Saints of Erin.

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Many of the holiest men in Ireland were present at the Synod of Teilte. St. Enda of Aran had passed from his life of penance to the glory which is eternal; but St. Brendan of Birr, and probably his namesake the Bishop of Clonfert, with his assistant St. Moinen, Oena of Clonmacnoise, successor of the saintly Ciaran, and St. Kevin of Glendalough, formed part of the Council.

When Columba was seen approaching in the distance, St. Brendan of Birr alone arose and went forward to receive him. The Fathers objected to his action. It was not fitting, they said, that one who was under the grave censure of the Church should be greeted with marks of deference and honour.

"If you saw what I see," replied the holy Brendan, "you would hasten to do likewise. I see Columba, as he climbs the hill, surrounded by a column of light, and angels going before and after him. I bow before the Hand of God which destines him to convert a whole nation to the faith of Christ."

His words made a powerful impression on the assembly, for the wisdom of Brendan was known to all; and there was a deep silence as Columba entered.

After a short pause one of the elders arose and stated the case in words that were brief and simple. Columba, he said, was under the censure of his brethren for having stirred up strife in the King's dominions, which had led to a fierce and bloody battle.

"The King's behaviour was unjust," replied Columba, "and it is hard for a man to bear injustice patiently."

"Truly, as you say," answered the speaker, "it is hard for a man to bear injustice; yet judge yourself if it is more fitting that one who has dedicated his life to the service of Christ should bear injuries patiently, or that he should avenge them at the point of the sword." He went on to speak of the duties of a Christian and of a priest; of the insults and humiliations offered to Jesus Christ, their Master and their model. The words were of one who had himself striven and conquered—of one who had a right to speak. The silence deepened, for the Spirit of God was with him.

Alone in their midst stood Columba, but his head was bowed upon his breast, and the grey eyes that had dashed so stormily at the Court of Tara were dim with tears. The cry that burst from his heart when the old man ceased to speak was the cry of another great penitent—one who in spite of human frailty had deserved to be called a "man after God's own heart."

"Against Thee only have I sinned and done this evil in Thy sight: For I acknowledge my fault, and my sin is ever before me."

The fault had been great, but the sincerity of the repentance was evident to all.

"Go in peace," was the verdict of the Council, "and for every man that fell on the field of Cuil-dreimhne win a soul to the faith of Christ."

Sentence had been given, but Columba was not content. He had grieved that Lord Who from his childhood had been the sole love of his heart, and no penance was great enough to satisfy him. Moreover the fate of the men who had fallen at Cuil-dreimhne was an intolerable burden on his soul. Through his fault they had been hurried—perhaps altogether unprepared—before the judgment-seat of God. The thought that they might be lost for all eternity was a perpetual torture to him, and he went from one to another of the Saints of Erin seeking advice and help.

In due time he went to St. Abban, like himself a monk, and the founder of many religious houses. Men called him the "Peacemaker," such was his power over turbulent and violent men. Not long before, he had gone alone and unarmed to meet one of the fiercest barbarians of the land, the heathen chief of a reigning clan, and the terror of the surrounding country. Such was the influence of Abban that the marauder laid down his arms, and became in course of time not only a Christian, but also a monk of exceptionally holy life.

Columba found St. Abban in the Church of one of his religious foundations, known amongst the people as the "Cell of Tears" on account of the contrition of the penitents who frequented it. He besought the holy abbot to pray for the souls of those who through his fault had met their death, and the thought of whose fate had destroyed his peace. He entreated Abban also to pray to God that He would reveal to him through the angel who spoke to him continually of the things of heaven, whether they were saved or lost.

The humility of the holy abbot would not allow him for a long time to accede to this last request; but in the end, so moved was he by the anguish of Columba, that he fell on his knees and implored of God to give this comfort to a soul in pain. The knowledge that he asked was given him; he returned with great joy to his visitor to tell him that, through the infinite mercy of God, the souls of all who had fallen on that fatal day had been saved. The chief solicitude of Columba was now at rest, but the future was not yet clear before him. How was he to mould his life that the days to come might be an atonement for the fault that was past? He had learnt his own weakness, he must lean more than ever on the Strength that cannot fail, and the desire for a more perfect expiation was strong in his heart. He determined to seek out St. Molaise, his "soul's friend," in the lonely isle of Inishmurry and to ask his counsel.

St. Molaise knew well the character of his penitent. The penance that would satisfy that great heart must be full and complete. To Columba the love of country came next to the love of God; the decision was taken ere the penitent had ceased to speak.

It had been decreed, said he, by the Synod that Columba was to win to the faith of Christ as many men as had perished at the battle of Cuil-dreimhne. Let him do so; but that the atonement might be more perfect let him go forth from his own people and his own land, and never look upon the hills of Erin again.

Columba bowed his head before the sentence. "It shall be done," he answered, and none but God was to know what the doing cost him. It only remained to break the news to his friends and kinsfolk. A wail of sorrow rang through Tir-Connell at the tidings.

It is not surprising that the land of Alba over the sea suggested itself at once to Columba as the place of his exile. The little kingdom of Dalriada on the Argyllshire coast was ruled by one of his own kinsmen, and reports of the condition of the surrounding country had possibly reached his ears. The Christianity introduced by St. Ninian two hundred years before had almost disappeared. The ruling chiefs were completely under the influence of the Druids, and heathenism and idolatry were supreme throughout the land. There his apostolic spirit would be able to find ample scope. We are told by some of the old writers that the thought of a missionary journey to Caledonia had been for years one of his dearest projects. If that were so, the time had now come to put it into execution.

Columba chose the companions who were to share in his great undertaking from amongst the monks of Derry. Two cousins of his own, Baithen, who was to succeed him in after years as abbot of Iona, and his brother Cobthach, were amongst the number. But the disciple who loved him the most was Mochonna, son of the King of Ulster, whom Columba considered too young for an enterprise that involved so many dangers, and to whose entreaties he refused to yield. It was not fitting, said he, that the young monk should leave the country of his birth and the parents to whom he was so dear; but Mochonna would not be gainsaid.

"Thou," he cried, "art the father of my soul, and Holy Church is my mother, and my country is the spot where I can work most fruitfully for Christ."

Then, that it might be impossible for his beloved master to leave him behind, he made a vow before all who were present to quit his native land and to follow Columba to the death. It was in this wise that the determined and devoted Mochonna overcame all opposition and obtained his heart's desire. He was to become one of the most active and zealous of the little band of missionaries, in Alba, where he was venerated for many centuries under the name of St. Machor, as the patron and founder

of the See of Aberdeen.

Thus, with only twelve companions, in the wicker-work "curraghs" covered with oxhide that were the only boats of the Celtic races at the time, the future apostle of Scotland set sail from his native land. A great crowd, gathered from all the surrounding country, stood on the shore, and as the light skiffs sped out into the sea, and the green hill of Derry faded slowly from the eyes of the mariners, the sound of a bitter wailing was borne to them on the breeze. The best beloved of the Saints of Erin had left her, and she mourned for him as one lost to her for ever.