

IRISH SEA INFLUENCE ON THE ENGLISH CHURCH

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'The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its walls on the southern side.'

Robert Browning.

Ecclesiastically speaking, the Irish Sea was like the River Weser. Not only were the dark currents of ecclesiastical lawlessness once thought to haunt its depths, it was also so wide that it washed the walls of the English Church even on the *southern* side. The influence of the Irish Sea on the course of the political history of early Anglo-Saxon England is, of course, generally recognised. Thus it is realised that the Irish, who were still penetrating the western coasts of Britain at the beginning of the seventh century, represented a real

threat to Northumbrian ambitions, and so contributed to Aethelfrith's decision to make his spectacular thrust over the Pennines, resulting in the Battle of Chester in A.D. 616. Similarly in the eighth century, the northern alignment of Offa's Dyke was drawn to include the southern shore of the Dee estuary within the boundaries of Mercia, reflecting the same awareness of the potential dangers of an Irish attack by way of the Mersey or the Dee. In 795 Offa led an expedition into Dyfed, whose strong Irish connections made him fear the possibility of an Irish attack upon Mercia from this quarter. Again, it is suspected that later that intrepid Mercian queen, Aethelflaed, penetrated Brycheiniog, a land connected by archaeology and tradition with Dyfed, and went as far as Llangorse Lake to strike a blow against Irish penetration.

The influence, however, of the Irish Sea on the development and character of the Church in early Anglo-Saxon England, though equally significant, has been less readily recognised. Admittedly, Bishop Lightfoot's judgement that Augustine was the Apostle of Kent, but Aidan was the Apostle of England, is as well known as his view that the Celtic Church was responsible for the advance of Christianity from the mouth of the Humber to the shores of the Firth of Forth. But the tides of the Irish Sea Province now seem to have penetrated well south even of the Humber.

Irish influence on the British Church, well documented for Wales, extended far into areas later settled by the Anglo-Saxons. Whilst the Irish background and contribution of Celtic monasteries like Iona, Lindisfarne, and Whitby are well known, there is good reason for thinking that Irish ecclesiastical influence in early Anglian Northumbria as paralleled as far south as in early Saxon Wessex.

Professor Finberg, like Baring-Gould and Fisher before him, sees Sherborne as a Celtic monastery.¹ To this he adds Shaftesbury, and believes that both foundations survived the Saxon movement westwards.² When, in the second half of the seventh century, Wilfred went to work amongst the South Saxons, he found a small Celtic monastery at Bosham,

near Chichester. Admittedly, it had made little impact upon the surrounding pagan population which Wilfred had to convert to Christianity. A number of Celtic inscriptions have survived at Wareham in Dorset, a county with a high proportion of British place-names. These inscriptions date from the seventh and eighth centuries, and as at Exeter, where the British were allowed to live unmolested under their own laws as late as the tenth century, the British at Wareham lived and worshipped peaceably side by side with the Saxons.³

We have here conditions favouring the survival of the Celtic Church in the face of Anglo-Saxon expansion, and this encouraged Irish saints to visit Wessex, where the Irish monk Mailduib founded a school at Malmesbury c. 635, which, under his pupil Aldhelm, developed into an important monastic centre. The Ogham stone found in a well at Silchester commemorates the route from the west to the continent of some Irish travellers in the early Dark Ages, and the possibility cannot be excluded that they had saintly successors who, like Mailduib, also penetrated far into England, and made a significant contribution towards its conversion to Christianity.

The missionary record of the Celtic Christians in Wales was not conspicuous for its energy and success. Their instinct to look after only their own was strengthened by their fruitless conferences with St. Augustine. Elsewhere this attitude was modified in the Celtic world by the Irish. Thus in 563 St. Columba sailed away from Ireland to become a pilgrim for Christ, and thereby founded Iona, and the Irish ideal of going into exile for Christ was responsible for the foundation of all the great missionary centres of the north.

The influence of these Celtic monasteries of Irish inspiration brought the land-locked Midlands within the embrace of the Irish Sea. Mercia was ruled by kings who claimed descent from Woden, and Penda, the architect of the Mercian confederation, remained a pagan to the end of his days. But he did not obstruct the propagation of Christianity amongst his fellow Anglians. The Welsh would have been the obvious source of missionaries to work this virgin soil. But this was not to be the case. Irish influence was minimal on the Welsh Marches, whose bogs and mountains made travel difficult. Welsh churchmen, who had already declined to co-operate with Augustine's missionary enterprises, were uneasy about the alliance between Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd, and Penda, because it had resulted in the death of Oswald, one of Iona's most distinguished Anglican converts.

Had Welsh missionaries been forthcoming, their work would have been helped by the native British population incorporated into Penda's Mercian confederation. For some of these Britons were Christians, whose bishops and monks had suffered when Cynddylan of Powys engaged the Mercians in the mid-seventh century in the vicinity of Letocetum. Perhaps like their counterparts in Central Wales, these indigenous British Christians of the West Midlands did not see themselves as missionaries to the world at large or intend their churches to be used for congregational worship. Consequently they did little towards converting the Anglian newcomers.

In the event, the rarity of heathen burial grounds on the Welsh Marches suggests there was, in fact, no great interval between the Saxon settlement of West Mercia and its conversion to Christianity. Perhaps this warns us against making an unqualified assumption that

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Christianity had made no headway amongst the Mercians until, two years before his death, Penda allowed a small mixed English and Celtic mission to work in Mercia. This mission came not from Wales, but from Lindisfarne.

Wulfhere, king of the Mercians, and Penda's successor, made a grant of land at Hanbury, Worcestershire, to an abbot Colman. 'Colman' is a very common name borne by over a hundred early Irish saints, but the only churchman so named who plays any part in English history is the Colman who in the fourth or fifth year of Wulfhere's reign was appointed bishop of Lindisfarne and in 664 headed the losing side at Whitby.⁴ An Irishman, trained at Whitby, he returned to Scotland after the synod, so if he is the Colman of Wulfhere's grant, it must have been made before he became bishop of Lindisfarne in c. 662. But irrespective of the identity of Colman, abbot of Hanbury, his name adds to our picture of the Celtic character of early Christianity amongst the Mercians.

The conversion in 660 of Merewalh, prince of the Magonsaete, who inhabited Herefordshire and southern Shropshire, marked a further stage both in the consolidation of Christianity in the West Midlands, and in the extension of the tides of the Irish Sea Province. For here again, the conversion of the Magonsaete was the work of a Northumbrian missionary called Eadfrith. This extra-ordinary southward penetration of Irish influence becomes more readily understood if we see the immediate origins of both the Mercian and the Magonsaetan missions as probably being the land of the Hwicce, occupying the present day counties of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. The rulers of the Hwicce appear to have been originally Celtic Christians from Northumbria, and the important place occupied by the Hwicce in Penda's confederation made them the natural basis for any missionary activity amongst the Mercians and the Magonsaete, their nearest neighbours. Thus, the roots of organised Christianity in these Midland regions, like those of Northumbria, reach back, by way of Lindisfarne and Iona, to Ireland.

The Synod of Whitby, held in 664, is often seen as the watershed of Celtic and Roman influence in the Church in England, and it is assumed that the Celtic element in English Christianity declined steadily after the Synod's acceptance of the Roman Easter. But the extent of the Synod's influence is uncertain, and it did not represent the mind of the Church in England as a whole. Even Oswiu, the Northumbrian king who convened it, continued to hold on to many of his Celtic ideas. Agilbert who led the Roman party at Whitby had studied in Ireland where English noblemen continued to resort to pursue their theological studies. The Celtic Easter was still observed in Wales and the South West, where the issues Wilfred and Oswiu tried to resolve at Whitby were still alive in the tenth century.

In Northumbria Cuthbert became bishop of Lindisfarne in 684, and though he staunchly supported the Roman tradition he never forgot his background of Irish monasticism, so that it is no surprise that Irish legend eventually claimed him as an Irishman. Even so, Bede's admiration for him was unstinted and his place in English devotion is reflected in the dedications to him beyond his native Northumbria and by the young Anglian Christians named after him. In the second half of the eighth century an abbot Cuthbert presided at Wearmouth, and in the same period a bishop Cuthbert was elected Archbishop of Canterbury on his translation from the diocese of Hereford, where Celtic influence was still strong.

Celtic tradition, then, continued to flourish in post-Whitby England and the Roman attitude to its survival is illustrated by the fortunes of St. Chad who became bishop to the kingdom of Mercia in 669. He came from Northumbria, like Ceollach and Diuma, Mercia's first bishops, and had learned the monastic life in Ireland. Oswiu had second thoughts about the desirability of Wilfred as his bishop, and whilst the latter tarried on the Continent, where he had gone to secure the validity of his consecration, Oswiu replaced him with Chad. On his return to Northumbria, Wilfred disputed Chad's appointment which was subsequently held to be invalid by Archbishop Theodore in 669. Chad was deposed on the grounds that his consecration had been irregular.

What exactly was lacking in Theodore's eyes about Chad's consecration is uncertain. Theodore had a sympathy for the Celtic Church, and was always ready to accept the services of Celtic clergy who acknowledged the Roman Easter. Tradition has it that he was surrounded by Irish students at Canterbury, and in providing the English Church with a penitential he set the seal of his approval on the Celtic system of spiritual discipline. But Theodore's insistence upon Chad's reconsecration suggests he was uneasy about Celtic orders in general, and their validity was denied in his penitential. It is unlikely that his dissatisfaction arose from any deficiency in the rite used at Chad's consecration at the hands of the bishop of Dorchester and two British bishops. Instead, he was probably unhappy about the Celtic interpretation of orders and the absence of properly kept ordination records. Chad himself may have submitted to reconsecration before coming to Mercia because he himself had come to see the irregularity of his position.

Chad's decision to fix his see at Lichfield when he came to Mercia was significant. Not only was Lichfield the Mercian capital, there may also have been a substantial Celtic element in the local population to respond to his own Celtic background. Moreover, Lichfield offered Chad the kind of site which would appeal to the Celtic saint. His episcopate, however, was short-lived. His death in 672 marked the end of the Mercian succession of Celtic bishops, and when he died a vision of his death was seen in Ireland; the sanctity of his life, and the extent of his influence amongst the Mercians is reflected in the distribution of place-names and dedications commemorating him.

Chad's successor was a man called Wynfrid who had been his deacon. One of his first episcopal duties was to attend the Synod of Hertford, convened in 672 by Archbishop Theodore.⁵ Many of the canons promulgated at this synod referred to Celtic practices which differed from those of Canterbury. It was agreed to keep the Roman Easter, that bishops should not invade the *parochiae* of others, and that monks and clergy should not wander from monastery to monastery. At the same time, provision was made for setting up new bishoprics, for it was Theodore's policy to subdivide dioceses, especially in Mercia and Northumbria, regions where Celtic influence was strongest. Bishops are the custodians of Christian orthodoxy, so by multiplying English bishoprics in these areas of Celtic influence Theodore was reducing the chances of survival for Celtic faith and practice. But the need for such provisions shows that the tides of the Irish Sea Province were still flowing strongly around the shores of the English Church.

Three years after the Synod of Hertford Theodore deposed Wynfrid who may have been unwilling to implement in his diocese those canons which aimed at the reduction of Celtic ecclesiastical customs in England. Another synod was held in 680, this time at Hatfield.⁶

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A statement directed against English Celtic doctrinal survivals was endorsed by the bishops, and the existence of such survivals is reflected in the decision of the synod which met in 705, probably somewhere in Wessex, to suppress the heresies of the Britons.

Even so, Irish Christianity was still a real influence in the English Church of the eighth century. In 747 the Council of Clofeshoh ordered the general adoption of Roman sacramental usages throughout the English dioceses, implying that the use of the Roman liturgy was only partial in England and that its Celtic counterpart was still to be heard at many altars.⁷ At the end of the century Alcuin urged Archbishop Eanbald to abolish the Celtic liturgy in daily use at York. There were Irish teachers and students at York when Alcuin was a student there, and he did not forget these Irish associations when he became head of the School at Charlemagne's palace. The festival of All Saints, unknown in Charlemagne's empire before Alcuin's day, is found in Northumbria soon after the middle of the eighth century; there it first appeared in a metrical martyrology at York, where the feast probably made its way from Ireland. The chanting of the creed at Mass is another custom of Irish origin imported into the Frankish liturgy by Alcuin by way of Northumbria.

When Offa's son Egfrith was anointed king in 787 it was thought Offa was imitating the anointing of Charlemagne's sons Pippin and Louis by Pope Hadrian in 781. But it has recently been argued that the means with which Offa inaugurated the reign of his son were of Celtic origin. Adamnan, in the seventh century, related how Oswald, after his success against the British, was anointed Emperor of all Britain, so both these men were familiar with a Celtic custom of Irish origin whereby kings were ordained by God in a coronation ceremony. It was this ceremony that Offa used for the coronation of his son.⁸ The Celtic customs of using the crown as episcopal headgear, and of kings and princes embracing the *clericatus*, were also absorbed by the Church of England.

The development of English Christian art affords further evidence of Irish influence in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Even when the flow of continental books and learning into English minsters increased, Celtic influence remained strong. The *Book of Durrow* dates from the second half of the seventh century and both Iona and Lindisfarne have been named as possible alternatives to Ireland's Durrow as its place of origin. We are on more certain ground when we come to the Lindisfarne Gospels and the *Codex Amiatinus* which are both written, despite continental influence and innovations, in an Anglo-Saxon insular script which is the artistic creation of the Irish. It has even been not implausibly conjectured that the *Book of Kells* was written in Iona and taken to Kells for safety before the Viking raid of 806.

Such compositions as these of Irish inspiration were not limited to Northumbria. Mercia, too, produced *lives* reflecting an interest in the saints of the Celtic Church, and we are told that 'in England, c. 700, Irish ecclesiastical thought, Irish vernacular literature and even Irish folk tales could form part of the total experience of an Anglo-Saxon poet.'⁹ Some believe that the Celtic love of the anchoritic life is echoed in Old English poems like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Similarly, St. Aldhelm's *Enigmata* can be seen to reflect in its diction and metre its author's early Irish teachers.

Anglo-Saxon sculptured crosses and other ornaments also commemorate Celtic influence. The great early eighth-century carved crosses that once stood at Glastonbury, like their extant Northumbrian parallel at Bewcastle, were the work of either Irish or Irish-trained

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craftsmen. The setting up of such monuments was a favourite practice of the Celtic Church; from them evolved the later sculptured crosses. Such crosses became an important feature of the landscape, not only in Northumbria and Wales, but also in parts of Mercia.

These monuments reflect a Celtic emphasis on the veneration of the Holy Cross. Assimilated by the Anglo-Saxons, it is reflected in such Old English poems as the *Dream of the Rood* and *Elene*, as well as in church dedications.

A final example of abiding Irish influence on English spirituality lies in the popularity of the cult of St. Michael. The Celts were very familiar with this saint. Intrepid travellers, they had seen churches dedicated to him at Rome, and at the beginning of the seventh century St. Columbanus dedicated a chapel to him at Bobbio. In Adamnan St. Michael is named as one of the three hostages 'taken on behalf of the Lord for warding off every disease from the Irish'. The archangel is prominent, too, in Irish place-names and poetry.

The Welsh were less familiar with St. Michael, at least during the Age of the Saints, so since the earliest English dedication to him appears to have had a Celtic background, it would seem to have been an Irish importation. It belonged to St. Chad, who, when he became bishop of the Mercians in 669, set up a place of retreat or refuge, identified with the site of St. Michael's church, Lichfield. John of Beverley had a similar retreat when he was bishop of Hexham at the end of the seventh century.¹⁰

On the eighth century the developing Mercian cult of St. Michael was paralleled by a similar development in Powys and Gwent, an interesting by-product of the breakdown of the Anglo-Welsh *entente* and the growth of military activity between the two peoples. The distribution of Welsh Michael dedications is thickest in those counties adjoining the English border, so we seem to have here an unusual example of Irish influence coming to Wales by way of England.

The Synod of Chelsea in 810 discussed the validity of the ministry of some Irish clergy, presumably working in England. Some Celtic ideals, once held in general respect, were now in decline. Thus pilgrimage, an expression of Celtic spirituality esteemed by the Anglo-Saxon Church, fell into disrepute. When Bede wrote his *Historia* in the eighth century earlier-held opinions were changing, and when he talked about the much-journed Odfor, who became bishop of Worcester in 691, he related how he had gone to Rome on pilgrimage, a custom considered to be of great virtue *in his day*.¹¹ By 731 the growth of English continental missions had caused the Celtic conception of pilgrimage to loose ground amongst the Anglo-Saxons. But the English Church inherited her missionary spirit from the Irish by way of Northumbria. The Northumbrian Willibrord, for example, went to southern Ireland for further study, before being exhorted by Egbert, who had left his native East Anglia for Ireland, to preach to the pagan Frisians.

The Anglo-Saxon mission to Europe, which largely supplanted the Irish missionaries, contained, all the same, a conspicuously Irish strain. However, new notions of ecclesiastical order and discipline became established in England under the influence of Boniface, making wandering clergy of the Celtic pattern an anomaly, whilst the Benedictine rule was now beginning to represent monasticism at its best at the expense of Celtic ideals of the religious life.

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At the same time, a growing corporate self-awareness amongst the English, together with an increasing degree of continental influence in the English Church was beginning to militate towards the ultimate disappearance of Celtic influence. Offa, for example, saw the advantages for Mercia of greater involvement in continental affairs. This increased Roman influence in the Mercian Church, for he painstakingly emulated the Carolingians, who strove to abolish Celtic usages where they survived in the Churches of those countries under their control.¹²

The Irish were highly successful missionaries whose techniques had equal success both in Britain and the Continent, and one suspects that much of the similarity between the Celtic and early Anglo-Saxon Churches is due either to the conscious or to the unconscious assimilation of these techniques by Augustine and his successors. St. Birinus, who came to Britain as a missionary bishop in 634 at the direction of Pope Honorius, was quite happy to have Oswald, for all the latter's Celtic background, as his patron. Similarly, St. Wilfred, despite his anti-Celtic fulminations at Whitby and Rome, acted as an *episcopus vagans* after the Celtic fashion when he retired to Ripon in protest against Chad's consecration as bishop of Northumbria.

Thus, even the pattern of life followed by Augustine and his party at Canterbury resembled that of the Celtic monastery at Lindisfarne.¹³ Monasticism became the characteristic expression of Celtic Christianity, whereas Pope Gregory favoured the separation of monks from the pastoral clergy. But this did not prevent the distinction from being unobserved in the early Saxon Church in which nearly all the clergy were monks. Consequently, it becomes difficult to draw any clear distinction between the ethos, activities, and discipline of the Celtic monastery and the pre-Benedictine Saxon minster. Both were enclosed by a hedge or palisade, neither had a general rule of life, both were connected with the local ruling family and respected the claims of heredity and kinship. Even as late as 803, when Wulfred, then Archbishop of Canterbury, decided to reform the communal life of the clergy of Christ Church, Canterbury, his description of their way of life reflects an almost startling similarity with that of the clergy of a Celtic monastery.¹⁴ Beyond the monastery, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom bishopric had a parallel in the Irish *tuath* bishopric, and neither Celts nor Saxons had any parochial system in our period. Everywhere churches were few and the ministry itinerant.

The Anglo-Saxons were very conscious of their common Germanic origin, and this awareness was kept alive by their nearness to Celts speaking a different language. On the other hand, the difference between the Angles and the Saxons was disappearing, and a sense of national unity, for example, pervades Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It also expressed itself in 747 when the Synod of Clofeshoh ordered the celebration of the feast days of Gregory the Great and his delegate St. Augustine. The work of the Northumbrian mission and of Irish missionaries like Fursey had contributed to the foundation and growth of the Church of England, but that Church, as it developed its sense of national identity, saw its origins, as it still does today, in Gregory and St. Augustine. The tides of the Irish Sea had receded to their present-day limits.

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- ⁴ H. P. R. Finberg, ed., *The Early Charters of the West Midlands*, Leicester, 1961, 12.*
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- ¹¹ Bede, *op. cit.*, 4 : 21 (23).
- ¹² See, for example, the *Life of St Winwaloe*, ch. 13.
- ¹³ Bede, *op. cit.*, 1 : 27; 4 : 25 (27).
- ¹⁴ M. Deansely, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England*, London, 1961, 274.*

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