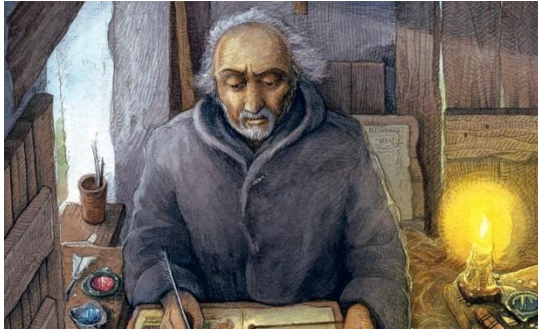


Saint Colmcille

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Ireland is known as the “Land of Saints and Scholars” because of the vital role the island nation played in preserving the light of faith and learning during Europe’s dark age. Five hundred recognized saints from the Emerald Isle lived between the sixth and ninth centuries; during that time, many monasteries produced a flourishing of art and learning that missionaries took to a suffering European continent in the wake of the Roman Empire’s collapse. One of these missionary saints and scholar is Saint Columba, or we say St. Colmcille in Irish, the Patron Saint of Derry and one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland. What is important to know about Colmcille is he came from a time which is prewritten history in Ireland. So like Saint Brigid, all we have is mythology. Saint Patrick wrote two letters – so we have a link to his thoughts. We have very little information about the life of Colmcille except what we get from biographies written about him 100 years after his death.

St. Colmcille is one of Ireland’s three patron saints and the only one that is not recognized by a public holiday. The other two are St. Brigid and of course, St. Patrick. His feast day is June 9, the day he died in the year 597 AD, at the impressive age of 75. Colmcille was born on December 7, 521 in Gartin, in Co. Donegal. He was known as Columba, a Latin version of Colum. The ‘Cille’ suffix that was added to his name means ‘of the churches.’ On his father’s side, he was the great-great-grandson of the famed Niall of the Nine Hostages – an Irish high king of the 5th century. The modern-day Donegal village of Glencolmcille is named in his honor. A young Colmcille entered the priesthood at the age of 20 when he became a pupil of Clonard Abbey, situated on the Boyne River in modern day Co. Meath. When a cousin gave him some land in the town of Derry, he decided to start his own monastery. This allowed him to travel throughout Northern Ireland teaching the pagans about Christianity. Colmcille founded some 30 monasteries in just 10 years, inspiring many people with his personal holiness.

Colmcille was no angel, however. His strong personality and forceful preaching ruffled feathers and in 563 AD he was accused of starting a war between two tribes. The battle resulted in the loss of 3,000 lives. Colmcille borrowed a Psalter belonging to his old master Finian of Movilla and copied the manuscript without permission. Finian objected and demanded the copy be given over to him. A quarrel ensued and the matter was presented to the High King of Ireland, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, who ruled in favor of Finian famously saying, “To every cow belongs to a calf; to every book its copy.” Colmcille did not accept the ruling, objecting to the limitations placed on spreading God’s word. After the death of Prince Curnan of Connaught – who Colmcille was meant to protect – a number of clerics and scholars threatened to excommunicate him. Instead, Colmcille was sentenced by the High King never to see Ireland again and was exiled to Scotland with 12 companions. He settled on a bleak Scottish Island called Iona where he would spend most of his remaining years.

In 575 Colmcille was persuaded to visit Ireland to mediate a dispute between the high king and the league of poets. Insisting on remaining faithful to the terms of his exile, that he never ‘see’ Ireland again, he travelled blindfolded. His considerable reputation was respected by everyone in Ireland. He spoke to the assembled nobles and clergy with such force and authority that the king was persuaded to calm hostilities. He was a renowned ‘man of letters,’ wrote several hymns and has been credited with having transcribed over 300 books and manuscripts.

On August 22, 565, St. Colmcille is said to have encountered the Loch Ness Monster – which has been interpreted as the first ever reference to the mythical Scottish beast. Traveling in Scotland, Colmcille had to cross Loch Ness, but Nessie had other ideas. Raising his hand to make the sign of the cross, Colmcille commanded the beast, saying “You will go no further, and won’t touch man, go back at once.” At the voice of the saint, the monster fled. The local pagans were amazed and converted to Christianity based on the miracle.

A number of miracles have been attributed to St. Colmcille – such as healing people with diseases, expelling malignant spirits, subduing wild beasts, calming storms, and even returning the dead to life. He is also said to have performed ‘agricultural miracles’ that would hold a special significance to the common people of Ireland and the British Isles, such as when he casted a demon out of a pail and restored spilt milk to its container.

As well as being one of the three patron saints of Ireland, St. Colmcille is also the patron saint of the city of Derry – where he founded a monastic settlement in 540 AD. The Church of Ireland Cathedral in Derry is also dedicated to St. Columba. Ireland’s Aer Lingus has named one of its Airbus airplanes St. Columba in commemoration of the saint. There are numerous parishes dedicated to Colmcille within the Presbyterian, Anglican, and Catholic churches throughout the United States and Canada.

St. Colmcille spent the rest of his life on Iona praying, fasting, and teaching his monks to read and copy the scriptures. He died on Iona and was buried in 597 by his monks in the abbey he created. In 794 the Vikings descended on Iona and plundered much of the relics Colmcille had procured in his life as an intellectual.