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## THE OLD CHURCH AND CHURCHYARD OF KINGUSSIE (ST. COLUMBA'S.)

[BY ALEXANDER MACPHERSON.]

“ Stop, Stranger, whosoe'er thou art,  
And to thyself be just ;  
These mouldering tombs address thine heart—  
Catch wisdom from the dust.”

IN giving a few gleanings and traditions gathered from various sources—meagre as these unfortunately are—regarding the old Church and Churchyard of Kingussie, it may not be out of place, by way of introduction, to give a glimpse or two of the great Missionary Saint and Highland Apostle by whom, according to popular tradition, the Church was planted, and to whom it was dedicated.

In the very interesting *Life of St. Columba*, by the elder Dr. Norman Macleod—the large-hearted, Highlander-loving, Minister for so many years of St. Columba's Gaelic Church in Glasgow—it is related that Columba, with twelve of his favourite disciples, left Ireland 563 A.D. in a little *Curach*, built of wicker-work covered with hide, arriving on Whitsun-Eve in that year at the “lonely, beautiful, and soft-aired Iona,” which subsequently remained his home down to the date of his death in 597 A.D. The Highlands—indeed the whole country north of the Forth and Clyde—were at that time, we are told, like a vast wilderness, without way or road through the thick, dark woods—the hills extensive and full of wild beasts. But in spite of all this Columba persevered.

During four-and-thirty years he never rested nor wearied in the work of founding churches and spreading the Gospel of Christ. In his day he established three hundred churches, besides founding one hundred monasteries, and, as he penetrated, in the course of his mission, so far north as Inverness, the probability undoubtedly is that the old Church of Kingussie was one of the number thus planted by him.

No traces remain of the buildings which he thus raised, but some particulars of their general character have come down to us. "There was an earthen rampart which enclosed all the settlement. There was a mill-stream, a kiln, a barn, a refectory. The church with its sacristy was of oak. The cells of the brethren were surrounded by walls of clay held together by wattles. Columba had his special cell in which he wrote and read: two brethren stationed at the door waited his orders. He slept on the bare ground with a stone for his pillow. The members of the community were bound by solemn vows. . . . Their dress was a white tunic, over which was worn a rough mantle and hood of wool left its natural colour. They were shod with sandals which they took off at meals. Their food was simple, consisting commonly of barley bread, milk, fish, and eggs." According to the evidence of Adamnan, his successor and biographer, the foundation of Columba's preaching and his great instrument in the conversion of the rude Highland people of that early time, was the Word of God. "No fact," says Dr. Macgregor of St. Cuthberts, "could be more significant or prophetic. It was the pure unadulterated religion of Jesus that was first offered to our forefathers, and broke in upon the gloom of our ancient forests. The first strong foundations of the Scottish Church were laid broad and deep where they rest to-day on the solid rock of Scripture. It was with *The Book* that Columba fought and won the battle with Paganism, Knox the battle with Popery, Melville the first battle of Presbytery with Episcopacy—the three great struggles which shaped the form and determined the fortunes of the Scottish Church."

The picture of the closing scene in the life of St Columba, on 9th June, 597, A.D., as given by Dr. Boyd of St. Andrews—the well-known "A.K.H.B."—in his eloquent lecture on "Early

Christian Scotland," is so beautiful and touching that I cannot refrain from quoting it:—

"On Sunday, June 2, he was celebrating the communion as usual when the face of the venerable man, as his eyes were raised to Heaven, suddenly appeared suffused with a ruddy glow. He had seen an angel hovering above the church and blessing it: an angel sent to bear away his soul. Columba knew that the next Saturday was to be his last. The day came and along with his attendant, Diormit, he went to bless the barn. He blest it, and two heaps of winnowed corn in it, saying thankfully that he rejoiced for his beloved monks, for that if he were obliged to depart from them, they would have provision enough for the year. His attendant said: 'This year at this time, father, thou often vexest us, by so frequently making mention of thy leaving us:.' For like humbler folk, drawing near to the great change, St. Columba could not but allude to it, more or less directly. Then, having bound his attendant not to reveal to any before he should die what he now said, he went on to speak more freely of his departure. 'This day,' he said, 'in the Holy Scriptures is called the Sabbath, which means Rest. And this day is indeed a Sabbath to me, for it is the last day of my present laborious life, and on it I rest after the fatigues of my labours, and this night at midnight which commenceth the solemn Lord's Day, I shall go the way of our fathers. For already my Lord Jesus Christ deigneth to invite me; and to Him in the middle of this night I shall depart at his invitation. For so it hath been revealed to me by the Lord Himself.'

"Diormit wept bitterly; and they two returned towards the Monastery. Halfway the aged Saint sat down to rest, at a spot afterwards marked with a cross; and while here a white pack-horse that used to carry the milk vessels from the cowshed to the Monastery, came to the Saint, and laying its head on his breast, began to shed human tears of distress. The good man, we are told, blest his humble fellow creature and bade it farewell. Then ascending the hill hardby, he looked upon the Monastery, and holding up both his hands, breathed his last benediction upon the place he had ruled so well; prophesying that Iona should be held in honour far and near. He went down to his little hut, and pushed on at his task of transcribing the Psalter. The last lines he wrote are very familiar in those of our churches where God's praise has its proper place: they contain the words of the beautiful anthem which begins 'O taste and see how gracious the Lord is.' He finished the page; he wrote the words with which the anthem ends: 'They that seek the Lord shall want no

manner of thing that is good,' and laying down his pen for the last time he said, 'Here at the end of the page I must stop; let Baithene write what comes after.'

"Having written the words, he went into the church to the last service of Saturday evening. When this was over, he returned to his chamber and lay down on his bed. It was a bare flag and his pillow was a stone, which was afterwards set up beside his grave. Lying here he gave his last counsels to his brethren, but only Diormit heard him. 'These, O my children, are the last words I say to you—that ye be at peace, and have unfeigned charity among yourselves; and, if then you follow the example of the holy fathers, God, the comforter of the good, will be your helper; and I, abiding with Him, will intercede for you; and He will not only give you sufficient to supply the wants of this present life, but will also bestow on you the good and eternal rewards which are laid up for those who keep His commandments.' The hour of his departure drew near, and the Saint was silent; but, when the bell rung at midnight, and the Lord's Day began, he rose hastily and hurried into the church, faster than any could follow him. He entered alone and knelt before the altar. His attendant, following, saw the whole church blaze with a heavenly light; others of the brethren saw it also; but as they entered the light vanished and the church was dark. When lights were brought, the Saint was lying before the altar. He was departing. The brethren burst into lamentations. Columba could not speak; but he looked eagerly to right and left, with a countenance of wonderful joy and gladness: seeing doubtless the shining ones that had come to bear him away. As well as he was able he moved his right hand in blessing on his brethren, and thus blessing them the wearied Saint passed to his rest. St. Columba was gone from Iona. . . . There is but one account of his wonderful voice—wonderful for power and sweetness. In church it did not sound louder than other voices, but it could be heard perfectly a mile away. Diormit heard its last words: the beautiful voice could not more worthily have ended its occupation—with kindly thought of those he was leaving; with earnest care for them; with simple promise to help them, if he could, where he was going; it was fit that good St. Columba should die."

To quote the beautiful lines of the late Principal Shairp, of St. Andrews, another warm-hearted friend, by-the-way, of the Highlands and the Highland people:—

"Centuries gone the Saint from Erin  
Hither came on Christ's behest,  
Taught and toiled, and when was ended  
Life's long labour here found rest;

And all ages since have followed  
To the ground his grave hath blessed."

Little or no reliable information regarding the old church of Kingussie earlier than the 12th century has come down to us. About the middle of that century, Muriach, the historical Parson of Kingussie, on the death of his brother without issue, became head of his family, and succeeded to the Chiefship of Clan Chattan. Obtaining a dispensation from the Pope of the time, he subsequently (about 1173) married a daughter of the Thane of Calder, by whom he had five sons, and surnames about this time having become hereditary, Mac-pherson—that is, "Son-of-the-Parson"—became the distinguishing clan appellation of his posterity. The village of Kingussie occupies the precincts of the ancient priory, built by George, Earl of Huntly, about the year 1490, on the site, it is believed, of the old church of St. Columba; and in course of the improvements recently made in the churchyard, a portion of one of the gables of the chapel of the Monastery was distinctly traced.

Mr. Sinton, the esteemed minister of Invergarry—so well known as a collector of the old folk-lore and songs of Badenoch—thus relates one of the most ancient traditions which has survived in Badenoch in connection with St. Columba:—

"St. Columba's fair—*Feill Challum-Chille*—was held at Midsummer, and to it resorted great numbers of people from the surrounding parishes, and some from distant towns, who went to dispose of their wares in exchange for the produce of the country. Once upon a time the plague or *Black Death*, which used to ravage Europe broke out among those who were assembled at *Feill Challum-Chille*. Now this fair was held partly within the precincts consecrated to St. Callum, and partly without, and so it happened that no one who had the good fortune to be within was affected by the plague, while among those without the sacred bounds it made terrible havoc. At the Reformation, a plank of bog-fir was fixed into St Columba's church from wall to wall, and and so divided the church. In the end which contained the altar the priest was allowed to officiate, while the Protestant preacher occupied the further extremity."

The example thus shown in such troublous times of the "unfeigned charity" so touchingly inculcated by the good St.

Columba with his dying breath more than a thousand years previously, reflects no little credit upon Badenoch, and it does not appear that the cause of the Reformation suffered in any way or was retarded in that wide district in consequence. "The sockets of the plank," adds Mr. Sinton, "were long pointed out in the remains of the masonry of the old church." Unfortunately, when part of the north wall of the churchyard was repaired, nearly thirty years ago, these remains appear to have been incorporated with the wall and almost entirely obliterated.

Here are some further reminiscences received from Mr. Macrae, the Procurator-Fiscal at Kirkwall, like Mr. Sinton, a worthy and much-respected native of Badenoch:—

"One of my earliest—indeed, I may say, my earliest—recollection," says Mr. Macrae, "is connected with this churchyard. I remember one hot summer Sabbath afternoon—it must, I think, have been in the year 1845—sitting with my father upon a tombstone in the churchyard listening, along with a crowd of others, to a minister preaching from a tent. I cannot say who the minister was, but I was at the time much impressed with his earnestness, and with what, on reflection, I must now think was a most unusual command of Gaelic language and Gaelic idioms. In one of his most earnest and eloquent periods he, and the large congregation listening to him, were startled by seeing the head of a stag looking down over the dyke separating the churchyard from the hill road which was used as a peat road, and which used to be the short cut by pedestrians to Inverness. The stag was tossing his head about, evidently bellicose. The bulk of the congregation were from the uplands of the parish—Strone, Newtonmore, Glenbancher, etc., and they, by their movements, recognised the stag as a young stag that the worthy and much-respected occupants of Ballachroan attempted to domesticate. They were not in this attempt more successful than others, for the stag's great amusement was to watch, from the uplands, persons passing along the public road, and then giving them, especially if they were females, a hot chase. That Sabbath he had, as I subsequently learned, been in the west Kingussie Moss amusing himself by overturning erections of peat set up to dry. Those of the congregation who knew his dangerous propensities became very uneasy, and, in consequence, the service was interrupted, but some of those present managed to get him away, after which the service was proceeded with.

"I used to be very often in the churchyard. It had a great attraction for all the youths in the west end of Kingussie. The

ruins of the old church engrossed our attention next to witnessing funerals. The walls of the church were, when I first remember them, more perfect than they are at present. The church consisted of a nave rectangular without a chancel. The east and south walls were almost perfect. The west gable was away. The stones of the north wall were partially removed and used for repairing the north dyke of the churchyard. There were traces of windows in the south wall, but whether these windows were round, pointed, or square could not be inferred from the state of the walls.

"In the remains of the north wall there was, about two yards, I should say, westward from the east gable, an aperture with a circular arch, which interested us boys at the time very much. It was about eighteen inches in length, twelve in height, and five in depth. We had many discussions in regard to it, some of us contending that it was a receptacle for the Bible, others that it was a canopy for a cross or an image, but it undoubtedly was a *piscina* where the consecrated vessels, paten, chalice, etc., used in celebrating mass, were kept when not used during the celebration. The *piscina* is generally in the south gable, and has a pipe for receiving the water used in cleaning the sacred vessels. I will be able to show you a perfect *piscina* in one of the side chapels of St. Magnus Cathedral when you are next here. It was, however, not unusual in northern or cisalpine churches, especially in those of an early date, to have the *piscina* in the north gable without a pipe. You may depend upon it that the church was of a very early date, probably of the earliest type of Latin Rural Church architecture in Scotland. It may have been built upon the site of an earlier Celtic church. You might probably ascertain this by directing the workmen you have employed in putting the churchyard in order to dig about five feet inwards from the eastern gable. If they should find there any remains of the foundations of a cross gable between the north and south gables, you may safely conclude that there was a Celtic church there, and that the Christian religion was taught in Badenoch before the close of the tenth century."

For a period of fully seventy years now there have been *three* churchyards in the village of Kingussie, namely, "St. Columba's," "The Middle Churchyard," and "The New Churchyard"—the first interment in the new one having taken place in 1815. Except in the case of the latter, there is no obligation incumbent upon the Heritors of the parish to keep the churchyards in repair, and even as regards the new one the obligation extends simply to the maintenance of the walls surrounding it. As regards the other

two, which are now but seldom used, the force of the old adage—"What is everybody's business is nobody's"—has, alas! as in the case of many other interesting old churchyards throughout the Highlands, been sadly exemplified. Up till within the last two or three years the venerable churchyard of St. Columba—where for a period extending over fully seven hundred years, so many generations of Macphersons, *Clann Mhuirich Bhàideanaich*, have been laid to rest with their kindred dust—was anything but creditably kept. Its surface was so irregular and many of the tombstones and mounds were so placed or raised above the ground as to render it almost impossible to cut the grass or remove the weeds. The whole ground was in consequence a tangled mass of long grass, rank nettles, and dockens. The walls had also been allowed to fall into a sad state of disrepair, and altogether the condition of the churchyard was felt to be so very discreditable that about three years ago the following appeal was prepared and widely circulated:—

"CLADH CHALLUM CHILLE"

"ST. COLUMBA'S CHURCHYARD, KINGUSSIE."

"The stone wall or dyke enclosing this interesting and venerable Place of Burial having become dilapidated, it is proposed to collect by general subscription a sum of money sufficient to put it in good order and repair, and thereby guard the sacred precincts from possible desecration. An estimate has been received for the partial rebuilding and thorough repair of the dyke, and this expense, along with that of other contemplated permanent improvements, which would add greatly to the appearance of the place and the amenity of the neighbourhood, will, it is calculated, cost altogether from £40 to £50. It is confidently anticipated that the sum required for so commendable an object will be readily subscribed in honour of the Dead who lie buried there; in honour of the hallowed site of the old church of Kingussie, a place of worship of remote antiquity, one of the most ancient north of the Grampians, planted, it is believed, by St. Columba himself, to whom the church was dedicated; and in honour of the "Parson" of that church, from whom the Macphersons of the Macpherson country derive the name which they now bear. Subscriptions will be received and duly acknowledged by Mr. A. Macpherson, British Linen Bank, Kingussie."

The response to that appeal has been so far very gratifying, the contributions already received amounting to close upon £50.



Besides subscriptions from residents in the place, ranging from 1s. to 21s., the list includes contributions from the late Cluny Macpherson; Sir George Macpherson-Grant, Bart.; Mr. Baillie of Kingussie; Colonel Macpherson of Glentruim; Mr. Brewster Macpherson of Belleville; Mr. Allan Macpherson of Blairgowrie; Mrs. Macpherson, Waitui, New Zealand; Mr. Donald D. Macpherson, Manchester; Mr. John Macpherson, Craighdhu, Crieff; the Rev. Eneas Macpherson, Larbert; Mr. James Macpherson, Edinburgh; Mr. G. R. Mackenzie, president of the Singer Manufacturing Company, New York; Mr. John K. Macdonald, and other natives of Badenoch, in the employment of that Company in Glasgow; Mr. Donald King, London; Mrs. Cumming, America; Mr. Hugh Bannerman, Southport; Dr. Murray, Forres; Mr. David Whyte, Glasgow; etc., etc. Not the least gratifying circumstance in connection with the appeal is the fact that through the kind exertions of Miss Macpherson of The Willows, Kingston (whose grandfather, Captain Clark of Dalnavert, a nephew of the translator of Ossian's poems, is interred in St. Columba's), subscriptions to the extent of several pounds have been received from Canada. The Canadian list of subscriptions includes such distinguished and well-known names as Sir John Macdonald, G.C.B., the Prime Minister of Canada (whose deceased wife was a daughter of Captain Clark of Dalnavert); Sir David Macpherson, K.C.M.S.; Mr. Hugh J. Macdonald, Winnipeg; Mr. A. M. Macpherson, Kingston; Lieut.-Colonel John Macpherson, Ottawa; and Mrs. Macpherson of The Willows, Kingston.

The result of the response already made to the appeal referred to is that not only, with a total expenditure of about £53, have the walls been partially rebuilt and thoroughly repaired, but that the churchyard itself has been all neatly laid out in terraces in conformity with the original formation of the ground, and the tombstones and graves in each terrace all reverently placed on a uniform level. The work is now so far finished that all who have recently seen the place acknowledge that a great improvement has been effected. Altogether, it is extremely gratifying to be able to state that the old churchyard of St. Columba has been rendered more worthy of the honoured name it bears, and of the

care due to it as the hallowed resting-place, for so many centuries, of all that is mortal of the old people of Badenoch. There is not, it is safe to say, one living Badenoch-Macpherson, or descendant of the famous "Parson" of Kingussie, all the world over, some of whose forbears do not sleep their "long last sleep" in the old churchyard of St. Columba. As with pensive thoughts, in the quiet Autumn-twilight, we survey their "mouldering tombs," we seem to hear long-silent voices plaintively speaking to us in the tender wailing strains of the Gaelic *Coronach*—so inexpressibly touching to all Highlanders—which, in our comparatively cold Saxon everyday tongue, may thus be feebly rendered:—

"Return, return, return, we'll never.  
In War or in Peace, return, we'll never.  
Nor Love nor Gold can recall us thither,  
Till dawns the Great Day to unite us for ever."

Hearty thanks are due to Cluny Macpherson and Mr. Macpherson of Belleville for their kindness in supplying ivy and other plants for the churchyard, and to Mrs. Duncan Cameron, Kingussie, who not only subscribed to the Improvement Fund, but exerted herself so successfully in obtaining contributions from others. Similar thanks are also due to Mr. Roberts, C.E., who generously prepared the specifications for the work, and to Mr. George Macdonald for many kind services rendered in connection with the improvements. If a further sum of about £20 were subscribed—and let me express the earnest hope that such an amount will soon be forthcoming—this would not only clear off the present balance of about £5 against the Fund, but also meet the cost of the additional operations suggested by Mr. Macrae, Kirkwall, and of placing a small marble tablet, with a suitable inscription, in what remains of the wall of the old church. The minister of Invergarry has already kindly sent me a contribution of 20s. towards meeting the cost of the proposed tablet.

In a future paper I propose giving transcripts of the inscriptions on the many interesting tombstones in the churchyard, with descriptive notes, to be followed, as opportunity occurs, by similar papers on the other two churchyards in Kingussie, with which, as well as with St. Columba's, the history of the parish is so closely identified.