

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Place of Community: “Celtic” Iona and Institutional Religion

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Abstract

This paper identifies the concept of a “Celtic” form of spirituality that has developed recently within Christianity in Britain and Ireland, in particular in relation to ancient pilgrimage sites. One of these, the Scottish island of Iona, has always been subject to reinterpretation; but while the resident population and the Iona Community may have contributed to current expectations, they do not necessarily identify with them.

Introduction

The modern Celtic spirituality movement, whether Pagan or Christian, is a part of the Celtic revival of the past twenty-five years that has been termed the “new Celtic Twilight.” [1] All things Celtic have again become extremely popular and, while its contents have little in common with what is normally taught in a university department of Celtic Studies, [2] the movement has attracted the attention of folklorists. Consequently, the term “Celtic” is used in this paper to refer to the movement in terms of its own dynamics rather than of its historical validity. The roots of modern Celtic spirituality are understood to lie within current popular culture, in particular that of the white middle classes, a section of society that has not always been seen as a repository of this kind of tradition.

The Celtic Pagan form of Celtic spirituality has been the subject of scholarly discussion in recent years, in particular by Marion Bowman (2000; 2004). There appear to be substantial similarities between the Pagan and Christian manifestations of the movement, and both concentrate on individual personal development and the growth of one’s inner spiritual capabilities. The Christian version, however, is almost uniformly orthodox in terms of mainstream Christian belief. In fact many of the proponents of the oldest, English, strand of Celtic spirituality are theologically conservative, and the tendency is to view what they regard as Celtic spirituality as a tool for renewal and church growth. The key writers of this version, who are nearly all men, may, however, combine this with a distrust of formal ecclesiastical structures. Nevertheless, many of the evangelical Christian organisations that espouse Celtic spirituality are in fact highly structured and would regard an understanding of spiritual authority as essential. [3]

Another group attracted to the Celtic spirituality movement that is also inclined to be suspicious of formal religious structures includes women disillusioned with ecclesiastical systems in which they perceive themselves as having no role. They have, therefore, been attracted to a secondary, rather later, version of the Celtic

Christian movement, which has more affinity with Ireland, Wales and Scotland than with Northumbrian England. An emphasis on spiritual development through individual or group retreats during the past forty years, coupled with increasing levels of formal education, have led to the growth of an audience acquainted with the movement through its literature, inputs at religious conferences, and also through liturgical material. This has led to wide acceptance of the prevailing understanding of Celtic religious activity as an alternative to more established forms of religious practice.

A recognisable Irish variant of Celtic Christianity displays a greater sense of ease and continuity with Ireland's general and religious cultural inheritance, including much that is neither specifically Pagan or Christian. It represents itself as recovering what has survived at the fringe, in a Gaelic context, with the implication that this is more genuine than the English version. [4] Proponents of the latter form often assume that, in spite of the difference in language, they are rediscovering their own Celtic roots, and that the later cultural and political dominance of England in these islands also applied in early Christian times, though they see the focal point as Northumbria rather than London. In both Britain and Ireland, a formative feature in the development of Celtic Christianity was the increased accessibility, in the English translations, of Alexander Carmichael's late-nineteenth-century collection of Hebridean oral poetry—*Carmina Gadelica*—(1900–71), much of which is specifically religious. [5]

Both the Pagan and Christian versions of Celtic spirituality are inclined to regard organisational Christianity as monolithic, culturally dominant and excessively masculine. Both strands often use the same or similar sources, including books, poems and artistic works from the last Celtic Revival, Celtic music in particular in its gentler instrumental forms, and dance as a form of self-expression.

Defining Celtic Spirituality

The defining attributes of modern Celtic Christianity include the following elements:

- An interest in nature and the experience of the divine as immanent. Closely connected is a desire to respect the environment.
- An emphasis on orthodox Christian doctrine, in particular that of the Trinity, with an interest in translations of ancient or nineteenth-century folk poetry and modern derivatives.
- A sense of place, linked to a desire for travel, expressed as pilgrimage.
- A certainty of the equality of women in the early "Celtic church."
- A belief in the spontaneity of the ancient Celts as expressed in worship, lack of structure and perceived liturgical freedom.
- The importance of art, in designs, dance, music, and common or individual self-expression, often incorporated into liturgy.
- A distrust of ecclesiastical structures.
- An interest in applying the lives of the "Celtic" (including English) saints as models for today, including well-known female saints.
- A sense of liminality, of being on the edge, spiritually and organisationally, and an enjoyment of the experience.

The movement is often characterised by the absence of engagement in social action, although many adherents may take part in single-issue initiatives, particularly in relation to the environment.

A distrust of intellectualism is also found, and the absence of a rigorous interpretational approach to the movement's roots enables some of its proponents to view Celtic spirituality as a native English heritage. It is also believed that it was severely damaged at the Synod of Whitby in 664 when the Celtic Church (usually seen as highly individualistic, but on this occasion treated as a unity) lost out to a centralised Roman Church. It is believed that this Northumbrian event, depicted three generations later by Bede, had an effect on the Church in all the Celtic lands, which eventually capitulated to Roman authority.

The movement's interest in a sense of place, essentially a spiritual homeland, coupled with its desire for new forms of belonging, made it virtually inevitable that ancient holy places such as the sites associated with early Christianity, Holy Island (Lindisfarne), Iona, Bradwell-on-Sea and others would become connected with the new Celtic spirituality movement (Figure 1). This is most noticeable in the case of Iona, a place of pilgrimage that many regard as both remote and beautiful. It is also a place where people of differing lifestyles can discuss social issues with a degree of freedom. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the medieval abbey was rebuilt as one of the activities of the ecumenical Christian Iona Community, which receives weekly guests. This Community's considerable



Figure 1. Sites associated with Celtic spirituality and pilgrimage.

impact within Scotland and beyond can be linked to its charismatic founder who further developed some of the attributes of celticity already linked to the island, to suit evangelical purposes. These and subsequent developments in music and liturgy have since been appropriated and produced as evidence of celticity, by the wider Celtic movement.

In this case, the paradoxical nature of the movement is particularly evident, for the Iona Community is expected by many to be a leading proponent of Celtic spirituality, but it has at best an ambiguous relationship with it. Its origins had little in common with the expected attributes of a "Celtic" movement, having been founded by a male cleric with a military background and strong social conscience, for men whose wives were not permitted to accompany them. Much of the reason for the attribution of a Celtic character to it can be seen by an exploration of its origins, the geographical situation of Iona, and the social situation on the mainland from which it grew and with which it interacted. An examination of its origins may also to some extent explain both its wider attraction, including those aspects emulated by other communities, and the limited impact Celtic attributes have had, recently, and in their previous manifestations, on the residents of the Hebridean island of Iona.

The Iona Community and George MacLeod

The Iona Community was founded in 1938 by George MacLeod (1895–1991), a Church of Scotland minister, who had been a soldier in the First World War (Ferguson 2001). He worked in Govan, the shipbuilding area of Glasgow, and saw at first hand the misery caused by the poverty of the Depression. A socialist from a wealthy background, who became a pacifist, MacLeod was acutely aware that the churches appeared to have nothing to say to this situation. He had been powerfully influenced by experience of Greek Orthodox liturgy, and believed that quality in church services, and consequent attractiveness, was lacking in the extempore style current in his own time (Ferguson 1998; 2001). He was already well known when he gained permission for the rebuilding of the ruined abbey of Iona as a place for training future Church of Scotland ministers who would engage in particular with the industrial poor. He raised money to start rebuilding the abbey, offering summer work to skilled craftsmen and using clergy students and young ministers as their untrained labour. This approach to white-collar and blue-collar labour, and the reversal of the usual expectations regarding skills, was a major departure, and work on the island was marked by this controversy and by the claim that he was creating an organisation "half-way towards Rome and half-way towards Moscow" (Ferguson 2001, 80).

The project thus caused both interest and scandal, and was described by MacLeod in the Community magazine *The Coracle* (1938–). As early as 1939 he used the periodical to refute the "return to Rome" charge and to enlist support for the rebuilding programme on the island and for social activism on the mainland (*The Coracle* 2 [1939], 18). He also used *The Coracle* as a fundraising tool, which provided him with a forum for expounding and promoting his theological perspectives. Although the war years (1939–45) interrupted the work, the rebuilding of the abbey on Iona was completed in the 1960s. By this time MacLeod and his colleagues had attracted a wide number of people to the Community, they

had developed a youth centre on an isolated part of the Isle of Mull, originally for public schoolboys and then for Borstal boys who had demonstrated good behaviour, and they were succeeding in influencing social action and regeneration in Scotland and beyond. An excellent speaker, MacLeod's talks and religious services from Iona were broadcast on the radio. The rebuilding projects attracted young people to the island, who lived during the summer in camps, under the eye of MacLeod and his followers. Iona has since continued as a place for popular pilgrimage and for visiting holidaymakers. [6]

They did not, however, come to an uninhabited island, but one with a local crafting and fishing population, and one accustomed to receiving summer visitors. Moreover, it had been repeatedly interpreted by visitors for centuries; and during the last one hundred and fifty years, these visitors had left records that in turn influenced the interpretations of later comers.

Iona Before the Community

Historically, Iona had been a place of pilgrimage since it was settled by the Irish saint, Colum Cille (Columba), in the sixth century, and its name, apparently meaning "island of yews," indicates that it may already have been a sacred place before Colum Cille's time. The Columban monastery was replaced by a flourishing Benedictine one in the Middle Ages, but the buildings fell into disrepair after the Reformation (Argyll 4 1982; Brown and Clancy 1999). There are accounts of the island dating from 1549, 1635, 1688, and about 1695, which describe *inter alia* the condition of the monastic buildings, and some measures taken to remedy the situation. The descriptive interpretations of the site increased

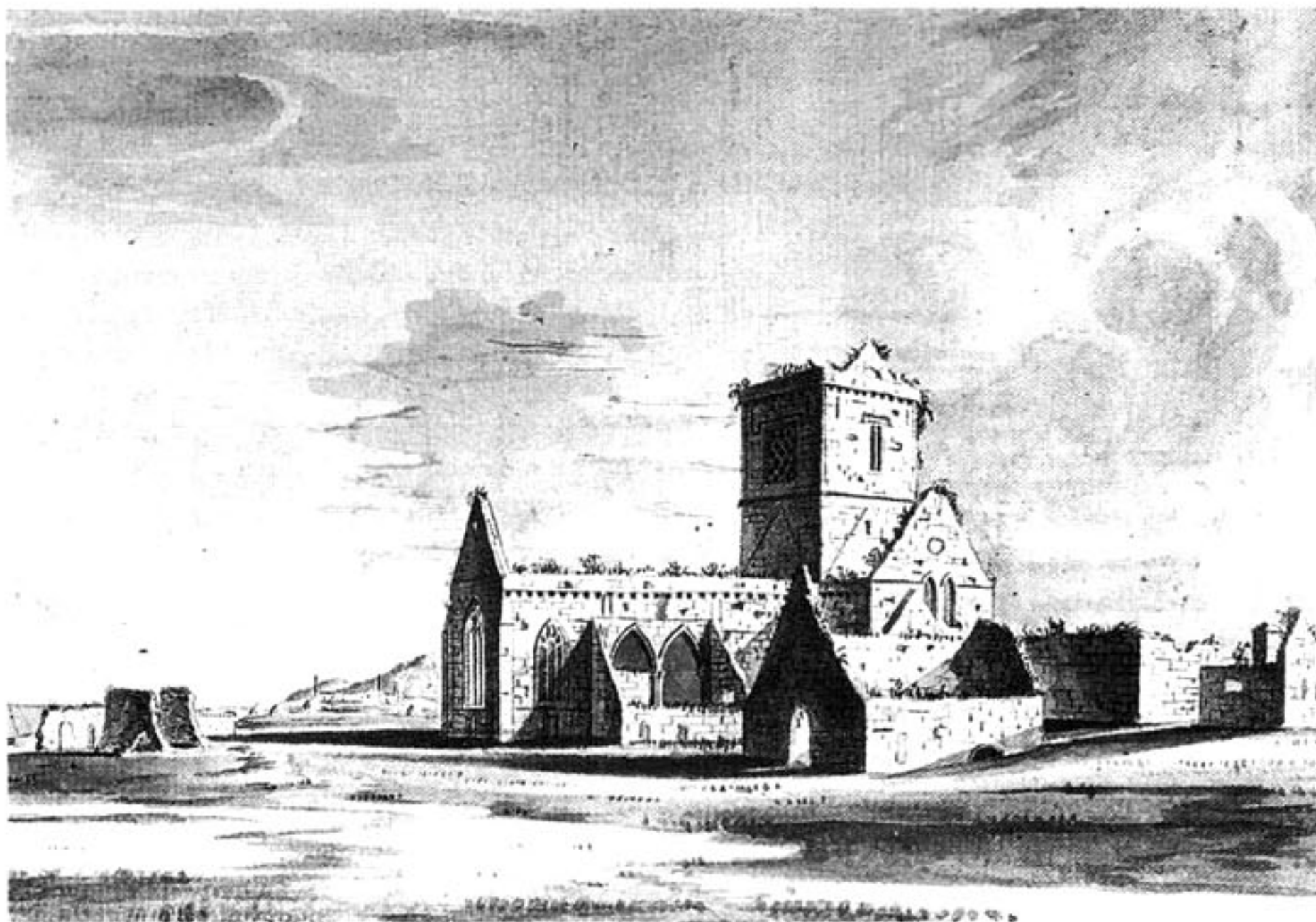


Figure 2. "N.E. view of the Cathedral in Ycolumkill," 1772, by Moses Griffith. Engraved for Thomas Pennant's *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides: MDCCLXXII* (Christian and Stiller 2000, 12). (By permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales).

in the late eighteenth century with the accounts of the tours made by Richard Pococke in 1760, followed by Thomas Pennant in 1772, and Samuel Johnson and James Boswell in 1775. These later writings speak of the decayed grandeur of the buildings that still evoked sentiments of prayer in the onlooker. [7]

The imposition of personal rather than local interpretations on the Iona ruins is evident when Johnson complains of the use of an outer chapel as a byre, and of only two inhabitants speaking English, while Boswell returned alone after breakfast to say his prayers:

I then went into the cathedral, which is really grand enough when one thinks of its antiquity and of the remoteness of the place . . . I again addressed a few words to Saint Columbus . . . I read with an audible voice the fifth chapter of St. James, and Dr. Ogden's tenth sermon. I suppose there has not been a sermon preached in this church since the Reformation (Boswell 1936, 334).

In fact, it seems likely that the islanders had services in the ruined church on Sundays, continuing the practice observed a century previously (Sacherverell 1859, 104). A new Presbyterian Church and manse, followed by a Free Church, were built in the following century.

Other visitors, well known or not, provided prose accounts or sketches of the ruined abbey and the smaller nunnery. Further reinterpretations followed when the abbey church was rebuilt at the turn of the twentieth century, at the instigation of the landowner, the Duke of Argyll, and an Episcopalian retreat house was built on the island at about the same time. In 1899 the landowner made a gift of the monastic sites to the care of Trustees (mainly Church of Scotland, who still own the site) on condition that the abbey could be used as a place of worship by all denominations, a gift that allowed not only Church of Scotland worship, but that of other Protestant denominations, and, more controversially, the Catholic Church. Soon after the end of the First World War, it was suggested that the monastic buildings should be rebuilt as well.

Also present on Iona between the 1870s and the 1930s, in particular during the summer months, was a population of artists, mostly painters (Christian and Stiller 2000). The ruins of monastery and nunnery were sketched repeatedly from all angles, fishing and farming scenes were portrayed, occasionally including women and children, and, above all, scenic paintings were produced. While some painters came to experiment with a view to the quality of the light on the island, others came because the island was relatively accessible and geared to the reception of visitors. The early years of the twentieth century had many well-known artists spending a substantial amount of time on the island. While painters were thus numerous on Iona, photographers seem to have been in much shorter supply. By the 1930s, the ferry company Caledonian MacBrayne, was commissioning paintings made on Iona for its advertising posters (Christian and Stiller 2000, 79–81).

Late-nineteenth-century authors joined this group, including William Sharp (1855–1905), who, from 1894 onwards, wrote twelve books under the pen-name Fiona MacLeod. Sharp's earlier works were mainly from a neo-classical pagan perspective and he published and wrote under different pen-names the solitary issue of the *Pagan Review* (Brooks 1892). By the end of his life he was influenced by the Celtic Revival, and especially by the poetry Alexander Carmichael was collecting. His posthumously-published *Iona* (MacLeod [Sharp] 1910) and other works, including his later poetry, had considerable influence on the artists who

visited the island (MacLeod [Sharp] 1895; 1910; Elizabeth Sharp 1910; Christian and Stiller 2000, 57–8). The folk-music collector and singer Margary Kennedy Fraser was a frequent visitor to Iona, and her ashes were buried there in 1932 (Christian and Stiller 2000, 62). Also resident on the island were the silversmiths Alexander and Euphemia Ritchey, who produced jewellery in Celtic designs, some of which were taken from the early Christian and medieval tombstones on the island. They had a significant library, to which MacLeod and his companions would have had access. It contained mainly nineteenth-century works on history and Celtic Studies, the writings of Iona's literary visitors, and also a second edition of MacPherson's *Ossian*. [8]

The Iona Community—Early Days

Although, as will be argued, these earlier visitors and the contemporary artists had a profound influence on the development of celticity with regard to Iona, it nevertheless has to be borne in mind that the men who joined MacLeod, most of them previously unacquainted, lived to a different agenda, with a military-style timetable that combined spirituality and hard work. This was at variance with contemporary concepts of Celtic spirituality and of community. [9] The exclusively male company lived together, alongside but apart from the island families and summer visitors of both sexes. The men lived in temporary huts, bathed in the sea, said prayers together and engaged in work, although not before the students and ministers had listened to one of two daily lectures. The daily timetable was published in the Community's journal *The Coracle*. In 1941, the day started for the men at 6.45 a.m. with "reveille," followed, in order, by breakfast, worship, room inspection, worship, work, and hymn practice. They did, however, on this dry island, [10] get cocoa at 9.30 p.m. before lights out an hour later (*The Coracle* 5 [1940], 14; 1941, 13). A dark blue serge suit, intended to reflect the dress of island fishermen, was adopted (Ferguson 1998, 60). There was always morning and evening service, which all those working on the island were expected to attend, and, as photographs in the magazine pointedly attest, in working clothes. By 1948, pictures of women, hatless, in the choir stalls also appeared (*The Coracle* 1948, illustration).

The Sunday programme was a little lighter with a later start and some free time, but discipline remained strict. One Sunday in the 1930s, two members who had managed to go on a boat trip to the uninhabited Isle of Staffa were accidentally marooned there and finally rescued, only to be then confined to Iona by MacLeod.

Evenings were regularly taken up by members being sent off in twos to visit the islanders in their homes, a practice that was not universally welcomed (Ferguson 1988, 60). Wives were allowed to visit, but only briefly, and were never permitted to stay with their husbands, an arrangement that caused lasting unhappiness. Although MacLeod eventually married and raised a family, the Community membership remained exclusively male. While there were many women who were friends and associates of the Community and also acted as fundraisers, it was only in 1969 that the first woman was admitted to membership—after MacLeod had relinquished leadership.

Through using *The Coracle* to influence discussion, liturgies for services were developed in order to accommodate people from varying backgrounds, many of

whom were not regular churchgoers but those who came to “conferences” on the island—which were to be the precursors of regular youth camps and other activities. Even during the Second World War, up to two hundred people took part in summer conferences that had social and industrial themes. By the 1940s, these in no way reflected the modern Celtic movement as the conferences dealt with such topics as “Communism and Christianity,” “The Church and Psycho Therapy,” and the abolition of the death penalty. The youth activities continued to grow, attracting young men and women who lived in (separate) camps. MacLeod found volunteers to run these, and the attendees came from a variety of backgrounds, both deprived and affluent, and increasingly also from overseas. A volume entitled the *Camp Song Book* from this period includes many favourites of the time, including parodies on “Clementine” and a Glaswegian satire on their town.

MacLeod describes the Community as it was in 1956, having one hundred and forty members (thirty of them working abroad) drawn from a variety of professions and occupations, although the large majority were young Church of Scotland ministers. There were also over six hundred men and women Associates, a large number of Friends (of the Community), and a Community House in Glasgow—which provided opportunities for education, socialising and debate in the centre of the original deprived urban heartland (*The Coracle*, 1956). Activities of

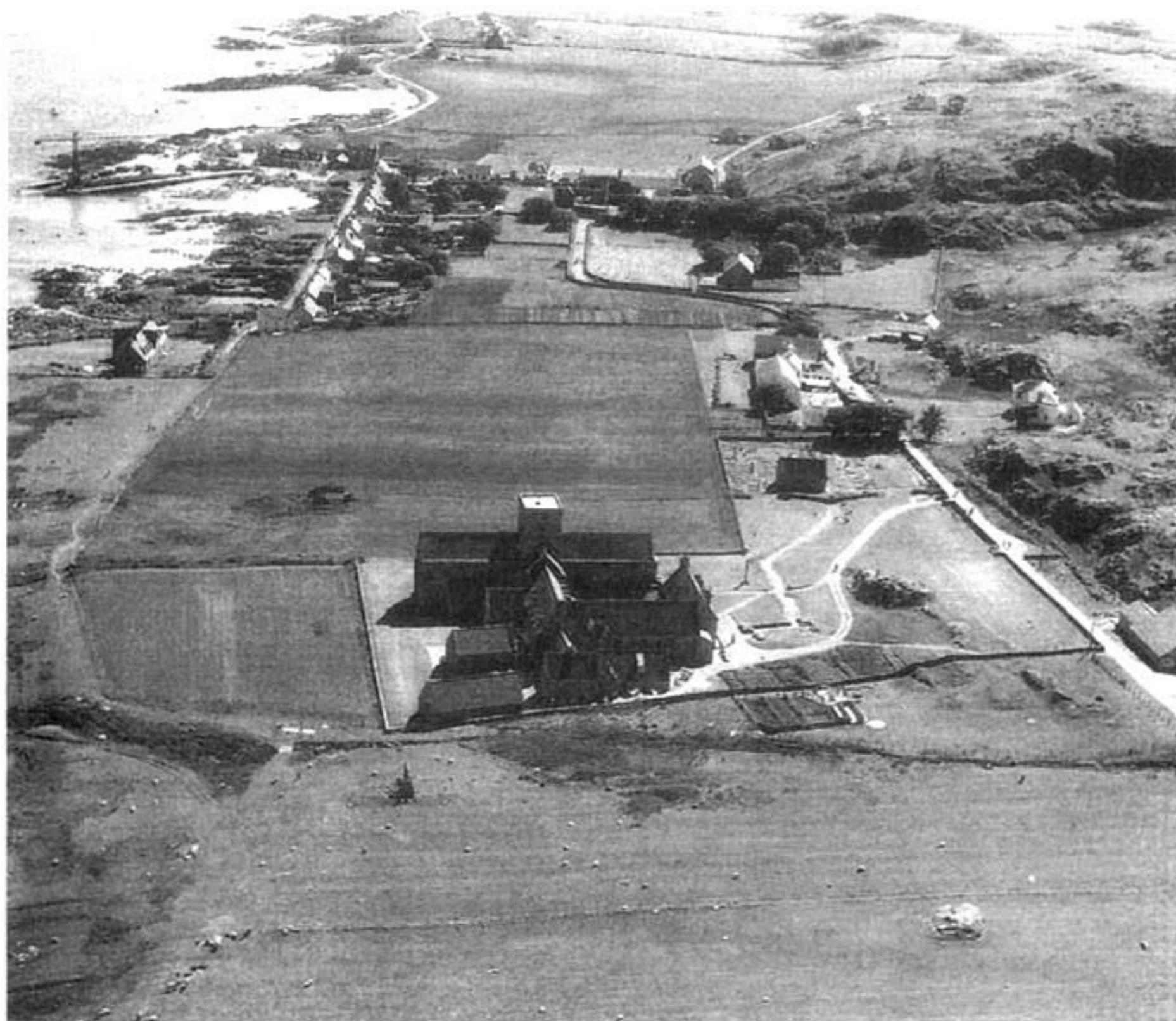


Figure 3. Iona: Aerial view of the rebuilt medieval Abbey. Early Christian ramparts to the left; the home stream in the foreground (Ritchie 1997, 20). (Crown copyright: RCAHMS).

this kind, and later anti-nuclear activism, have not influenced the common understanding of Celtic spirituality.

Worship was always a key part of the island experience, and, from the outset, it was related to the pattern of work—work and prayer being perceived as flowing one into the other. The Benedictine balance of prayer, work, and study was seen as the key precedent, although it was adapted to the needs of reformed Protestants, many of whom were family men.

Leaflets and books of worship were printed for use in the abbey, and MacLeod and others used these publications to develop Celtic roots for their activities. They proved to be saleable to a broader market as well, because they provided a departure from formal worship in the Church of Scotland, and appealed to a wider audience. [11]

Developing Celtic Themes

MacLeod and his colleagues had as their main concern the revival of Christianity, its expression in contemporary forms, and engagement with social activism. There are constant references to the Celtic spirituality in the early issues of *The Coracle*, probably intending to deflect criticism from current activities. MacLeod's methods were frequently unorthodox. One of the 1939 donors to the Community was the Icelandic Society of London, whose letter by the writer Jón Stefánsson was published in *The Coracle* between a lengthy piece dealing with action to alleviate poverty in housing-scheme areas, and a discourse on the building work (*The Coracle* 2 [1939], 8). In this letter, in a nice glossing-over of Viking activity, Iona is credited with having taken "the light of the Gospel to the shores of our native land in the far north." Jón Stefánsson and his contemporaries, proud of the Gaelic element in their ancestry, had developed the account in the medieval *Kjalnesinga saga* of the Irishman named Ørlygr, who on the advice of a Bishop Patrekr settled in Iceland, where he dedicated his new church to Saint Columba (Halldórsson 1959, 3–5). This kind of embellishment was much to the taste of MacLeod, and a later issue of *The Coracle* developed the account accordingly. This was an occasion not for history, but for preaching.

Many of the apparently Celtic references have been provided from his own imagination to fill the gaps left by historical knowledge. This was done not primarily for artistic effect but as part of the process of "recovering" tradition for religious purposes. An example of this is to be found in his treatment of the fourth-century St Martin of Tours, "one of the very greatest of our Celtic saints" (*The Coracle*, 1948, insert) who is associated with a free-standing ring-headed high cross to the east of the abbey. This saint, a favourite of MacLeod's and others, was, it is said, the source of scriptures brought by Saint Ninian from Martin's monastery to Whithorn, and were ultimately copied by Saint Columba (Cattanach 1939, 13). In the 1948 issue of *The Coracle* he had acquired a Celtic father and Hungarian mother, while St Ninian of Whithorn is said to have studied at St Martin's (unidentified) abbey. Authorities are provided for these statements when the text goes on to matters likely to be known in some way to their audience. Both St Martin's Abbey and the Celtic Church are credited with being independent of Rome, the latter being a common Presbyterian belief. Reference is made to the dating of Easter and the shape of the tonsure—both issues taken

from Bede's (2001) *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a work to which the modern movement has ascribed assumptions regarding authority. The account also makes the biblical St John the patron saint of the Celtic Church, a significant matter as another ring-headed but ruined cross on the abbey site is associated with his name. The piece goes on to assure the reader that the new silver cross on the abbey Communion Table, a photograph of which was included, represented in its Celtic ring-head style "the sun of Creation superimposed upon a Cross" (*The Coracle* 1948, insert). This is the crux of the argument, for the use of a liturgical cross of any description (and on what was a replacement for the medieval altar) had aroused severe censure from within the Church of Scotland (Ferguson 2001, 194–5). MacLeod sought, by providing a Celtic authority for the cross, to deflect in advance criticism from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and, perhaps more alarmingly, from the island's minister.

While support for the Community came from a wide range of people, many of the attitudes it held were very different from those associated with the modern understanding of Celtic spirituality. Apart from the position of women, MacLeod, who accepted money from the rich, did not hesitate to refer to "a humble soul in Glasgow, typical of many who encourage us" (*The Coracle* 1941, 30–1). Equality might be the ideal in the rebuilding of the abbey, but in terms of intellectual output and social standing, MacLeod's Community was of its time. Similarly, modern expectations of cross-denominational work have little in common with the attitudes of the period. Early on, there were prayers for the "Universal and Early Church," which named the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, Anglican and Lutheran Churches, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and "our own Communion (Church of Scotland)" (*The Coracle* 1941, 17). Catholics were not mentioned.

The Holy Communion service for 1956 was still Presbyterian in form, but MacLeod claimed a common tradition for his own time and presented it in terms of connecting with ancient ritual:

The form used is closely related to the early Celtic Church and to the sequence of the Communion service of the reformers. But we do not follow it for that reason. We do it for the same reason as they did it—because by performing it in any age it makes available once more the experience of our membership together in Christ, and steels us to go sailing with him in the rescue of a shipwrecked world (*The Abbey Services of the Iona Community*, 1956, 16).

This introduction, however, is followed by a standard Church of Scotland service, although it also contains a few of MacLeod intrusions, such as a "Prayer of the Veil," and the following instruction concerning the elements for Communion:

These are to consist of loaves of bread from the Community House, Youth Centre and Fishing Station (now known as Camas), so that "the whole life is brought forward. In the Celtic church, they so brought forward the 'ordinary bread' to be blessed and to be partaken of later at their midday meal."

While few of those directly associated with the Community were unlikely to have sufficient knowledge of the early "Celtic Church" to be able to contradict MacLeod, assured claims of this kind were probably meant as a form of protection against criticism. The Celtic element was something that could be invoked in order

to enable him to do what he felt was needed, but the actual practices have much in common with Eastern Orthodox tradition.

In spite of the many references to Celtic practice, the liturgies themselves show little evidence of Celtic content or associations. In 1963, when celebrating the fourteenth centenary of St Columba's arrival in Scotland, a liturgy of the Church of South India was used. Music and liturgy had always been part of what attracted people to the Community, and there was a choirmaster among the original group. Celticity was to develop in the 1970s and 1980s, when the island and the Community became widely known in Christian circles beyond Scotland, for liturgical experiment and hymnody.

This was also taken up in the liturgies when they were printed in book form, appearing first as *The Iona Community Worship Book* in 1988. This relied heavily on Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, and was consciously poetic. In order to try and retain some of the cadences and verbal patterns of the Gaelic language of the original poems, Carmichael's English translations of the *Carmina Gadelica* are replete with prepositional forms that have never been standard English, and a regular use of the present continuous tense where the simple present would be normative. These forms are found in the liturgies and have also been widely used by many other writers of the movement, in particular by David Adam.

The *Iona Community Worship Book* was reworked in 1991, and in the process the social justice element became less focal, the rhythms and verbal forms of the *Carmina Gadelica* became more evident, and, for the first time, a specifically "Celtic Evening Liturgy" was introduced (*The Iona Community Worship Book* 1991, 54–6). This volume also contains a well-known piece by William Sharp—the writer of the *Pagan Review*—which was written towards the end of his life, under the pen-name Fiona MacLeod. His poem, "Invocation of Peace," is in the revised collection called *From the Hills of Dream* (MacLeod [Sharp] 1907). It was reprinted in a work entitled *An Iona Anthology*, first published in 1947 by the Iona Community. There the poem is said to be "from the Gaelic," but it was also on occasion attributed to one Alan Dall ("Blind Alan"). At some stage after Sharp's death, a number of lines from the poem were selected, and used, with a slight adaptation, to create a shorter well-known poem, which is sometimes set to music, and is usually credited with being an anonymous "ancient Celtic blessing":

Deep peace of the running wave to you,
 Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
 Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,
 Deep peace of the shining stars to you,
 Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you. [12]

MacLeod's love of the Orthodox Church ceremonies led him to suggest that people knelt for prayer. Sitting while praying, he declared, had only been a Church of Scotland custom since 1875. This innovation was perhaps going too far, and did not last. Later, his commissioning of new members to the Community as part of the Thursday night "Act of Belief" is thought to have been much influenced by Orthodox tradition.

He was most successful with those aspects of liturgy that he introduced casually, in a context where there was neither the knowledge nor the courage to

contradict the source, and where his proposals met with approval. Already in the 1950s the annual service sheets were decorated with a picture of a Wild Goose, an image that remains on the Community's publishing imprint to the present day.

This "Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit" seems to have emerged from MacLeod's imagination in the late 1930s. Whether or not the deprived workers of the Gorbels in Glasgow had ever seen a wild goose, or the local islanders had feasted on whichever breed he had in mind, the symbol became a potent identifying feature of the Community's publicity. Its design took the form of a free adaptation from the *Book of Kells*, using its technique of closely interweaving animals into abstract interlace patterns. [13]

Another custom also originates from this period. Small cakes (of bread) were offered to the congregation on leaving the main church after the Sunday Communion, with the request to break and share them with a stranger in the area designated as the place of the "common life"—that is, the cloisters. This emerged as a highly effective means for enabling strangers to introduce themselves to each other. "This is Communion brought into the ordinary ways of life. This custom was practised in Iona in the sixth century" (*Abbey Services of the Iona Community*, n.d. [?1962]). There are no liturgical works surviving from the sixth century for Ireland and Britain, nor is this practice referred to in later texts, but it became identified as "an ancient Celtic custom" because of the practice on Iona, and specially baked small round oatcakes came into use. The practice developed out of Orthodox custom, both Greek and Russian, the former of which could date back to the sixth century. [14] Examples of this kind of innovative measures, which had poetic value or were obviously effective, became accepted during MacLeod's lifetime, and their origins have been questioned only in recent years, as a result of the backlash to the recent Celtic revival.



Figure 4. George MacLeod in the library of the Abbey of Iona in 1943 (from Ferguson 2001).

Images of shipwrecks, veils, and the iniquitous Wild Goose (or at times Geese) are found repeatedly in his poems, prayers, and polemical writings (*The Coracle* 1 [1938] 3; MacLeod 1985). When in his nineties, and by then Lord MacLeod of Fuinary, he completed a trenchant attack on what he saw as the spiritual devaluation of life by American policy and economic practice, with a "Reverie" that contains previously-used images, and ends with reference to the later Irish prophecy attributed to Colum Cille of the fall and revival of Iona:

The Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit is not a Dove. But the Wild Geese; flying high in V shaped formation, the leading bird from time to time giving way to another at the point of the V. True leadership is in Fellowship, taking the brunt by turn. Could the time come in the Abbey when Ecumenicity would be fully declared? One Sunday High Mass would be celebrated. The next Sunday would be declared the primitive Presbyterian mode when the large common loaf would be shared round a long common table. We have recovered too the early Celtic Traditions that, as you leave the Church, you receive a piece of the Blessed Bread. This you then break with any stranger you have never met before—Communion out into all the world! And the next Sunday the Society of Friends would lead us in silent contemplation and then taking us to the Refectory to remember that every common meal is the Table of the Lord? Each in turn would take the brunt. The Holy Spirit would reveal Himself as fully as at the first free Pentecost. It has not happened yet. But Iona will be as it was (MacLeod 1972, 40).

MacLeod's description of Iona as a "thin place" or a place where the "veil is thin," a description he used repeatedly in his writings, may also date from the 1930s, and may have originated from the writer George MacDonald. While it has some Celtic Twilight resonances, its source is ultimately biblical, where it refers to the veil of the Temple and to the division between this world and the next (Hebrews 6:19 and repeatedly in 2 Corinthians). There are also allusions to "thin places" in Greek and Russian Orthodox tradition. [15] The literary uses of the image in the early twentieth century, however, refer to the idea that the veil between the fairy world and the mundane is thin. On Iona, dreams and visions were accepted as being of significance (see Christian and Stiller 2000, 66), and MacLeod's use of the "thin place" image (MacLeod 1985, 60), became firmly established. A report of the funeral in 1994 of John Smith, leader of Britain's Labour Party, who was buried on the island, states that MacLeod described Iona as "a very thin place where only a tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual realm". [16] The image continued, however, independent of MacLeod's use of it, in children's literature to describe the boundaries between mortal and otherworldly nature.

Celtic Spirituality after MacLeod

While the social justice aspects remained high on the agenda after MacLeod's resignation as Leader in 1967, the Community became well-known for liturgies and hymnody that were already developed when the current Celtic movement took off in the 1980s. Music, liturgical material, and popular theological works are still produced by Wild Goose Publications, but few of these are specifically Celtic. That this is a theme that has clearly grown with the development of Celtic spirituality generally is evident from the fact that the early liturgical pamphlets contain Celtic references interspersed with much that is quite different. The earlier edition of the *Iona Community Worship Book* (1988) contained an increased amount

of prayer derived from, or in the style of, the *Carmina Gadelica*, but the focus remained elsewhere. The revised *Iona Community Worship Book* (1991) introduced a great deal more of the Celtic kind of material, including its "Celtic liturgy." This was supplemented by the *Wee Worship Book* (Wild Goose Worship Group 1989; 1999), which kept the cadences of the *Carmina Gadelica* but also retained the social activist approach. More recently, the *Iona Community Worship Book* (1991) was replaced with an *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (2001), which contains material that is less evidently Celtic. Formerly, traditional Scottish and English folk tunes were published with new words, giving yet more accreditation of celticity, while more recently African and South American tunes have predominated. The words of the songs place an emphasis on poverty and realism, but seem to be widely acceptable, even among audiences with relatively few social agenda.

Iona, in all its manifestations, may sit uneasily with a movement that makes the island regarded as the repository for an ancient and recoverable tradition. The activities that take place there, however, together with its geographical position, make it inevitable that it remains subject to expectations of celticity in Scotland and beyond. It is a focal point in a way that less established centres are not. The Northumbria Community, focused on north-east England, is more explicitly Celtic in its approach as expressed in public talks and activities, and has to some extent



Figure 5. Iona Abbey Cloisters after Sunday Service. Photograph: Rosemary Power, 2003.

modelled itself upon Iona with its dispersed membership. Its *Celtic Daily Office*, which contains both "Celtic" themes and prose and poetry selected from all periods and places, has recently been republished in paperback (see Northumbria Community 2005). Another Christian group, The Community of Aidan and Hilda, is centred on Holy Island (Lindisfarne) off the coast of Northumbria, where the monastery was originally founded from Iona in the late sixth century, and is consequently regarded by many as the centre of the English "Celtic Church." This view is reinforced by the writings of the former vicar, David Adam (see [3]). A small community emulating the Iona Community formed for a time among the many expressions of spirituality at Glastonbury in Somerset (Bowman 2004, 276).

The Othona Community at Bradwell-on-Sea in Essex was established just after the Second World War by a contemporary of MacLeod's, and acquired land just beside the Saxon chapel, which is both regularly visited and encountered unexpectedly by walkers of the coastal path. The chapel was founded by a sixth-century Northumbrian bishop and is thus seen by many as part of the original Celtic church. [17]

The Corrymeela Community, which in many ways emulated the Iona Community, was established in Northern Ireland in the early 1960s and developed a specific ethos in response to the political and social nature of Northern Ireland during the last two generations (Ferguson 1988, 107). Corrymeela does not have the ancient sense of place that makes Iona, Holy Island, and Bradwell-on-Sea significant to many visitors, and the Celtic agenda has been less used in a society where both Catholics and Presbyterians would possibly view it as their particular heritage rather than necessarily as a tool for the Community's key aim of reconciliation.

The island of Iona has a number of centres, including one owned by the unaffiliated spiritual Findhorn Community, where visitors can stay. [18] It is an island where church groups in particular can enjoy a relatively inexpensive communal holiday, and is widely used for this purpose. Some come for a spiritual experience or return regularly because they have had such an experience on the island. Others come because they believe that Iona has a particular immanent spiritual strength, and Druids and others may meet there. The island and the islanders accommodate a wide variety of open-air activities and up to two thousand day-visitors in the summer months.

Celtic Christianity, in particular that perceived to be expressed through the Iona Community, has had an impact further afield. It has become popular in Germany, and increasingly also in Sweden. Norway has a potential equivalent to Iona in the ruins of the medieval monastic buildings on Seljø, the island off the coast of Trondheim area associated with a mythical Irish saint, Sunniva. There is increasing interest in all things Celtic in Greece, and in an interesting parallel to MacLeod's fascination with Orthodox Christianity and the presence of a small Celtic Orthodox Church group in Glastonbury, one of a series of detective novels featuring a seventh-century Irish nun as sleuth, is set at the Synod of Whitby and has been translated into Greek (Bowman 2004, 276; Tremayne 1994).

Conclusions

None of the organisations that use the island of Iona appears to have set out to identify themselves as specifically Celtic, but when an interest in this cultural and religious aspect developed in the 1980s they found that others expected them to be at the heart of the Celtic movement. Given Iona's significance in the Celtic revival of later nineteenth-century Scotland (Christian and Stiller 2000) and the publicity gained during the rebuilding of the Abbey, this was probably inevitable. The Celtic element became a focal point for a time due to the work and reputation of one forceful and poetic writer—George MacLeod—who used images from published sources and his own imaginative interpretations of his experience, to serve the perceived needs of his time and Church.

The term "Celtic" was used in this period largely as an extended metaphor. For George MacLeod it provided an imaginative dimension to the Community's work and image, and as no one in the Community or among the visiting public apparently had the specific academic knowledge, or the will, to challenge him, his interpretations became established as fact. When new Celtic conceptions developed in the later twentieth century, there was an expectation that the island, and the Community that bore its name, would be in the forefront of the popular Celtic movement, although its members actually saw their priorities elsewhere. To some extent, the Celtic attribution was accepted by the Community and others in Britain and Ireland as a tool for spirituality and liturgy. As a contribution to the Celtic Christian spirituality movement, whether intentional or otherwise, Iona, and to a lesser extent other modern centres, have had a role. In the case of Iona, this was partly due to the production of successful liturgical works and hymnody, while in the case of others, like the Northumbria Community with its *Celtic Daily Office*, it arose from the publication of a collection of prayers for daily use.

The character and intellect of MacLeod, his access to a good Celtic library, and the presence on the island of artists and writers in the period up to the 1930s must have influenced his version of the Celtic phenomenon, which in turn provided a basis for later development by others. MacLeod's primary interest, and that of his colleagues, was, however, derived from his commitment to social justice, the alleviation of mental and physical poverty, and his desire to make Christianity and church-going attractive to those who had no regular experience of either. Knowing that his experiments in these areas and, in particular, his social activism made him a controversial figure, he produced Celtic roots to countermand in advance criticism from the Church of Scotland, whether this was likely to be from the centre or from the ministers and other inhabitants of Govan or Iona. The approach taken by MacLeod and his colleagues relied on the Presbyterian view of religion found in Scotland and Northern Ireland; that is, that the Reformed tradition was the purest form of the Early Church. Consequently, what could be "reclaimed" or "re-discovered" could be presented as part of the Reformed heritage. The absence of references to Roman Catholicism may be due, in part at least, to a desire to ensure that the liturgical practices based on Orthodox Christian origins were not misinterpreted as deriving from Roman Catholic worship. They may relate, too, to a wariness, institutional rather than theological, and the need to ignore Catholic views among the Glasgow Irish, that they were the true, direct successors, both of the universal Early Church and of its insular Celtic version.

While having a limited knowledge of the primary source material, MacLeod and his colleagues also selected those aspects that appealed to the imagination and a sense of romance, reworking them as occasion demanded. In this way they were able to influence others to accept them because there were few in this milieu with the confidence or desire to state that something was, or was not, "Celtic." The combination of an attractive personality, charm, and evident commitment usually carried the day. What MacLeod proposed worked, reaching the desired goal of attracting people to his work and Community. Celtic spirituality became more widely accepted after his time, and then, in part at least through music, the area in which he was weakest and contributed least. But the imagery he produced and the goals he had in mind certainly contributed to the expectation that Iona was the "world centre" of Celtic Christianity.

The result was unexpected and only tentatively owned, but it provides an example of the ways in which a small group could influence a movement, and in this case contributed substantially if, unintentionally, to the development of modern Celtic spirituality.

Notes

Some early issues of *The Coracle* (Iona Community periodical) are unnumbered, and can be identified by year only. Page numbers can be erratic, and there are occasionally unnumbered inserts. Many of the articles are anonymous and it is likely that they can be attributed to MacLeod.

- [1] The final poem, originally entitled "The Celtic Twilight," in a collection of supernatural writings by W. B. Yeats, gave its name to the publication *The Celtic Twilight* (Yeats 1893) and to much of Yeats's writing and that of others who were influenced by him during the Irish Literary Revival (c. 1890–1920). See Welch (1996, 92–3 and 311).
- [2] Some universities, for example the University of Wales at Lampeter, now offer postgraduate degrees in the subject.
- [3] A leading proponent is David Adam, for many years vicar of Holy Island (Lindisfarne) off the Northumbrian coast, which is a major place of "Celtic" pilgrimage. For over twenty years he has written poems based loosely on *Carmina Gadelica* texts—a six-volume collection of the Gaelic texts and Carmichael's translations (Carmichael 1900–71, 1992; Adam 1995), and reflections in the same form on post-industrial lifestyles (Adam 1992). He has also produced meditations on ancient Irish poetry known through well-known translations such as that of Kuno Meyer (1911; Adam 1987) or Eleanor Hull (1912; Adam 2001), and through the very loose translations made by proponents of the movement (van de Weyer 1990, 30; Adam 2000); and also anthologies and reflections on saints' lives (Adam 1993; 1997). Other proponents include Mackay 1989, Mitton 1995 and O'Donohue 1999. Some academics, including Gilbert Márkus and Thomas Clancy (1995; see too Brown and Clancy 1999) and Donald Meek (2000), have written against modern interpretations of "Celtic" Church and spirituality.
- [4] In this it is linked with other revivals; that of Irish music being the most established and that of Irish dance the most commercially successful. See also O'Donohue (1997), whose book was a bestseller in Ireland. Its eclectic nature is matched by other works such as the *Celtic Daily Office* of the Northumbria Community.
- [5] Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*—six volumes of Gaelic texts and Carmichael's translations (1900–71), published and reprinted sporadically for the Scottish Academic Press. Compilations of the English religious texts appeared in Scotland in the early 1960s, and similar collections

such as those of Alastair MacLean's were available in English (MacLean 1937; 1961; see also Reith 1975), but none seems to have had widespread influence. The collection became more widely known when Esther de Waal (1988; 1991) published the English texts of the religious poetry in 1988, and acceptance and emulation followed. All Carmichael's English texts were published in a single volume in 1992, with a Preface by John MacInnes (1992). Some of the material, while it is not unusual for collections of this period, alarmed at least one writer when it was found to cover charms, fairy tradition and apparently occult material (Mitton 1995, 173).

- [6] In addition to his own wartime experience, MacLeod was also influenced by his older friend P. B. Clayton, founder of the of the Christian "ToCH," which grew out of a First World War spiritual movement that linked men across Christian denomination and military rank (Ferguson 2001, 79). The growth of the Community and details of MacLeod's life have been written about by another former Leader, the Scottish minister and journalist Ron Ferguson (1998; 2001). Norman Shanks (1999), also a former Leader, continues the history of the Community to recent times. An oral history project designed to collect the stories of others associated with the early days of the Community, ran from 2004 until 2005, Some of the material is to be published by Wild Goose Publications (*Iona Community*, in press, Glasgow).
- [7] These are the accounts of the Dean of the Isles, Donald Monro (Monro 1934, 498–500), the account of the ruinous state that led King Charles I in 1635 to donate £400 for the upkeep (see McNeill 1947, 49–50), the visit in 1688 by the former Governor of the Isle of Man (Sacherverell 1859, 100–9), the description by the Hebridean Martin Martin at the end of the seventeenth century, first published in 1719 (Martin 1934, 286–91), and the late-eighteenth-century accounts by Pococke, Pennant, Johnson and Boswell (Pococke 1887, 80 and 83; Pennant 1774–75; Johnson 1817, 230–7; Boswell 1936, 330–9). See also Ferguson (1988, 43–5).
- [8] James McPherson (1736–96), Scottish poet and author whose poems of Ossian, first published in 1760, were immensely popular and influential all over Europe (MacPherson 1765; Welch 1996, 438).
- [9] A remark previously attributed to the artist F. C. B. Cadell that on Iona it was a case of "stink or swim" was soon attributed to MacLeod (Christian and Stiller 2000, 60). Rutherford (2004) included this phrase, and also "The Celtic clergy bathed in the sea every day of the year," a comment that has echoes of MacLeod's way with words. See Ferguson (1998, 59).
- [10] In common with many Scottish islands where Presbyterianism is dominant in religious practice, no alcohol was sold—a cause of lamentation among artists (Christian and Stiller 2000, 60).
- [11] Printed by the Iona Community, many have no date. Themes of celticity are developed within them, often in parallel to accounts published in *The Coracle*
- [12] *Iona Community Worship Book* (1991, 58). See MacLeod (1907, 26) and McNeill (1952, 58–9), where in both cases Fiona MacLeod is named as the translator. Extracts of many of Sharp's other writings as MacLeod's are also included. Originally, the "shining stars" of the text quoted were "the Flock of stars," and were divided from the preceding lines by invocations of "Yellow Shepherd" and the "Wandering Shepherdess." They were followed by invocations to Saints Mary and Brigit. The verse is currently found in a multitude of Pagan and Christian publications, and websites. One such use is by the Baptist Union of Great Britain (1991, 141), as part of the Funeral Liturgy's "Act of Committal."
- [13] This was believed to have been started in the late eighth century but taken to the inland monastery of Kells in Ireland in the early ninth century to protect it from Viking raids. It is now in Trinity College Library in Dublin. Ferguson relates that at a chance meeting on Iona with Eammon de Valera, then Irish Prime Minister, MacLeod jokingly asked for it back (1988, 89–90).

- [14] There are similarities to the Greek "antidoran," which involves bringing blessed bread to people not taking Communion at the end of the liturgy, and to the Russian practice of "prosphora," the taking of bread to people who were unable to attend church. A similar tradition referred to as *pain sacré* ("sacred bread") was also found in western Christian tradition (Bede Gerrard, pers. comm., August 2005).
- [15] The Greek Orthodox tradition goes back to the sixth century, and there is a specific October "Feast of the Protecting Veil" (Bede Gerrard, pers. comm., August 2005). The image appears in contexts such as in the eighteenth-century hymn *Amazing Grace*, by John Newton (1725–1807). This hymn is sometimes regarded as being Celtic. The tune played on the bagpipes made Top of Pops in 1972, at a time when many of the proponents of Celtic Christian spirituality were young adults.
- [16] McSmith, Andy, and Martin Wroe, "Smith is Laid to Rest Among Scottish Kings." *The Observer* (London) 22 May 1994, 1, photograph by Murdo MacLeod. Smith was originally from nearby Argyll and was a Gaelic speaker. As he had not been a resident, permission for his burial on Iona was a rare privilege. His grave became an additional place for pilgrims to visit.
- [17] Martin Wallace (pers. comm., 1996). The chapel is associated with St Cedd, known through Bede. It is built with the stones from the abandoned late-Roman fort of Othona.
- [18] See www.findhorn.org; INTERNET. Founded in eastern Scotland in 1962, it also has a small retreat centre on the neighbouring island of Erraid. It does not espouse any particular religion.

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