

# St Donnan the Great.

## Pictish Martyr.

### Died 617AD

Reprint of, "*St Donnan the Great, and his muinntir.*" Rev Archibald Black Scott, DD. Published in the Transactions of the Scottish Ecclesiological Society, vol i, part iii. Aberdeen. 1906.

The Teutonic expeditions which, early and late in history, entered the Moray Firth, destroyed many sources of information, and obscured many names eminent in the story of northern Alba. Nynia (better known as St Ninian,) Finbar, and Donnan are among the more prominent of those who stand out in the mists which came with the east winds that blew over the first frail boats of the Vikings, years before the long-ships were devised.

Donnan is the most distinct of the three figures, and it is remarkable that, in a land devoted to its Church, no native historian has thought of using the widely scattered traces of S. Donnan and his disciples to supplement the Irish records, and so bring the Martyr Saint into the historical foreground.

The minor Scottish writers generally dismiss S. Donnan with the remark he was the contemporary and friend of S. Columba, leaving the impression that he was one of the missionaries sent out from Iona while Columba was Abbot of Hi. The remark is only partially true; and the impression is altogether wrong. S. Donnan headed a very large mission into Scotland which was quite independent of Iona; and although it came from Ireland, there are indications that the head and members were not Dalriad Scots.

Archaeological students, unacquainted with the record concerning S. Donnan, who have studied only the remains of the ancient Church in the east of the four Northern Counties, have long been convinced that an efficient Christian organization, Irish in type, was established in north-eastern Alba in the period between S. Finbar and the first Teutonic invaders, alongside the Churches founded by S. Nynia. Owing to the differences of speech, and the not too friendly relations between the Dalriads and the Northern Picts, it is clear that this organization was not worked from Iona, to which it has sometimes been carelessly credited. On the contrary, the name, traditions, character, and period of certain Churches of the group indicate an origin from S. Donnan, Bishop and Abbot, who sent forth his Missionaries from his cell on the Ulligh, or Helmsdale River. For example, Fordyce in Banff-shire, and Strathmore in Caithness are separated by the whole breadth of the Moray Firth; but each place had a Church which tradition says was founded by a follower of S. Donnan. Fordyce was founded by Tarlogan (Lat. Talaricanus), and the Church of Strathmore by Ciaran, and a reference to the Martyrology of Tallagh shows that both were members of S. Donnan's muinntir. That S. Donnan's influence was more than local is also brought home to us by the recollection that his bachul was kept with great veneration in the Church of Auchterless, Aberdeenshire, until the Reformation.

Kildonan in Sutherland affords ample evidence of its former ecclesiastical importance. In the present parish there are eight sites of Churches belonging to the Celtic period, and several more in the neighbouring district. Tradition is quite clear in differentiating these Churches from S. Nynia's remains; and as they could not have been founded later, owing to the influx of the Vikings, they must have been founded by S. Donnan. Besides, S. Donnan's muinntir is the only organization known to the Irish records large enough to account for these Churches. What is still more convincing, the names of the Irish founders are contained in the Tallagh list of S. Donnan's

disciples.

So completely was S. Donnan associated with the scene of his labours in "Sutherland of the Catti," that one of the old authorities located his martyrdom at his Church there. The mistake was excusable, as geographers were few and far between, and the boundaries of the Catti never constant. Beyond all doubt S. Donnan perished in his Church at Eigg, on the 17th April, 617 A.D. Tradition says that the day was being observed as Easter Sunday, which is quite possible when we remember the Celtic usage. The Felire of Oengus the Culdee says -

"With the festival of Peter the  
Deacon,  
To glorious martyrdom  
ascended  
With his clerics of pure lives  
Donnan of cold Eigg."

The words, "Clerics of pure lives," confirm the tradition that when he was driven from Sutherland, he recalled to his muinntir those who had been sent forth to preach the Word, and to plant churches in the surrounding country.

Donnan is not to be confounded with Donnan son of Liath, nor with Donnan son of Beoadh, who both laboured in Ireland. Our S. Donnan is called "the Great," in the Irish records. He came from Ireland on the wave of missionary enthusiasm which passed over that country towards the end of the sixth century. It is calculated that he entered Scotland about the year 580 AD. He was accompanied by a much larger band of disciples than the twelve who accompanied S. Columba.

A string of facts suggests that S. Donnan was of the race of the Irish Picts, and had some regard for Nynia, and Candida Casa the first centre of Pictish enlightenment. For example, he began his work among the Picts of Galloway; and devoted the best part of his life to the Catti, one of the chief Pictish tribes in the north. Unlike S. Columba, he appears to have had no difficulty with the Pictish speech. His chief Church and muinntir were established in that district of the Catti where Nynia had long before set up a Church, and where Whithorn had sent Finnian, or Finbar, to continue Nynia's work for a time. It looks as if Whithorn had inspired S. Donnan also to take up work among the Northern Picts, more especially as we find Churches of S. Donnan or his disciples in the immediate vicinity of Nynia's Churches in Caithness, Ross and Inverness-shire. The curious result of the celebrated interview between Donnan and S. Columba, in which the senior abbot refused to be the *anam-caraid*, or soul friend, of the junior, is quite explainable if S. Donnan, as looks likely, differed in race and in ecclesiastical leanings from S. Columba. Again, S. Donnan and his disciples made themselves at home in parts of Pictland where no Dalriad could go without danger.

After Nynia, S. Donnan may justly be considered the greatest apostle to the Northern Picts. Not to mention the churches which he planted between Galloway and the Garry, nor the churches of his disciples, he himself planted churches from the Garry to the Pentland Firth, and from the North Sea to the Atlantic.

We can map out the greater part of S. Donnan's itinerary after he left Ireland, with perfect certainty. we know that at the interview with S. Columba he was on the eve of going North. We also know that he passed to the Atlantic sea-board from Sutherland. Consequently, he must have founded his churches in southern Ayrshire, Arran, and Kintyre, on his way to Iona.

The church which he founded at Munerigie, on Loch Garry indicates the route which he took to Sutherland. After leaving his cell in the east of Sutherland he is said to have attempted to settle, first, at Loch-Broom, and then at Eilan-Donnain in Kintail. In this little island at the mouth of dark Loch Duich there is a tiny boat harbour called "Sith-port" - Port of Peace - which one would like to

think, points back to the time when Donnan moored his skiff after a preaching tour among the islands.

The following are the places in which he founded churches. They are given in the calculated or known order of foundation.

Kildonan in  
Colmonell.  
Kildonan in  
Carrick.  
Kildonan in Arran.  
Kildonan in  
Kintyre.  
Kildonan on  
Loch-Garry.  
Parish of Kildonan,  
Sutherland.  
Kildonan, Little  
Loch Broom.  
Eilan-Donnain,  
Kintail.  
S. Donnan's, Uig.  
Kildonan in South  
Uist.  
Kildonan in Eigg.

Kildonan in Sutherland has always been warmly interested in the founded of its Church. Unfortunately, the parish suffered grievously during the Clearances, and through the deportation of the natives many ancient traditions concerning S. Donnan became attenuated or lost. Two places, however, have never been lost to memory. One is the "Suidhe Donnain," the other is the site of his cell.

The Suidhe Donnain or "Cathair Donnain" is now in pieces on the left bank of the Ulligh, near Balabhailidh. It was originally a large detached piece of rock with a big cavity on the upper side. By this stone S. Donnan rested when he passed to and fro in the strath. When the Ulligh was in flood and the people could not come to his cell, he went to the Suidhe Donnain and preached to them gathered on the opposite bank. The stone remained nearly entire until about the year 1839. Sometime later, owing to the disintegrating action of many sever winters, the rock fell into pieces, and it has been further dilapidated by workmen looking for building materials.

The site of S. Donnan's cell has been preserved by the Church and burial ground which still bear his name. As was frequent, the cell is at some distance from the locality of the muinntir. It is in a beautiful nook made by the meeting of the Alt Cill-Donnain with the river Ulligh.

The Church is associated with certain interesting remains. Behind the old Manse where there is an artificial-looking mound, used in the clan-period as a gallows-hill, which authorities, both old and recent, consider an ancient chambered burial-cairn. Anyhow, there is a large rough standing-stone beside it called Clach-na-h-Uaighe - stone of the grave. In the stone, a Cross of very primitive Irish type is rudely incised. Whose grave it is no one knows, but it is probably one of the oldest undisturbed graves in Scotland with a Christian marking. Westward, and near the Rock-pool on the Helmsdale River, are some remains called "Tigh-an-Ab", the house of the Abbot. These are more likely to be connected with the Abbot of Scone than with S. Donnan. The Abbot of Scone was

titular of Kildonan, and was usually represented by a vicar. One Abbot of Scone, at least, visited the Church, and interested himself in the salmon fishing on the Helmsdale. Tigh-an-Ab is described by Sage as a "long monastic building, low in the walls and steep in the roof, which was covered with grey flag taken from the neighbouring mountain, Beinn Thuairidh." Near it is a little sheet of water called "Loch-an-Ab."

No recognizable remains survive of the church buildings of the Celtic-period. The parish Church of the Roman period (1069-1560) was arranged with a choir and nave, and "a chapel at the West end." This chapel was the burial-place of the Chiefs of the Clan Gunn from the middle of the Thirteenth century. "Their mortuary chapel," says Sage, "was a small building with a Gothic window, attached to the church, and entered by a low-arched door." The part of this church when Sage began his ministry in 1787, was only "thatched with heather." In 1788 this venerable fabric" was taken down and a church with galleries erected on the same site. It is said that much of the old wood was worked into the new church. Even this church was not allowed to remain. Part of it was taken away, after the Clearances, by the heritor; and the wood-work was used to fit up a wayside inn. The church now known as "S. Donnan's" represents the other part. It is a small, plain building externally. Internally, it is made interesting by a tastefully built pulpit, with pews of the wood of the Caledonian forest. The auger holes which were bored through the original logs in order to lash them together when they were floated down the Spey still appear in the ill-dressed planks and boarding worked into the church.

The building, in one form or another, has passed through strange experiences. It has been a great centre of Irish missionary zeal; it has witnessed the plundering march of heathen Teutons; it has been cherished by the royal Abbey of Scone, less ancient than itself; it has been deprived of its congregation by a heritor more interested in sheep than in men. The exiles from this beautiful valley gave the first Presbyterian congregation, and the first Presbyterian minister, to Canada, where they founded Kildonan of Winnipeg. After years of desolation, when the sparrow had found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where S. Donnan was wont to celebrate the Holy Mysteries, it was turned into a school to save the pocket of the heritor; then gold-miners took possession and converted it gallery into a place of merchandise, and its aisles into places for hearths, where, instead of incense, the smoke of cooking fires ascended! Now, again, it is a place of worship where the Holy Communion is once more celebrated; and the vessels used are those from the Chapel Royal formerly belonging to Queen Adelaide.

The head-quarters of S. Donnan's "Family" were at Suisgill in Kildonan. The name of this place is manifestly a Norse modification of a Celtic name. The old natives speaking of it in English call it "the College." The name of the ancient Norse settlement facing it is Lear-bol, which looks like a translation; while "Suisgill" has always been connected by the old Gaelic speaking natives with "Sgoil."

Three names on the present lands of Suisgill point back distinctly to S. Donnan's muinntir. "Cnoc-an-Eiranach" means "hill of the Irishman." "Ach-an-Ernin" is S. Ernin's - one of S. Donnan's disciples. Near the present house of Suisgill there is an outcrop of rock called "the Crois," on a smooth face of which a cross of distinctly primitive Celtic type was rudely cut. During recent years the figure has been much obliterated by weather. The wood surrounding this rock is called "Coille Cille-Marie." S. Mairie was also a member of S. Donnan's muinntir.

On both banks of the river at Suisgill there are abundant traces of a very large Pictish population. The hill above Learbol, besides hut-circles, burial-cairns, and brochs, has a remarkable arrangement of low upright stones arranged around a large standing-stone, on which is cut a tiny equal-armed cross.

From Suisgill those members of S. Donnan's muinntir who did not attend to the agriculture and pastoral work, went forth to teach the natives and to preach the Gospel in Northern Pictland. The

full list of S. Donnan's muinntir is preserved in the Martyrology of Tallagh. The authenticity of the names in this list is remarkably brought out by comparing them with the names of the Celtic Churches in the district of Kildonan, Sutherland, without going farther.

Before presenting the Tallagh list it is proper to note that one of the Bollandists gratuitously threw a doubt on it. He suggested that the names had been devised lest the Martyrs of Eigg should go nameless. The Bollandists have been so credulous in other matters that naturally this suggestion calls for remark.

Godefridas Henschenius is the Bollandist responsible. He did not himself extract the Eigg names from the Martyrology of Tallagh for the *Acta Sanctorum*; but had them communicated by Thomas O'Sheerin, Lector of Theology in the Franciscan College, Louvain.

Henschenius not having seen the original manuscript, and knowing nothing of any other evidence concerning the Eigg Martyrs, was manifestly not in a position to question the Tallagh list. His action has the appearance of the old fault of a Roman writer being unable to do justice to the Celtic Church. The position of the Tallagh list of S. Donnan's disciples is as follows. No authority who has looked into the matter has seen reason to question the list. The genuineness of the manuscript from which the names are taken is beyond doubt. The Martyrology of Tallagh was written in the century after the martyrdom at Eigg. Anyone who has realised the prolonged tenacity of Celtic tradition in less important matters knows that it would not be difficult to preserve the martyr-roll to the time of Aengus and Maelruain the Tallagh martyrologists.

Entry concerning S. Donnan and his Companions in the Martyrology of Tallagh:-

"Donnani Egha cum sociis ejus LII; hi sunt -

Aedani, Tarloga, Mairie, Congaile, Lonain, MacLasre, Iohain, Ernain, Ernini, Baethini, Rotain, Andrlog, Carillog, Rotain, Fergusain, Rectaire, Connidi, Endae, MacLoga, Guretii, Iuncti, Corani, Baetani, Colmain, Ternlugi, Luggedo, Luctai, Gracind, Cucalini, Cobrain, Conmind, Cummini, Baltiani, Senaig, Demmain, Cummeni, Tarlugi, Finani, Findchain, Findchon, Cronani, Modomma, Cronain, Ciarian, Colmain, Naummi, Demmani, Ernini, Ailchon, Domnani."

It is manifest that the severest test to which we can subject this list is to compare it with the names of the Celtic Churches in Kildonan - names that have come down to us from the time of their foundation, through the Norse period and the stormy period of the Clans, little if at all modified.

The result is surprising. Not only can we trace the names of the founders of the Celtic Churches of Kildonan in the Tallagh list as we would expect; but we find the names of the founders of other Churches in the North who were presumed but not known for certain to belong to S. Donnan's muinntir. The following tables bring out the extent of the work of S. Donnan and his companions in what is now the parish of Kildonan and elsewhere in northern Scotland.

### **Kildonan, Sutherland.**

Church or Sacred Place.	Locality.	Name in Tallagh List.
Cill-Donnain.	Kildonan Church.	Donnan.
Cill-Ernain.	Kilernain, Kildonan.	Ernain.
Coille Cille Maire.	Suisgill.	Mairie.
S. John's.	Helmsdale.	Iohain.
S. John's Well.	Helmsdale.	Iohain.
Cill-Rect.	Navidale.	Rectaire.
Navidale.	Navidale.	Naummi (Navi).

Ach-an-Ernin. (S. Ernin's)	Suisgill.	Ernin
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### Elsewhere in Sutherland.

Cill-Ian. S. Calyne's (Aloyne's). S. Callen's. S. Murie's. S. Devinie's. Cill-Maillie. Ach-an-Ernin. S. Curetin's (Curdan). Kilmote. S. Colman's.	Parish of Clyne. Clyne Church. Rogart Church. Lairg Church. Creich Church. Ancient Church of Golspie. Clyne. Loth Church. Loth. Reay Church.	Iohain (Ian). Cucalini. Cucalini. Mairie. Demmain (Devain). Macloga. Ernin. Guretii. Modomma. Colmain.
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### Caithness.

S. Ciaran's. S. Fergus's. S. Fergus's.	Strathmore. Halkirk. Wick.	Ciarian. Fergusian. Fergusian.
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### Ross.

Seipeil-Donnain. Eilean-Donnain. Cill-Donnain. Tobar ma Cholmag. S. Aedan's Well. Killearnan. Balconie. Killen.	Courthill Loch Carron. Kintail. Little Loch Broom. Portmahomack. Fearn. Parish Church. Kiltearn. Avoch.	Donnan. Donnan. Donnan. Colmain. Aedani. Ernain. Connidi (Kenneth). Lonain.
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### North Inverness-shire.

Cill-Tarlogain.	Kintarlity Church (Keltalargyn 1279)	Tarloga or Tarlugi.
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### Banff-shire.

S. Talorgain's (Talricain).	Fordyce Church.	Tarloga or Tarlugi.
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The foregoing list is not exhaustive. There are places like Halladale, for instance, where remains of Celtic Churches exist, founded, almost certainly, from Kildonan; but their names have either been hopelessly corrupted or forgotten.

It frequently gives occasion for wonder in those regions to see, after all these years, the all-pervading heather holding itself reverently back from some ancient Cll; keeping green the site where some Irish missionary dwelt and laboured for God; while men have allowed his name and everything but the bare recollection of his work to fade. Norse invaders and unscrupulous clansmen have erased much; but the Church, by a little more intelligent interest, could have preserved a great deal concerning the distinguished Irishman and his brave followers who aspired to establish a second Iona in the midst of the stormiest tribesmen of Northern Pictland. Scenes that, in places, are now "lonelier than ruin"; and "stranger than death," carry evidence in their remains of having been very different when S. Donnan won them for God; before Wessex had embraced Christianity, or S. Augustine had secured himself in his chair in Kent.

The exodus of S. Donnan and his companions is understood to have taken place a year or two before 617 AD. It occurred under pressure. The tradition of Wester Ross was that he came thither from "Cattaibh" to seek safety and solitude in an island of the sea. The evidence of S. Donnan's parish goes to confirm the ancient tradition that those who drove him to wander in search of peace were the pioneers of the marauders from across the North Sea, whom we vaguely call Vikings. "Pirates of the ocean," they are called in one of the old records which tells how he received the Martyr's crown.

They have left peculiarly distinct traces in S. Donnan's parish. Their chain of positions in the valley of the Helmsdale tells its own story. Before the long-ships were built to accomplish the dangerous passage of the Pentland (Pictland), Firth, the Vikings had to maintain a land route to the easy waters of the north-west and west from the few creeks on the east of Sutherland, of which the mouth of the Helmsdale is one of the most convenient after avoiding the Pentland. In the Strath of Kildonan all the Viking positions are on the south bank of the Helmsdale river, while S. Donnan's own settlements are on the north bank. Such an arrangement effectually isolated the saint from his friends. The Vikings were at this time heathens. The early date of their first appearance and the fierceness with which they were resisted, are vividly suggested by the finds of arrow-heads and stone weapons that have been made at the mouth of the Helmsdale and other adjoining Sutherland inlets. Manifestly the heathen marauders after effecting a landing would be in no mood to pay much regard to the Christian Saint, and we can understand how he set out for the shores of the Atlantic to seek that peace of which the traditions speak.

Peace, as S. Columba had prophesied to S. Donnan on his way northward, was not to be his lot. The prophecy was uttered in this way. Donnan visited Columba and requested him to become his anam-caraid, or director and adviser in spiritual things. One can well understand how the younger man entering on a mission in remote parts felt that he would be none the worse of the patronage of the great Dalriad. "I will not be anam-caraid," said Columcille, "to those who shall be heirs of red martyrdom for thou shalt come to red martyrdom and thy people with thee." The prophecy is well authenticated, and no one doubts that it was uttered. The question is: How much did S. Columba know?

We can hardly think that Columba's prophecy pointed to persecutors of Celtic race. Martyrdom was so absolutely rare in work among the Celtic races that neither Columba nor others had reason to dread it, and especially on a gigantic scale. Did Cormac, his disciple, or some other daring voyager from Hi, bring word of the presence of the heathen Vikings on the eastern mainland? We must remember, in this connection, that Nennius, whose historical accuracy has been vindicated by the better-read authorities, states that as early as 449 AD, Ochtha and Ebissa, whom he calls Saxons, came over with "forty keels," laid waste the Orkney Isles, and seized a great many regions beyond the "Frisic Sea," wherever that was. With very few data about the Vikings, Columcille could easily foresee not only what was in store for S. Donnan, but what was ultimately in store for Hi itself. Neither saint nor sanctuary was to be safe from the sacrilegious hands of the heathen from across the North Sea.

Some writers with very loose notions as to who the Picts were, have ascribed S. Donnan's martyrdom to them. They find confirmation of their ideas in S. Columba's distrust of the Northern Picts; and in fact that a ruling chieftainess instigated S. Donnan's death.

But in the later Norse settlements among the Celts ruling-women were by no means rare. There is the instance of Frakork in S. Donnan's own parish. Then the Martyrology of Donegal says that S. Donnan's murderers were "robbers of the sea." This is not a name which fits the Northern Picts, because they were most inexpert sailors. How much they learned of the sea from the Scandinavians can be realised by remembering that all terms for sea-worthy craft and their fittings are borrowed from the Viking speech. Of course, S. Columba distrusted the Northern Picts, because the Northern Picts had no kindly feeling to any member of a people who were threatening their territories on the south and west. Everything indicates that S. Donnan's persecutors were not the Picts.

The unadorned story of the martyrdom of S. Donnan and his companions as contained in the older records is as follows: Before S. Donnan settled in Eigg a certain woman of position was in the habit of grazing her cattle on the island. She resented the presence of the Saint and his people, and ordered them to be killed. The native people were shocked at the idea, and pointed out to her that such a thought was contrary to religion. Thereupon she persuaded robbers of the sea to fall upon the community and slay them all. The pirates came to the church while S. Donnan was celebrating the Holy Communion. Either because he was granted a short respite or for some other reason they permitted him to conclude the service.

Then, according to one account, the Abbot invited his people to march to the living-room. "We may not die," he said, "so long as we remain in the joy of the Lord; however, let us go where we refresh our bodies and there pay the mortal penalty." When they were gathered together in the refectory it was set on fire, and the whole company perished in the flames, or by the weapons of the enemies who had closed them in.

S. Donnan's companions, who had followed him to many distant places, accompanied him to death. Two and fifty were his congregation. "All their names are in a certain old book of the books of Erin," quaintly observes the Martyrology of Donegal. They perished on the 17th April, 617 AD. The Felire of Aengus, the Kalendars of Cashel, Maguire, Donegal, of the Aberdeen Breviary, Adam King, and the Martyrology of Drummond commemorate them on the same date.

Two points in the story are worthy of note. (1) The people of the district had a much higher moral outlook than the chieftainess; (2) the Christian enemies of the Vikings were often despatched in the halls of Odin by the medium of fire.

The Celtic Church had rarely a martyr. The latter Church of Scotland became sadly familiar with them. Well did S. Donnan and his companions earn a place at the top of the shining roll of men and women sacrificed to religion and liberty in Scotland. There is a supernatural calm in the venerable Bishop and Abbot proceeding unfalteringly with the celebration of the Eucharist while the heathen fretted outside for his life and the life of his companions, and at the close of the sacred rite marching with his people to where their blood would not desecrate the Holy Place.

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