

III.

“IN OCEANO DESERTUM”—CELTIC ANCHORITES AND THEIR ISLAND RETREATS. BY J. M. MACKINLAY, M.A., F.S.A. (LOND. AND SCOT.).

No one can study the Annals of Hagiology without noticing the importance attached to the idea of solitude in connection with the lives of our early saints. Such solitude was usually sought in what was known in ecclesiastical language as a *desertum*,—a word that appears in topography as *Dysart* under a variety of spellings. To discover the origin of this custom of withdrawing from the world, we have to look to Egypt, where, as we learn from Montalembert,¹ Paul and Anthony, the Hermits, in the latter half of the third century, imitated the Baptist by withdrawing into desert places. Within a short time, life in a desert became very popular in the Nile valley. Before long the custom was transplanted to Europe, and took firm root there. We find unmistakeable traces of it in Ireland at a comparatively early date, and in Scotland a little later. Deserts were sometimes attached to monasteries. As Bishop Reeves remarks, “Those who desired to follow a more ascetic life than that which the society afforded to its ordinary members, withdrew to a solitary place in the neighbourhood of the monastery, where they enjoyed undisturbed meditation without breaking the fraternal bond.”² At Kells, in Ireland, there was a retreat for wandering pilgrims known as *Disert Columcille*, Kells having been one of St Columba’s foundations. St Fergnous, who was in Ireland when Columba died, retired to *Eilean-na-Naomh*, where he spent the rest of his life, partly under conventual rule, and partly as a solitary in a hermitage. St Becan, who died about 677, left Ireland—his native land—for Iona, and there became a hermit for

¹ *Monks of the West*, pp. 303-6.

² *Adamnan*, Introduction, p. 124.

several years, while Segenius, his uncle, was Abbat of the monastery.¹ The topography of Iona shows *Cladh-an-Diseart*, *i.e.*, the Burying-ground of the Desert, and *Port-an-Diseart*, *i.e.*, the Port of the Desert.

In Loch Lomond are two islands which formed the retreats of early saints. These are Inch-ta-Vannach and Inch-Cailleach.² The former is a steep island in Luss Parish. According to the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*,³ its summit is called *Tom-na-Clag*, *i.e.*, the Knoll of the Bell. Inch-ta-Vannach means the Island of the Monk's House. St Kessog, who flourished in the sixth century and was patron of the church of Luss, is said to have had a hermitage on the island. Inch-Cailleach, now in Buchanan Parish, but once itself a parish, means the Island of Old Women, *i.e.*, nuns. It was the retreat of St Kentigerna, sister of St Congan and mother of St Fillan of Strathdochart, who made the island her home during the later years of her life, and died there in 734.⁴

Guarding Lamlash Bay, where Haco's shattered ships sought refuge after the Battle of Largs in 1263, lies Holy Island, known to the Norsemen as Melansay, *i.e.*, the Island of St Molios. In the cliff, on the west coast of the island, is St Molios's Cave, some twenty-five or thirty feet above the present level of the beach. Here the saint, who was of Irish origin, is believed to have led the life of a hermit prior to visiting Rome about the year 630. The cave has Runic inscriptions, described by Sir Daniel Wilson in his *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*.⁵ A shelf of rock in the cave is known as St Molios's Bed; and a well on the shore below goes by the name of St Molios's Bath; while a block of sandstone, flat on the top and surrounded with a series of seats cut in the stone, bears the name of the Saint's Chair.

Island retreats are also to be met with on the east of Scotland. In the Firth of Forth, the Bass, Inchkeith, May, and Inchcolm are pointed

¹ Forbes's *Kalendars, Scottish Saints*, p. 277.

² Inch-ta-Vannach and Inch-Cailleach, though not in the ocean, can yet claim to be island deserts.

³ "Dumbarton," p. 157.

⁴ *O.P.S.*, vol. i. p. 32.

⁵ Vol. ii. pp. 279-81.

to by tradition as having been resorted to by Baldred, Adamnan, Adrian, and Columba, respectively. The last of these, whether St Columba set foot on it or not, bears his name. It was inhabited, in the first half of the twelfth century, by an anchorite, described by Bower as "eremita insulanus," who lived in an oratory, and devoted himself with zeal to the cultus of the saint. A ruined cell, still to be seen on the island, is believed to be the very oratory in question, and its architecture shows it to be older even than the twelfth century.¹ We know that there was a hermit living in later times on the Isle of May. In his *Records of the Priory of May*,² Dr John Stuart remarks, in connection with the visits of James IV. to St Adrian's shrine:—"There was a hermitage on the island, and its occupant frequently received alms from the King on his visits to the island. In the Treasurer's accounts are entered the payments made to him in June 1583 and August 1505. Three years later the hermit received a much larger gift than on former occasions, the reason of which may be inferred from the circumstance recorded that at this time 'he brocht ane selch to the King.'"

The sea, with its changes and mystery, appealed strongly to the imagination of the Celt. Many a hide-covered currach was launched on its waters, freighted with men anxious to find what lay across the waste of waters. In the early centuries of Christianity in Scotland, the discovery of what was known as "a desert in the sea" was an object of ambition. Thus we find Adamnan, in his *Vita Sancti Columbae*, alluding to the voyage of a certain man called Baitan, who, along with others, went in search of "a desert in the sea" (*in oceano desertum*). Before setting out, he asked St Columba for his blessing. The latter prophesied that Baitan would not be buried in the desert in the ocean whither he was bound, but in a place where a woman would drive sheep over his grave—a forecast said to have been verified. About the same time, St Cormac, Abbat of Durrow, sought a retreat in the ocean. So devoted was he to the quest, that he became known as *Cormac Leir*, i.e., Cormac of the Sea.

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. ii. pp. 439-528.

² Pref., p. 42.

Thrice he sailed in search of a desert, and thrice he failed to find one. The cause of his failure is not quite evident. Probably he did not feel inclined to settle down even after he found a suitable spot. Adamnan gives as the reason why he did not succeed in his second attempt, the fact that he had taken with him, as a companion, one under monastic rule without the sanction of his superior. But we have probably to look elsewhere for the real reason. There is no doubt that Cormac had a considerable choice of retreats, for he sailed as far as Orkney, and must have sighted many of the Western Isles.¹

None of the saints devoted to a sea-faring life were so famous as St Brandan, founder of the monastery of Clonfert in Galway. He is said to have voyaged for seven years in search of the land of promise of the saints. Dr Skene observes:—"The narrative of his seven years' voyage became one of the most popular tales of the Middle Ages, and numerous editions exist of it."² The story is full of fable, but there is no doubt that he visited many an island in the Hebridean seas. The saint died in 577. The sea-foam must have acted on him as a tonic, for he had then reached the advanced age of 95. St Brandan may have had more than one desert in the sea; but Culbrandon, an island in the Garveloch group, tells us that he had there found a retreat for a shorter or longer time; the name signifying in Gaelic "the corner or retreat of St Brandan." Culbrandon, along with the neighbouring *Eileanna-Naomh*, was granted in 1630 by Andrew, Bishop of Raphoe and Prior of Oransay, to John Campbell, rector of Craigness.³

To certain of these deserts in the ocean, Dr Mackinnon's remark is applicable when he says:—"The heaps of loose stones on such remote islands as North Rona in the North Atlantic, far out of reach of human dwellings, which, when examined, were found to be the remains of some hermit cell 'presenting the earliest type of Christian construction remaining in Scotland,' still testify to the mistaken but adamantine piety that

¹ *Adamnan*, pp. 11, 252, 71.

² *Celt. Scot.*, vol. ii, p. 76.

³ *O.P.S.*, vol. ii, p. 279.

braved the tempests of the open ocean and courted the isolation of some wild inhospitable rock." ¹ The searchers after a desert in the sea must indeed have been exposed to many a danger like the monks of Mont St Michel in Normandy, who (with less reason) are said to have been *in periculo maris*