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Our legacy from

Ninian of Galloway

Pilgrimage to "Whithorn of the five kingdoms"

By ANDREW PATTERSON

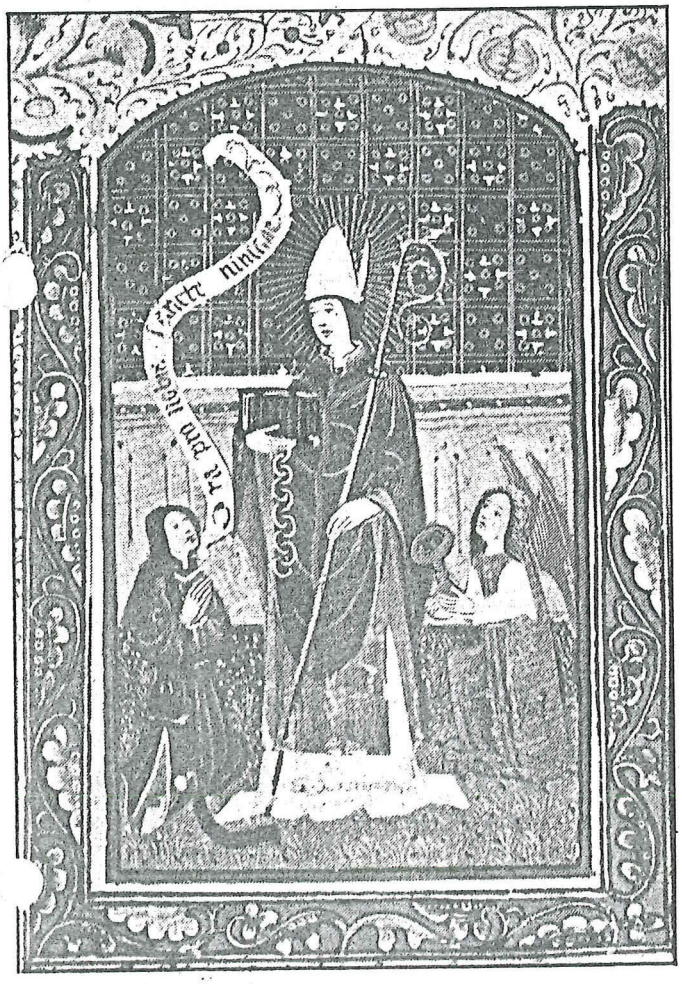
PILGRIMAGE seems to be an activity that is the common property of ery people and great creed.

To the Ganges, Lhasa, Mecca and many other places throng the pilgrims. Bushmen of the Kalahari and aboriginal Australians go walkabout in their dream-time. Fundamental to the Judaism which nurtured Jesus were the regular journeys to the Temple for the great festivals.

During the Christian centuries Jerusalem remained the great focus of pilgrimage. Dangerous journeys lasting years prohibited many from following the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa, but other more local centres of pilgrimage grew to prominence throughout Christendom.

In Scotland it was to Iona and Whithorn that pilgrims made the most frequent journeys. During the medieval centuries we should not imagine the pilgrim groups which approached Whithorn and Iona as being so very different from Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims.

Martin Luther was to declare that "all pilgrimages should be stopped". The Scots Parliament of 1581 was to take him at his word, and pilgrimage to Whithorn, Iona and all other centres became an activity proscribed by law.



"Even the Vikings could not conquer the achievements of St Ninian".

St Ninian, as depicted in a 15th century *Book of Hours*. *By courtesy of Edinburgh University Library.*

Luther and the Reformers had their reasons for attacking the ancient spiritual practice of pilgrimage. They emphasised that the essential spiritual journey is an inner one, where God's Grace can be encountered without intermediary. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an analogy of this inward journey to Zion.

Before the Reformation, credulous and unlearned pilgrims were prey to confidence tricksters playing on superstition. In Boccaccio's *Decameron* a pilgrim is depicted as returning from the Holy Land with a little bottle containing some of the sound of the bells of Solomon's Temple, and also with a feather which Gabriel dropped at the Annunciation!

In all honesty, pilgrims sought healing from bones thought to belong to long-dead saints. The cult of relics was particularly attacked by the Reformers, as was the practice of votive prayers to Mary or the saints.

And so for better and for worse, the Reformation destroyed pilgrimage in Scotland. Iona and Whithorn dwindled into quiet, neglected backwaters far from the main stream of Renaissance life that flourished in the burghs of newfound commerce and manufacture.

The world has changed in the four centuries since the Scots Parliament enacted its legislation against pilgrimage. Pilgrimage has re-enterd the Protestant lexicon. Thomas Cook Ltd extended their Grand Tours to include the Levant and the Holy Land in Queen Victoria's reign, and Lord MacLeod and the Iona Community have done much to restore Iona to the great religious centre it once was.

God willing, perhaps it is now time for Whithorn to fulfil the motto of the ancient Royal Burgh which for over a thousand years was a great focus of pilgrimage. The motto is "Resurgence"!

Fifth kingdom

Walking is the best way to see a landscape. The Machars of Galloway are a long finger of land stretching out towards the Isle of Man. It is a low, rolling landscape of green, drumlin hills interspersed with woodland and moor washed by the warm Gulf Stream waters of Luce and Wigtown Bays.

From the Machars, standing in Scotland, the eyes can travel overseas to England, Man, and Ulster. Whithorn has been called "Whithorn of the five kingdoms" because of this. The fifth kingdom? As a local saying has it, "Look above ye, man. Look above."

Perhaps in more than whimsy, on this remote peninsula there is the feeling that the veil between the mortal

(continued overleaf)

(from previous page)

and the eternal spheres is paper thin, that here the gates of heaven have been flung wide to shed abroad the light of God.

The Machars were settled by their earliest human inhabitants soon after the glaciers retreated at the end of the Ice Age. To walk along the peninsula to Whithorn under huge skies is to become aware of our forebears as the feet pass tumuli, dolmens, stone circles, Iron Age forts, brochs, Culdee chapels, ruined monastic buildings, and the Covenanter kirks that produced their literate and egalitarian peasantries. This is a precious and lovely land, rich in history.

Ninian's cave

The Whithorn Pilgrim Way will begin from near the old Cistercian chapter house of Glenluce Abbey. It winds through verdure as yet little spoilt by barbed wire, tarmac and the trappings of our materialistic world of modernity.

The pilgrims are led down to the sea by the fast flowing Water of Luce, overhung by large inland trees, until the great beach at the head of Luce Bay opens up into a seven-mile long strand backed by dunes and marram grass, but the Whithorn Pilgrim Way takes the rocky coast leading south. Cliffs with seapink and kittiwake lead on to Auchenmalg.

Inland by Mochrum Fell, past the White Loch, and back to the shore at Monreith, it is to a coast devoid of human habitation that the pilgrim travels until the remote cave of St Ninian's retreat is found.

From there it is a short hour's walk until Whithorn burgh is reached. Today it is a quiet, undemonstrative town, like many another in grey stone, scattered throughout Galloway.

And yet the burgh and the priory site of the dig are not the end of the way. At the southernmost tip of the peninsula is the Isle of Whithorn on which stands the ancient chapel of St Ninian. Here, at the edge of the land, the sky feels very close and the human world of commerce very far away.

To walk this Pilgrim Way is to become aware not only of our past, it is also hoped that respect for nature will be heightened. I believe that in green places there are angels. Does not Scripture say that we are the stewards of the planet? We should listen to the messengers of God in nature, then perhaps our species would be less destructive.

To go on pilgrimage is to seek to draw close to God and His will for each individual one of us. To go on pilgrimage is to seek to be changed for the better. It is also to walk with one's neighbour as Chaucer's pilgrims did, where the rank of ordinary life was set aside.

To walk is to talk and listen in the natural pace of the feet. It is peacemaking. It brings people together. Let us hope that so close as we are to troubled Ulster here, on the Whithorn Pilgrim Way, the differing peoples from there and elsewhere can find a new respect for each other.

Let us remember on the Whithorn Pilgrim Way the work of Ninian and his friends in bringing the Gospel of Christ in days long past. Let us remember who they were.

Roman Britain

Nurtured in the wide Eurasian grasslands of the East, a warlike people called the Celts broke in upon Bronze Age Europe. From Iberia came the Gaels into Ireland, and from there to Scotland. Across the Channel came the Cymric tribes who overran what is now England, Wales, and southern Scotland.

When Caesar's lawful killers in their turn carved the province of Roman Britannia, it was the Cymri they subdued. On the fringes of this province of Empire were semi-independent Cymric principalities that had many dealings with the Romans. All roads led to Rome and from Rome to the uttermost parts of the Empire. Along these roads spread the philosophy and the literature of the Hebrews and the new Christian Gospel.

In 1985 one of the largest archaeological digs in Europe was begun on the site of Ninian's settlement. The dig has provided upwards of 50 jobs in a locality suffering the second lowest average per capita income in the entire United Kingdom. Suffering also unemployment levels of over 20%, the Machars of Galloway around Whithorn needed this shot in the arm.

In 1986 the General Assembly urged parishes to identify, sponsor and promote job creation schemes. In early 1987 a proposal to construct a footpath along the shore of Luce Bay was put to the statutory authorities. Endorsed by Roman Catholic and Episcopalian as well as Church of Scotland dignitaries, this proposal met with a good reception. Preparatory development work is already under way and later this year wheelbarrow and shovel will begin to construct a new Whithorn Pilgrim Way.

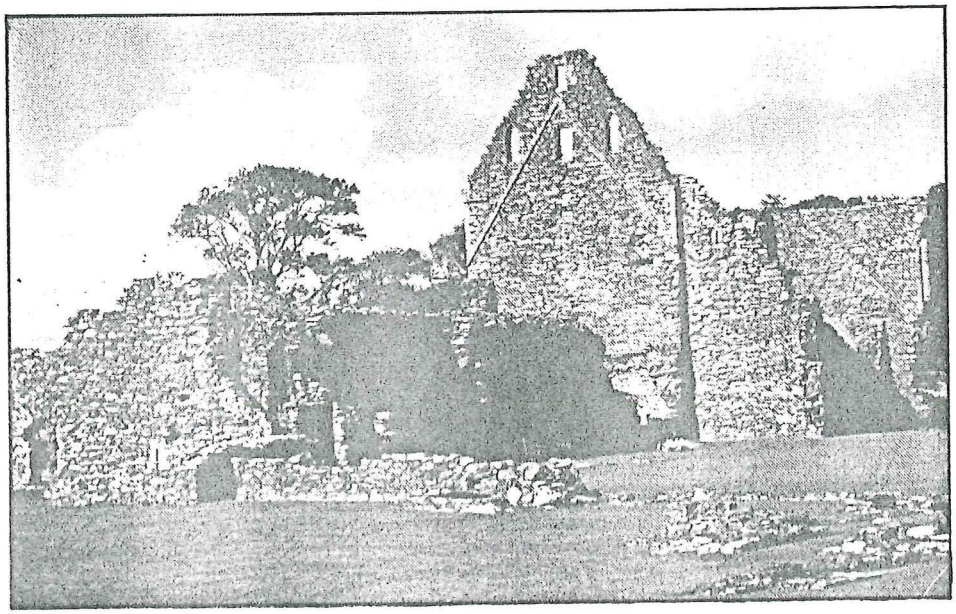
The Christian Church was part of Roman Britannia by the 3rd century after Christ, with book and basilica in town and villa. By the 4th century there were Christian congregations furth of the Empire in Cornwall, Wales, and along the Solway Firth beyond Hadrian's Wall.

Before AD 400 a Roman-trained bishop called Ninian established a great library and episcopal see of worship at Candida Casa, the "shining luminous house of prayer" that grew into the great centre of Whithorn.

Candida Casa and the see of Galloway were not long established when the fall of the Roman West was sudden and swift before the onslaught of Goth, Vandal, Frank and Hun. Anglo Saxons made Roman Britannia into their England and they obliterated the Roman Church in the lands they controlled.

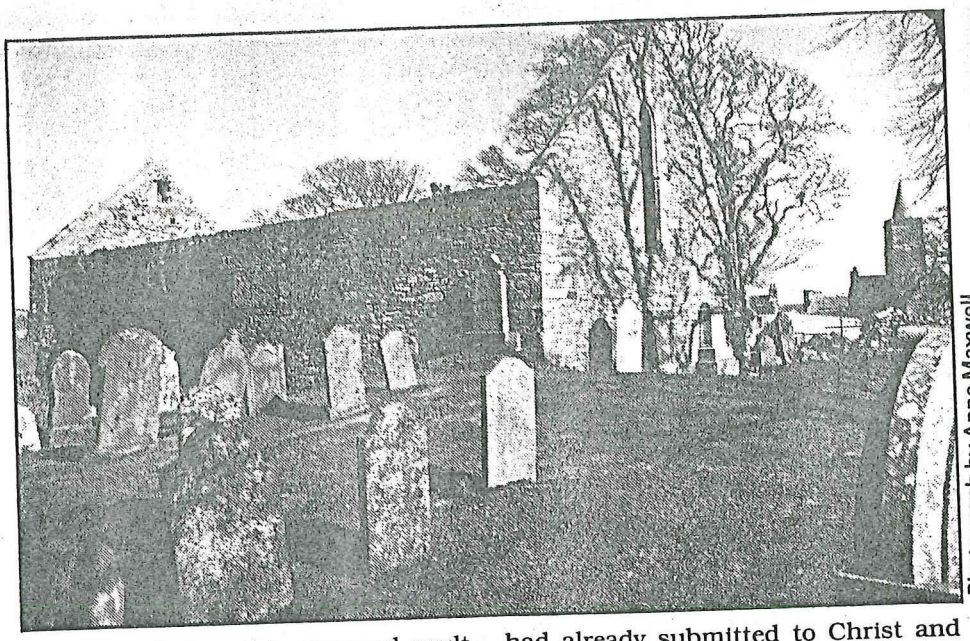
Legends echo down the centuries of a Cymric war leader called Arthur who threw back the Anglo Saxon invader from the lands of the Cymric north and west. These legends speak of the fact that the Cymri defended their language, society, and culture with considerable success for long centuries. This defence enabled the Christian Church to put down deep roots in the Cymric enclaves of Cornwall, Wales, Cumbria, Strathclyde, and Ninian's Galloway.

The construction of the Whithorn Pilgrim Way will not be completed until 1992, but walking holidays (pilgrimages) were to begin last month. Weekly groups will be of no more than 12 people. Accommodation will be in a large house overlooking Luce Bay. Enquiries should be addressed (with an SAE please) to "Perigrini Candidi", 45 Main Street, Kirkinner, Wigtownshire.



Photograph by George Candlish

Glenluce Abbey



Photograph by Anne Maxwell

Whithorn's great role in the dark 5th and 6th centuries was in keeing alive the internationalism, literacy, scholarship, healing arts, craftsmanship, beauty, and hope that are the hallmarks of Christ's Kingdom and the Church at its best.

From the Cymric Church which evolved out of Whithorn, the Gospel was to be providentially taken to the Gaels of Ireland. The son of a priest was captured by Irish slave-raiders. The missionary work of this Patrick bequeathed to the Gaels of that island the legacy of Word and Sacrament which challenged and gentled the head-hunting cruelty in Celtic society.

The Church in Cymric and Gaelic lands was remote and all but cut off from the Mediterranean Church by a Europe at war with itself. As a result their evolution was in idiosyncratic and individual ways.

When Ninian and Patrick and their friends met with the colleges of Druids in interchange and colloquy there seems to have been little bitterness or violence. The old embraced the new as a more complete version of itself, and the Celtic carved crosses of Christ were blended with the sun circle, symbol of eternity in an earlier understanding. This fusion resulted in a glorious artwork epitomised by abstract, interlaced, spiral designs in their manuscripts of the Gospel books.

When Columba of Donegal brought to Iona the full vibrancy of the Gaelic Church in the 6th century, it was not to be long before this wayward exultancy in the divine spread into Pictish and Anglo Saxon lands. Iona established a daughter-house on the Northumbrian island of Lindisfarne. It was to be a beacon of new hope and faith to the English.

In the 8th century after Christ, the Venerable Bede wrote his history in the monastery of Monkwearmouth. In his day the kings of Northumbria exerted suzerainty over the Cymri of Galloway. The only shire in Scotland to be named after a man is Kirkcudbright — Cuthbert's Kirk, named after Cuthbert the great bishop of Lindisfarne. When the Cymri of Galloway eventually had to sue for peace it was to overlords who had already submitted to Christ and who revered the memory of Ninian. Even the Vikings could not conquer the achievements of Ninian, and in their turn were overwhelmed by that which, like a golden, unbroken thread, runs through the history of these islands, in contradiction to the violence and cruelty of worldly ambitions.

It is my belief that our modern barbarism of gross consumerism will eventually discover a power greater than its own, as did the Northumbrian English and the Vikings.

The Rev Andrew R. M. Patterson, formerly minister of Mochrum, lives at Kirkinner.

Ninian's Church today

By BILL MacMILLAN

SOME seven years ago, BBC Radio did a series of services from Scottish Churches, "City of God", related to beginnings. As a starting point, the first broadcast was from the Priory Church at Whithorn.

Words, then, had to be found in the light of this unusual pre-Columban recognition. Neither scholar nor historian, the parish minister did not, however, have to look far for "hardish" evidence all around him.

The rural preacher spoke along the lines of: "If a history of either 'the Church in Scotland' or 'the Church of Scotland' were ever to be written in one place then, surely, that place could only be the Ancient and Royal Burgh of Whithorn. Ninian, monastery, Candida Casa, Celtic catholicism, influence from Northumbria and York, priory, priests and bishops, royal pilgrimages, Bruce, David and James, Margaret and Mary, Reformation, counter-Reformation, Disruption and Union . . . Some 1600 years of unbroken witness in this early place of faith."

And yes! — the parish church is adjacent to the ruined nave of the once splendid 12th century priory; and so the faithful people, on their way to worship, do constitute a kind of pilgrimage.

They cannot be other than conscious of their precious heritage Sunday by Sunday. Stained-glass window and woven banner are tribute to Ninian, St Peter's cross worked into pulpit fall . . . low-key Presbyterian display, nothing too ostentatious!

Next to the church gate, lodged in the small museum, are two touchable, tangible stones; more, though, to the local folk, than artefacts or archaelogical finds . . . more realistic if not just as venerable as Bede! Fifth-century memorial and 7th-century cross etched out, hewn locally, engraved on the hearts of this people as well as on stone.

Our Roman Catholic friends in the parish, though, are more visibly involved, through annual pilgrimages and saintly observance, than we who are so proud of our lineage in the Ninianic thread. Episcopalians come to the parish church once every four years, in tribute to the earliest Scottish saint. Places yet for Bishops of Galloway in the hierarchy of our sister Churches!

Perhaps different types of ministry would have shaped a more Ionan character to the shape of worship in acknowledgement of him who made the southern Picts "abandon the errors of idolatry". Our very ordinariness is, perhaps, a stumbling block towards any hint of pageantry or show — and then we are Presbyterians!

This most ancient place of worship binds its people to the past. Yet they are far from prisoners — somehow released in the depths of their extraordinary consciousness of Ninian having been — still being — at the very centre of their long-held Gospel inheritance. We are not the first to stumble in the steps of the Gallovidian saint.

The Rev Bill MacMillan is minister of St Ninian's Priory, Whithorn.