

Adomnán of Iona

LIFE OF ST COLUMBA

Translated by RICHARD SHARPE

*Et dixi, Quis dabit mihi pennas sicut Columbae:
& uolabo, & requiescam? Ps. 54:7*

PENGUIN BOOKS

In Jesus Christ's name the preface begins

Our blessed patron's life I shall now, with Christ's help, describe in response to the entreaties of the brethren. First, I am minded to warn all who read it that they should put their faith in accounts which are attested, and give more thought to my subject than to my words which I consider rough and of little worth. They should remember that the Kingdom of God stands not on the flow of eloquence but in the flowering of faith.¹ There are words here in the poor Irish language, strange names of men and peoples and places, names which I think are crude in comparison with the different tongues of foreign races.² But let no one think this a reason to despise the proclamation of profitable deeds, which were not achieved without the help of God.

The reader should also be reminded of this, that many things worth recording about the man of blessed memory are left out here for the sake of brevity, and only a few things out of many are written down so as not to try the patience of those who will read them.³ But even in comparison with the little we now propose to write, popular report has spread almost nothing of the very great things⁴ that can be told about the blessed man.⁵

Now after this little foreword, with God's help I shall begin the second preface with the name of our abbot.

In Jesus Christ's name The second preface⁶

There was a man of venerable life and blessed memory, the father and founder of monasteries, whose name was the same as the prophet Jonah's. For though the sound is different in three different languages, in Hebrew *Jona*, in Greek *Peristera*, in Latin *Columba*, the meaning is the same, 'dove'. So great a name cannot have been given to the man of God but by divine providence.⁷ For it is shown by the Gospels that the Holy Spirit descended upon the only begotten Son of the everlasting Father in the form of that little bird. For this reason, in the Scriptures the dove is generally taken allegorically to represent the Holy Spirit.⁸ Likewise, the Saviour himself in the Gospel told his disciples that they should have the simplicity of the dove in a pure heart.⁹ For the dove is indeed a simple and innocent bird, and it was fitting that a simple and innocent man should have this for his name, with through his dove-like life offered in himself a dwelling for the Holy Spirit. What it says in Proverbs is appropriate here: 'A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.'¹⁰ From the days of his infancy, our abbot was enriched with this appropriate name by God's gift.

Earlier still, many years before the time of his birth, by revelation of the Holy Spirit to a soldier of Christ, he was marked out as a son of promise¹¹ in a marvellous prophecy. A certain pilgrim from Britain, named Mochta, a holy disciple of the holy bishop Patrick, made this prophecy about our

patron, which has been passed down by those who learnt it of old and held to be genuine:¹²

'In the last days of the world, a son will be born whose name Columba will become famous through all the provinces of the ocean's islands, and he will be a bright light in the last days of the world. The fields of our two monasteries, mine and his, will be separated by only a little hedge. A man very dear to God and of great merit in his sight.'

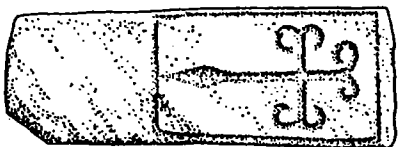
In describing the life and character of our Columba, I shall begin as briefly as I can with a summary which will set before the reader his holy way of life and also offer, as a foretaste to be savoured, some samples of his miracles, which will be unfolded more fully below in three books. Of these, the first will contain prophetic revelations, the second divine miracles worked through him, and the third angelic apparitions and certain phenomena of heavenly light seen above the man of God.¹³

No one should think that I would write anything false about this remarkable man, nor even anything doubtful or uncertain.¹⁴ Let it be understood that I shall tell only what I learnt from the account handed down by our elders, men both reliable and informed, and that I shall write without equivocation what I have learnt by diligent inquiry either from what I could find already in writing or from what I heard recounted without a trace of doubt by informed and reliable old men.¹⁵

Saint Columba was born of a noble lineage. His father was Fedelmid mac Ferguso, his mother was called Eirhne and her father Mac Nave which means 'son of a ship'.¹⁶ In the second year following the battle of *Cill Drebhne*, when he was forty-one, Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ.¹⁷

Since boyhood he had devoted himself to training in the Christian life, and to the study of wisdom; with God's help, he had kept his body chaste and his mind pure and shown himself, though placed on earth, fit for the life of heaven. He

was an angel in demeanour, blameless in what he said, godly in what he did, brilliant in intellect and great in counsel.¹⁸ He spent thirty-four years as an island soldier,¹⁹ and could not let even an hour pass without giving himself to praying or reading or writing or some other task.²⁰ Fasts and vigils he performed day and night with tireless labour and no rest, to such a degree that the burden of even one seemed beyond human endurance. At the same time he was loving to all people, and his face showed a holy gladness²¹ because his heart was full of the joy of the Holy Spirit.



Now begins the second book, dealing with miracles of power which are often also prophetically foreknown.

[II 1] *Of wine made from water*

Once, when St Columba was still a young man studying the Holy Scriptures with St Uinniau,²¹⁰ the bishop, in Ireland, on a day when mass was to be said, by some mischance no wine could be found for the sacrificial mystery. Hearing the ministers of the altar complaining to one another about this problem, Columba picked up a pitcher and went to the well to draw water, in accordance with a deacon's duties, for the sacred service of the Eucharist. By this time he was certainly serving in the order of deacon. He called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who at Cana in Galilee changed water into wine, and in faith he blessed the water that he drew from the well. With Christ's help, here once again the lowly nature of water was transformed at the saint's gesture into the more desired form of wine.

Columba returned from the well to the church and put the full pitcher down beside the altar.

'Here you have wine,' he said to the ministers, 'which the Lord Jesus has sent for the celebration of his mystery.'

When this was known, the holy bishop and his ministers gave great thanks to God, but the youthful saint ascribed it not to himself, but to the holy bishop Uinniau. And so Christ the Lord made this the first proof of power in his disciple, performing the same miracle that he himself had worked as the first of his signs at Cana of Galilee.²¹¹

Let it shine like a lantern at the entrance of this book, this

miracle of God manifested through our own Columba, so that we may pass forward to other miracles of power shown through him.

[II 2] *How the bitter fruit of a tree was turned to sweetness by the saint's blessing*

There was a tree not far from the monastery of Durrow on the south side, which used to bear much fruit. But the inhabitants of the place complained of it, because the fruit was too bitter to eat. So one day St Columba went up to it in autumn. He saw that the tree had a heavy crop of fruit but it was useless, for everyone found it unpleasant to taste rather than pleasing. The saint raised his holy hand and blessed the tree, saying:

'In the name of almighty God, all your bitterness shall leave you, O bitter tree, and your fruit until now most bitter shall become most sweet.'

Marvelous to tell, not a moment after he said it, all the fruit of that tree lost its bitterness and was changed according to the saint's word into wonderful sweetness.

[II 3] *How, when St Columba was living in Iona, a crop was sown after midsummer and was harvested at the beginning of August, at the saint's prayer²¹²*

Once St Columba sent his monks to bring bundles of withies from a plot of ground belonging to a layman so that they could be used in building a guest-house.²¹³ They went and did this, filling a boat with withies. On their return they came to the saint and told him that the layman was

much distressed at his loss, so Columba at once gave instructions:

'We do not want to give offence to this man. Take him six measures of our own barley, and let him sow it at this time in ploughed land.'

As the saint commanded, this was sent to the layman, whose name was Findchán. It was handed to him with the saint's instruction, and the man received it gladly but said:

'What use is it to sow a crop after the middle of summer against the nature of the ground?'

His wife on the other hand said:

'Do what the holy man commands, for the Lord will give him whatever he asks.'

So too the men who were sent added these words:

'St Columba who sent us to you with this gift imposed this instruction concerning your crop, saying, "Let the man trust in God's omnipotence. Though his crop be sown when half the month of June has gone, it shall still be harvested at the beginning of August."'

The layman obeyed, both ploughing and sowing. And the harvest which he had sown so late and against hope he reaped to the wonder of all his neighbours, fully ripe as the saint had said, at the beginning of August. The place where this happened is called *Deltrós*.²¹⁴

[11 4] *Of a disease-laden cloud and the healing of very many people*

Once again while St Columba was living in Iona, as he sat on the low hill of Dùn I,²¹⁵ he saw a heavy storm-cloud to the north rising from the sea on a clear day. Watching as the cloud rose, Columba turned to one of his monks sitting beside him, a man called Slinán mac Nemaídon, whose people were the moccu Sogin,²¹⁶ and said:

'This cloud will bring great harm to people and livestock. Today it will pass over here and tonight it will shed a deadly rain over that part of Ireland between the River Delvin and Dublin, a rain that will raise awful sores full of pus on the bodies of people and on the udders of cattle. All those afflicted with this poisonous infection will suffer a terrible sickness even to death.²¹⁷ But by the mercy of God it is our duty to take pity on them and help them. You, therefore, Slinán, come down with me now from this hill and prepare yourself to set sail tomorrow. For if life continue²¹⁸ and God will, you shall take from here bread that I have blessed in the name of God, you shall dip this bread in water and then sprinkle that water over both people and livestock, and they will soon recover health.'²¹⁹

Why do we pause? All necessary preparations were quickly made, and the next day Slinán received from St Columba's hand the bread he had blessed and set sail in peace. In the hour of his departure St Columba gave him this additional word of encouragement, saying:

'Have confidence, my son. You will have a fair following wind day and night until you reach the area of Árd Cian-nácht²²⁰ so that without delay you may come to help the afflicted with this healing bread.'²²¹

Why say more? Slinán did as St Columba had said. With the Lord's help his voyage was fair and fast, he landed where the saint had said, and found that the population of the district mentioned by St Columba had been wasted by the deadly rain from the cloud that had recently passed over. The first thing to happen was that Slinán found six men in one house by the sea, all close to death. But when he sprinkled them with the water of benediction, within the day they were happily restored to health. Accounts of this sudden cure rapidly circulated throughout the area affected by the disease, and attracted the sick to St Columba's representative, who, in accordance with the saint's command, sprinkled both people

and livestock with water in which the blessed bread had been dipped. At once men and beasts regained their health, and praised Christ in St Columba with exceeding gratitude.

There are, I think, two significant elements in this story, namely the grace of prophecy in respect of the cloud, and the miracle of power in healing the sick. That the story is in every respect completely true we have the testimony of Silán himself, a soldier of Christ, given in the presence of Abbot Ségène and other elders.²²²

[Ir 5] *Concerning the holy virgin Mógain, daughter of Daiméne, who lived in Clochar Macc nDaiméni*²²³

Once, while St Columba was living in Iona, he called to him in the first hour of the day one of the brethren, Lugaid nicknamed in Irish 'the strong',²²⁴ and said to him:

'Make ready at once for a speedy voyage to Ireland, for it is essential that I send you as my representative to Clochar Macc nDaiméni. For in this night just past Daiméne's daughter, the holy virgin Mógain, has had an accident. As she returned home from the church after the night office, she stumbled, and her hip is broken in two.²²⁵ Now she cries aloud and repeats my name constantly, hoping that I should bring her comfort from the Lord.'

Why say more? Lugaid did as he was bidden. When he was ready to set out, Columba handed him a little pine-wood box with a blessing inside it,²²⁶ and said:

'When you arrive to visit Mógain, the blessing contained in this box should be dipped in a jar of water and then the water of blessing should be poured over her hip. Then call on the name of God and at once her hipbone will be joined and knit together and her full health restored.'

Then the saint went on:

'Look, in your presence I write²²⁷ on the lid of this box the number XXXIII, which is the number of years which the holy virgin will continue in this present life after her cure.'

All of this was fulfilled as the saint foretold. For as soon as Lugaid came to the holy virgin, he sprinkled the blessed water on her hip, as the saint had said, and straightaway the bone was mended and Mógain was fully healed. She rejoiced at the coming of St Columba's representative and thanked him profusely. Thereafter, according to the saint's prophecy, she lived twenty-three years after her cure and continued in good works.

[Ir 6] *On the healing of various ailments at Druim Cett*

The man of praiseworthy life by the invocation of Christ's name cured the ailments of various invalids during the brief period when he was at Druim Cett to attend the meeting of the kings. So the story is handed down to us by learned men. Many sick people put their trust in him and received full healing, some from his outstretched hand, some from being sprinkled with water he had blessed, others by the mere touching of the edge of his cloak, or from something such as salt or bread blessed by the saint and dipped in water.

[Ir 7] *About a block of salt blessed by the saint which fire could not destroy*²²⁸

Likewise, on another occasion, Colgu mac Cellaig asked for and was given a block of salt which St Columba had blessed to help the man's sister, who had fostered him, for she was suffering from a severe affliction of the eye. That sister and foster-mother received this blessing from her brother's hand

and hung it on the wall above her bed. A few days later misfortune fell, and fire destroyed the entire village, including this woman's house. Marvellous to tell, a little section of the wall of this house remained standing unharmed though the rest of the house was completely burnt, and that which the holy man had blessed was still hanging there, for the fire did not dare to touch the two pegs on which this salt-block was hanging.

[Ir 8] *Concerning one leaf of a book, written by St Columba, which water could not damage*

There is another miracle that I should not pass over in silence, one that concerns the opposite of fire, water. It happened many years after St Columba had died. A young man fell off his horse in the Irish River Boyne and was drowned, lying for twenty days under water. At the time of the fall he was carrying a leather satchel²²⁹ of books under his arm, which he was still clutching when the body was found so many days later. When his body was brought to the bank, the satchel was opened and the pages of all the books were found to be ruined and rotten except one page, which St Columba had written out with his own hand.²³⁰ This was found to be dry and in no way spoilt as though it had been all along in a book case.

[Ir 9] *Another miracle of the same type*

Once a book of the week's hymns²³¹ written out by St Columba with his own hand fell into the water when the man who was carrying it in a leather satchel on his shoulder slipped off a bridge over a river in the province of Leinster.

The book remained in the water from Christmas to Easter, until it was found on the river bank by some women out walking. They took it to a priest called Éogénán, a man of Pictish origin, to whom it had belonged.²³² The book was still in its satchel, which was not merely sodden but had rotted. When Éogénán opened the satchel, however, he found the book unharmed, as clean and dry as if it had never fallen into the water but had remained in its book case.

We have heard many other accounts about books written out by St Columba, reported in various places by people who knew the facts and did not doubt them. Such books were never spoilt by being submerged in water. But this particular story, about Éogénán's book, came to me from some men of exemplary honesty and good faith, who left no room for doubt that they had seen this book extraordinarily white and clean even though it had been so many days in the water.

These two different miracles, though concerned with things of little importance, were performed against the two opposed elements of fire and water. They bear witness to the honour of the blessed man and show how God held him to be a man of great and special merit.

[Ir 10] *How the prayers of the saint drew water from hard rock*

While we are mentioning the element of water, we ought to speak also of the other miracles concerning it which the Lord worked at various times and places through St Columba.

Once during the saint's life of pilgrimage he was on a journey when a child was brought to him for baptism by his parents. But there was no water to be found in that spot. So the saint turned aside to the nearest rock, where he knelt and prayed a little while. When he stood up, he blessed the face of the rock, and at once water bubbled out from it in great

quantity. Thereupon he baptized the child, making this prophecy concerning him:

'This little boy will live a long life, into extreme old age. In his youth he will be more or less a slave of the desires of the flesh, but afterwards he will devote himself to service as a soldier of Christ to the end of his days, and in old age will depart to the Lord.'

All this happened to the man as the saint foretold. His name was Ligu Cenncalad. The place where his parents were was in Ardnamurchan, and a little spring is still to be seen there which is powerful in the name of St Columba.²³³

[111] *About another well with evil properties which St Columba blessed in Pictland*

Once, when St Columba spent some time in the land of the Picts, he heard reports of a well that was famous among the heathen population. Indeed the foolish people worshipped it as a god because the devil clouded their sense.²³⁴ What used to happen was that anyone who drank from the well or intentionally washed his hands or feet in it was struck down by the devil's art (for God permitted this). Such people became leprous or half blind or crippled or were afflicted with some other infirmity when they left the well. These occurrences deluded the heathens into treating the well as a god. When St Columba learnt of this, he made his way fearlessly to the well. The wizards, whom he had often driven away in confusion and defeat,²³⁵ saw what he was doing and were glad, for they expected that he too should suffer the effects of touching the harmful water. The saint first raised his hands and called on the name of Christ before washing his hands and feet. Then he and his companions drank from the water that he had blessed. Since that day the demons

kept away from the well. Instead, far from harming anyone, after the saint had blessed it and washed in it, many ailments among the local people were cured by that well.

[112] *How St Columba was in peril on the sea and how he stilled the storm by his prayer*

Once, when St Columba was at sea, he found himself threatened by danger. A great storm, with gusts of wind blowing from all sides, arose and his boat was tossed and buffeted by great waves. St Columba tried to help the sailors bail out the water that came into the boat, but they said to him:

'Your doing that does little to help us in this danger. You would do better to pray for us as we all perish.'

Hearing this, he stopped emptying the bitter water into the sea to no effect and began instead to pour out sweet prayers to the Lord.²³⁶ Marvellous to tell, as soon as the saint stood up in the prow and raised his hands to heaven in prayer to almighty God, the stormy winds and the raging sea were still in less time than it takes to say it and at once all was fair and calm. The men on board the boat were amazed, and gave thanks in wonderment, glorifying God in his praiseworthy saint.

[113] *Of another similar danger at sea*

On another occasion St Columba's companions called on him during a wild and dangerous storm, that he should pray to the Lord for them. But the saint answered:

'Today it is not I who will pray for you in this danger, but the holy Abbot Caimnech.'

I shall tell you a wonderful thing now. That very hour, St Cainnech was at home in his own monastery of Aghaboe when the Spirit brought St Columba's words to the inward ear of his heart.²³⁷ Nones²³⁸ was already over and the saint was beginning to break the bread of blessing in the refectory.²³⁹ But he instantly left the table and ran to the church, one shoe on his foot and the other left behind in his hurry.²⁴⁰

'We cannot have dinner at this time,' he said, 'for St Columba's boat is even now in peril on the sea. At this moment he speaks the name of this Cainnech, saying that he should pray to Christ for him and his fellows in time of trouble.'

So saying he entered the church where he knelt and prayed for a little time. The Lord heard his prayer and at once the storm ceased and the sea became calm.

At this point St Columba, who had seen in the Spirit the haste with which St Cainnech went to the church, though the two saints were miles apart, amazed everyone when from his pure heart he said:

'Now I know, O Cainnech, that God has heard your prayer. Now indeed you have helped us by your swift running to the church wearing only one shoe.'

In a miracle of this kind we believe that the prayers of the two saints worked together.

[II 14] *Concerning St Cainnech's staff left behind at the harbour*²⁴¹

Once, the same St Cainnech forgot to take his staff with him when he set sail from the harbour of Iona on his way to Ireland. When he had gone, the staff was found on the shore and was given to St Columba. Returning to the monastery, he took it with him into the church and stayed there a long while alone in prayer.

Cainnech had reached the southern part of Islay²⁴² before he realized that he had forgotten his staff and he was much dismayed. But after a little time he left the ship and knelt down on the ground to pray. There on the green grass of Islay he found lying in front of him the staff that he had left behind in the harbour of Iona. It could only have come there with the help of God, and he marvelled greatly and gave thanks.

[II 15] *How Baithéne and Colmán mac Beognai, two holy priests, asked St Columba to call on God to give them each a fair wind though they were sailing in different directions on the same day*

Once, these two holy men approached St Columba at the same time and with the same purpose, calling on him to ask for and obtain from the Lord that each be given a fair wind the next day, though they were to set sail in different directions. This is how St Columba answered them:

'Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, Baithéne will have a following wind for his journey from Iona to the harbour at Mag Luinge.'²⁴⁴

The Lord granted this according to the saint's word. For that day Baithéne crossed the whole expanse of sea to Three under full sail.

At the third hour of the same day St Columba sent for Colmán the priest and said to him:

'Baithéne has now arrived safely at the harbour he was wanting. Make your preparations to sail today. For soon the Lord will bring the wind round to the north.'

Within the hour the south wind had obeyed St Columba's word and had become a breeze blowing from the north.

So it happened that on one and the same day two men, parting from one another in peace, travelled under full sail

with a following wind — Baithéne in the morning to Tiree, Colmán after noon beginning his voyage to Ireland. By the Lord's gift. This miracle was accomplished through the power of prayer by the famous saint, for it is written, 'All things are possible to him that believeth'.²⁴⁵

Later on the same day, after Colmán's departure, St Columba delivered this prophecy concerning him:

'The holy man Colmán whom we have blessed as he set sail will never see my face again in this world.'

This was fulfilled, for in less than a year from then St Columba departed to the Lord.

[11 16] *How St Columba drove out a devil hiding at the bottom of a milk-pail*

Once a young man called Colmán Ua Briúin²⁴⁶ was returning from milking the cows and carried on his back the wooden pail with the fresh milk in it. When he reached the door of the saint's hut, where St Columba was copying a manuscript, he stopped and asked the saint to bless the pail according to his custom. St Columba did not come near but raised his hand and made the saving sign of the cross in the air in the direction of the pail. He called on the name of God and blessed the vessel, which at once shook violently. The peg that held the lid to the pail was shot back through both holes and thrown some distance, the lid crashed to the ground, and most of the milk spilled on to the earth. The youth set the pail down on its base on the ground with what little milk was left, and knelt in supplication. St Columba said to him:

'Stand up, Colmán. Today you were careless in your work. There was a devil hiding in the bottom of the pail and, before you poured the milk in, you should have driven it off by making the sign of the Lord's cross. The devil could not

withstand the power of that sign. Now his trembling has shaken the pail and as he escaped he has spilt the milk. Bring the pail nearer to me so that I may bless it.'

Colmán brought the pail to him and the saint blessed it. What was before nearly empty was in an instant found to be full; where only a little milk had remained in the bottom, under the blessing of the saint's hand it rose up to the brim.

[11 17] *About a pail that a sorcerer called Símhán filled with milk from a bull*

What follows is said to have happened in the house of a rich layman called Foirtgern, who lived on the hill of *Cainle*.²⁴⁷ When St Columba was a guest there, he foresaw the arrival of two country people in dispute and with true judgement he acted as judge between them.²⁴⁸

One of them, who was a sorcerer, by the art of the devil drew milk from a bull nearby, at the saint's command. It was not in order to confirm these sorceries that the saint had ordered this to be done but in order to defeat them in the sight of the people. St Columba told the man to give him at once the pail, which seemed to be full of milk, and he blessed it with these words:

'Now it will be proven that this is not true milk as you all think, but is blood, deprived of its colour by the devil's cheating in order to deceive mankind.'

Straightway the milk-white colour was changed into its proper nature, namely into blood. The bull, also, in the space of one hour wasted away to a hideous leanness and came near to death. But when it was sprinkled with water blessed by St Columba it recovered with remarkable speed.

[118] *About Luigne mocca Min*²⁴⁹

One day a young man of naturally good disposition called Luigne (who later, in his riper years, was prior of the monastery in the island of *Eleny*)²⁵⁰ approached St Columba and complained of a discharge of blood that had often during many months past flowed uncontrollably from his nostrils. The saint called him closer, squeezed his nostrils between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and blessed him. There was never again a drop of blood from his nose, from the hour of that blessing to the last day of his life.

[119] *How God specially provided fish for St Columba*

Once when the praiseworthy man was in the company of hardy fishermen on the fishul River Shiel,²⁵¹ they had caught five fish in the net, and St Columba said:

'Again cast the net in the river, and you will quickly find a great fish which the Lord has provided for me.'

O obeying his instruction, they drew in with their net a salmon of wonderful size provided for him by God.²⁵²

Another time, St Columba spent some days on *Leam Key*.²⁵³ His companions wanted to go fishing, but he detested them, saying:

'Today and tomorrow there will not be a single salmon caught in the river, but I shall send you fishing on the third day and you will find two great salmon caught in my net.'

So after two days of waiting they cast their net in the river. Boyle, and when they drew it to the bank they found a salmon of very unusual size, for which St Columba and his companions gave hearty thanks to God.²⁵⁴

In these two stories about fishing the power of a miracle is manifest and is accompanied by prophetic foreknowledge.

[120] *About Nésán the Crooked who lived in the district of Lochaber*

This Nésán, though he was a very poor man, rejoiced on one occasion to receive St Columba as his guest. When the saint had enjoyed one night's hospitality from Nésán, as far as his means would stretch, he asked how many cows he owned.

'Five,' said Nésán.
'Bring them to me,' said St Columba, 'so that I may bless them.'

They were brought, and St Columba blessed them, raising his holy hand, and said:

'From this day your little herd of five cows will grow until you have one hundred and five cows.'²⁵⁵

Since Nésán was a layman with a wife and children, St Columba made this addition to his benediction, saying:

'Your seed will be blessed in your sons and grandsons.'

All these things were fulfilled according to his word nor was anything diminished in any way.

[There was also a rich man called Vigen who was very tight-fisted, and who looked down on St Columba and would not receive him as a guest. About this man the saint made quite the opposite prophecy, saying:

'The riches of this miser, who has rejected Christ in the pilgrim visitors, will from henceforth be diminished little by little until there is nothing. He himself will be a beggar, and his son will run from house to house with a half-empty bag. At harvest-time he will strike him with an axe and he will die in the trench of a threshing-floor.'

All these things were fulfilled according to the saint's prophecies as they concerned the two men.²⁵⁶

[11 21] *A similar story about a layman called Colmán, whose cattle were few in number, but St Columba blessed them and thereafter they increased by one hundred.*

At another time the saint was received as a guest one night by this Colmán, who at that period was a poor man.²⁵⁷ Early in the morning St Columba questioned Colmán, just as he questioned Nésán in the previous story, about the kind and quantity of his wealth.

'I have only five little cows,' answered Colmán, 'but if you bless them, they will increase.'

The saint bade him bring them, which he did at once, and in the same manner as we described in the case of Nésán's five cows, so the saint blessed Colmán's little cows and said:

'God has granted that you will have one hundred and five cows, and there will be a blessing of fruitfulness on your sons and grandsons.'

Everything that St Columba foretold was fulfilled in Colmán's fields and herds and in his offspring. But this is the strangest part. For both men St Columba had fixed the number of his cattle at one hundred and five, and when this number was reached there was no further increase. Any beast which was in excess of the preordained limit was carried off by some mischance and never seen again, unless it could be made use of for the needs of his own household or in the work of charity.

In this story as in others a miracle of power is clearly connected with a prophecy. The power of blessing and of prayer are seen in the great increase of the cattle, and prophetic foreknowledge in the number set in advance.

[11 22] *How men of evil who had scorned St Columba were destroyed.*

St Columba held in great affection this Colmán whom the power of his benediction had brought from poverty to wealth, and Colmán in return showed his devotion in many services.

There was at that time a man of evil who persecuted good men. His name was Ioan mac Conaill maic Donnail, who belonged to the royal lineage of Cenél nGabráin,²⁵⁸ and he used to bring trouble upon trouble on St Columba's friend Colmán, attacking his house and taking all he could find there, not once but twice. Yet a third time, when this evil man had again plundered Colmán's house, he and his associates were returning loaded with booty to their boat. Suddenly and not undeservedly they were confronted by St Columba, whom they had discounted, believing him to be far away. Yet St Columba drew nearer, reproving the man for his evil deeds and urging him to give up his plunder. But the man remained hard and unyielding. He looked with contempt at the saint, and when he and his booty had all gone up the gangplank and into the boat, he scoffed at the saint and mocked him. St Columba followed him into the sea till the glassy water came up to his knees, then he raised both hands to heaven and earnestly prayed to Christ who glorifies his chosen ones who glorify him.²⁵⁹

He remained where he stood praying to the Lord for a little while after Ioan had sailed away from that bay, which is called 'Sharp bay' and is in Ardamurchan.²⁶⁰ Having finished his prayer, St Columba returned to dry ground and sat down with his companions in an elevated place. In that hour he spoke to them very terrible words, saying:

'This wretched fellow who has despised Christ in his servants will never return to this bay from which he has just now sailed away in front of your eyes, nor will he find the landfall he seeks. For he and those who share in his evil deeds

will be cut off by sudden death. Today as you will soon see, a cloud will rise from the north and bring a violent squall which will overwhelm Ioan and his men so that no one will survive to tell what happened.'

It was only a short time after this that, though the weather was fine and clear, there came a cloud from the sea. Just as the saint had said, it brought a great squall of wind, which, finding the robber and his loot in the open sea between Mull and Coll, at once stirred up the waves and sank their boat. Again the saint was proved right, for no one from the boat survived. But the marvel of it is this, that while this one squall drowned the robbers and snatched them down to the depths of hell — a wretched end, but well deserved — all the sea round about remained perfectly calm.

[I 23] *About someone called Feradach carried off by sudden death*

Likewise on another occasion there was a man named Taran, who belonged to a noble family in Pictland but who was living in exile.²⁶¹ St Columba in a friendly manner put him in the care of a rich man called Feradach, who lived in Islay, where Taran could live in his household as one of his friends for several months. Though Feradach received the man on trust from St Columba, only a few days passed before he acted treacherously and cruelly gave the order to murder Taran. News of this monstrous crime was brought by travellers to St Columba, who in response said:

'It is not only in my sight but in God's that Feradach has betrayed our trust. His name will be removed from the book of life. I say this to you now in the middle of summer, but in autumn when the pigs are fattened on acorns in the woods,²⁶² before he has his first taste of their meat, he will be overtaken by sudden death and carried off to hell.'

The holy man's prophetic saying was reported to the

wretched fellow, who made light of the saint and scoffed at his words. Autumn came and the pigs were fattening on mast when Feradach had a fattened sow slaughtered before any of his other pigs were killed. He ordered his servants to clean the sow quickly and to have some of its meat roasted immediately on a spit, for he was impatient to have his first taste of the meat and prove St Columba's prophecy false. As soon as a morsel of the meat was cooked, he called for it to taste it. He took the meat in his hand, but before he was able to bring it to his mouth he fell on his back and expired. Those who saw this and those who heard of it trembled greatly in wonder, glorifying Christ and honouring him in his holy prophet.

[I 24] *Concerning another impious man, an attacker of churches, whose name means 'Right Hand' 263*

Once, when St Columba was living in the island of *Hinba*, he set about excommunicating those men who persecuted churches, in particular the sons of Conall mac Donnall. We have already told the story of one of them, Ioan.²⁶⁴ Now, at the devil's prompting a man from the band of these men of evil attacked St Columba with a spear, meaning to kill him. To prevent this, one of the brethren, called Findlugán, stepped between them, ready to die instead of the saint. As it happened, he was wearing St Columba's cow and miraculously this garment acted like a strong, impenetrable breastplate that could not be pierced, however sharp the spear or great the thrust of a strong man, but remained undamaged. The man wearing this protection was untouched and unharmed. But the wretched man, whose name means 'Right Hand,' thought he had pierced the saint with his spear and made off.

A year later, on the anniversary of that episode, St Columba was in Iona when he said:

'Today is exactly one year since the day when Láin Dess

did his best to kill Findlugán in my place, but this very hour, so I believe, he will himself be killed.'

This was happening at the very moment the saint made this revelation. Lám Dess was in a fight in the Long Island²⁶⁵ when a spear, thrown — so it is said — in the name of St Columba by Crónán mac Bâetáin, transfixed him. Out of all the men fighting on either side Lám Dess was the only one to die, and after he was killed they stopped their fighting.

[II 25] *Again concerning another persecutor of innocents*²⁶⁶

When St Columba was a young man, still in deacon's orders, he lived in Leinster studying divine wisdom.²⁶⁷ During this period it happened one day that a cruel man, a pitiless persecutor of innocent folk, was pursuing a young girl who was running away from him over the open plain. As soon as she saw Gemmán, St Columba's old teacher, reading his book out on the plain, she made straight for his protection as fast as she could run. Alarmed by these sudden events, Gemmán called to Columba, who was also reading a little distance away, so that with their joint strength they might do their best to save the girl from her pursuer. When he came close, he showed no reverence to the clerics but at once drove his spear into the girl, even as she clutched at their habits, and left her dead at their feet. Then he turned his back on them and began to walk away.

The old man was much distressed by this, and turned to Columba.

'How long, Columba, my holy son, will God the true judge let this crime and our dishonour go unpunished?'²⁶⁸

Whereupon the saint pronounced this sentence on the man who had committed the crime:

'In the same hour in which the soul of the girl he killed ascends to heaven, so be it that the soul of her killer shall descend to hell.'

He had no sooner spoken than, like Ananias in front of Peter,²⁶⁹ so in the sight of St Columba that slaughterer of innocents fell dead on the spot. Reports of this sudden and terrible punishment were soon heard throughout the many districts of Ireland, and the holy deacon became famous.

This is enough of such stories about terrible vengeance on his opponents. Now we shall say a few things about animals.

[II 26]

Once, when St Columba was staying for a few days in Skye, he took himself off on his own, no little distance from the brethren with him, in order to pray. Entering a dense forest, he encountered a boar of amazing size which was being pursued by hunting-dogs.²⁷⁰ Seeing this, the saint stood still and watched it from a distance. Then he raised his holy hand and called on the name of God with earnest prayer, and said to the boar:

'Go no further, but die where you are now.'

The saint's voice rang out in the forest, and the beast was unable to move any further but at once collapsed dead in front of him, killed by the power of his terrible word.

[II 27] *How a water beast was driven off by the power of the blessed man's prayer*

Once, on another occasion, when the blessed man stayed for some days in the land of the Picts,²⁷¹ he had to cross the River Ness. When he reached its bank, he saw some of the local people burying a poor fellow. They said they had seen a water beast snatch him and maul him savagely as he was

swimming not long before.²⁷² Although some men had put out in a little boat to rescue him, they were too late, but, reaching out with hooks, they had hauled in his wretched corpse. The blessed man, having been told all this, astonished them by sending one of his companions to swim across the river and sail back to him in a dinghy that was on the further bank. At the command of the holy and praiseworthy man, Luigne moccu Min²⁷³ obeyed without hesitation. He took off his clothes except for a tunic and dived into the water.²⁷⁴ But the beast was lying low on the riverbed, its appetite not so much sated as whetted for prey. It could sense that the water above was stirred by the swimmer, and suddenly swam up to the surface, rushing open-mouthed with a great roar towards the man as he was swimming midstream. All the bystanders, both the heathen and the brethren, froze in terror, but the blessed man looking on raised his holy hand and made the sign of the cross in the air, and invoking the name of God, he commanded the fierce beast, saying:

'Go no further. Do not touch the man. Go back at once.'

At the sound of the saint's voice, the beast fled in terror so fast one might have thought it was pulled back with ropes. But it had got so close to Luigne swimming that there was no more than the length of a pole between man and beast. The brethren were amazed to see that the beast had gone and that their fellow-soldier Luigne returned to them untouched and safe in the dinghy, and they glorified God in the blessed man. Even the heathen natives who were present at the time were so moved by the greatness of the miracle they had witnessed that they too magnified the God of the Christians.²⁷⁵

[Ir 28] *How St Columba blessed the ground in this island so that thereafter the poison of snakes should not harm anyone here*²⁷⁶

One day of early summer, shortly before he passed to the Lord, St Columba went by cart to visit those brethren at work building a stone wall around the machair on the west coast of Iona.²⁷⁷ He stood on a little knoll above them, and addressed them with words of comfort, which he ended with this prophecy:

'My children, today is the last time you will see my face here at the machair.'²⁷⁸

He could see that they were much distressed by these words, and he made every effort to console them. Then he raised both his holy hands and blessed all this island of ours, saying:

'From this hour, from this instant, all poisons of snakes shall have no power to harm either men or cattle in the lands of this island for as long as the people who dwell here keep Christ's commandments.'

[Ir 29] *Of a knife which St Columba blessed with the sign of the Lord's cross*

Once, one of the brethren, Molua Ua Britin by name,²⁷⁹ came to the saint while he was engaged in copying a manuscript and asked him:

'Please bless this implement which I have in my hand.'

St Columba did not look up, but continued to keep his eyes on the book from which he was copying. However, he reached his hand out a little way and, still holding his pen, made the sign of the cross. Molua took away the implement he had blessed, and later St Columba asked Diarmait, his loyal servant:

'What was the implement I blessed for our brother?'

'A knife,' said Diarmait, 'for the slaughtering of bulls or cattle.'

'I trust in my Lord,' added St Columba, 'that the implement I have blessed will not harm man or beast.'²⁸⁰

No more than an hour had gone by before the saint's word was proved entirely true. For Molua went outside the boundary bank of the monastery,²⁸¹ intending to kill a bullock. But though he tried three times, pressing very hard with the knife, yet he found he was unable to get through the skin. Having discovered this fact, the monks who knew the blacksmith's craft melted down the iron of that knife and then coated the liquid metal on to all the other iron tools in the monastery.²⁸² From then on, these tools were unable to harm any flesh, for the power of the saint's blessing remained in the metal.

[II 30] *How Diarmait's sickness was healed*

Once, St Columba's loyal servant Diarmait fell ill and seemed likely to die. He was on the point of death when the saint came to visit him and as he stood at the bedside of the sick man he called on the name of Christ and prayed for Diarmait:

'My Lord, I beseech thee, hear my prayer, and while I live take not the soul of my loyal servant Diarmait from the habitation of this body.'

He was then silent for a time, before bringing this affirmation from his holy lips saying:

'This my child will not only survive on this occasion but he will outlive me by many years.'

The saint's prayer had been heard and found acceptable, for straightaway Diarmait regained his full health. He also lived many years after St Columba departed to the Lord.

[II 31] *How Fintan mac Áedo was healed though on the point of death*

Also at another time, when St Columba was journeying at the other side of Druim Alban,²⁸³ one of his companions was suddenly troubled with sickness and came close to death. He was a young man called Fintan, and his fellow soldiers in Christ were saddened and begged St Columba to pray for him. The saint took pity on them and at once spread out his holy arms towards heaven in earnest prayer, and blessed the sick man, saying:

'This young lad for whom you intercede will live a long life. Even when all of us here today are dead, he will still be living and will die in good old age.'

St Columba's prediction was fulfilled in every respect. For this youth, who in later life founded the monastery of *Cailli aynhinde*, ended this present life in good old age.²⁸⁴

[II 32] *How St Columba in the Lord's name raised a boy from the dead*

During the time when St Columba spent a number of days in the province of the Picts,²⁸⁵ he was preaching the word of life through an interpreter.²⁸⁶ A Pictish layman heard him and with his entire household believed and was baptized, husband, wife, children and servants. A few days later one of his sons was seized with a severe pain, which brought him to the boundary of life and death. When the heathen wizards saw that the boy was dying, they began to make a mock of the parents and to reproach them harshly, making much of their own gods as the stronger and belittling the God of the Christians as the feebler.²⁸⁷

All this was made known to St Columba and it stirred him vigorously to take God's part. He set off with his companions to visit the layman's house, and there he found that the child had recently died and his parents were performing the rituals of mourning. Seeing their great distress, St Columba comforted them and assured them that they should not in any way doubt that God is almighty. Then he proceeded to question them, saying:

'In which of these buildings does the body of the dead boy lie?'²²⁸

The bereaved father led St Columba to that sad lodging, which the saint entered alone, leaving the crowd of people outside. Having gone inside, St Columba immediately knelt and, with tears streaming down his face, prayed to Christ the Lord. After these prayers on bended knee, he stood up and turned his gaze to the dead boy, saying:

'In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, wake up again and stand upon thy feet.'²⁸⁹

At the saint's glorious word the soul returned to the body, and the boy that was dead opened his eyes and lived again. St Columba took hold of the boy's hand, raised him to his feet and, steadying him, led him out of the house. He gave the boy, now restored to life, back to his parents, and a great shout went up from the crowd. Mourning gave way to celebration and the God of the Christians was glorified.

One must recognize that in this miracle of power our St Columba is seen to share with the prophets Elijah and Elisha and with the apostles Peter and Paul and John the rare distinction of raising the dead to life. He has a seat of everlasting glory in the heavenly homeland as himself a prophet and apostle among the companies of the prophets and the apostles, with Christ who with the Father and the Holy Ghost reigns for ever and ever.²⁹⁰

[1 33] *How Broichan, a wizard, was stricken with sickness when he refused to release a female slave, but was healed when he released her*²⁹¹

At the same time St Columba asked a wizard called Broichan to release an Irish slave-girl,²⁹² having pity on her as a fellow human being. But Broichan's heart was hard and unbending, so the saint addressed him thus, saying:

'Know this, Broichan. Know that if you will not free this captive exile²⁹³ before I leave Picland, you will have very little time to live.'

He said this in King Bridei's house in the presence of the king.²⁹⁴ Then leaving the house, he came to the River Ness, where he picked up a white pebble from the river and said to his companions:

'Mark this white stone,' he said, 'through which the Lord will bring about the healing of many sick people among this heathen race.'

After a moment's pause, he went on:

'Now Broichan has suffered a heavy blow. For an angel sent from heaven has struck him, breaking into fragments the glass cup in his hand just as he was drinking from it. He is now struggling to get his breath and is near to death. But we should wait here a little while. The king will send two messengers hurrying out to us to call on our help for Broichan, and urgently, for he is dying. This seizure has put fear into him. Now he is willing to release the slave-girl.'

The saint was still speaking when there came two men on horseback, sent by the king, who told what had happened to Broichan in the king's fortress. Everything matched St Columba's prediction: the breaking of the cup, the wizard's seizure, his readiness to release the slave-girl. And they added:

'The king and his household have sent us to you to call on your help for Broichan, who will soon die.'

The saint listened to their speech, and then sent two of his own companions to the king, handing them the stone that he had blessed and saying:

'If Broichan will first promise to release the Irish girl, then and only then dip this stone in some water and let him drink it. He will be well again immediately. But if he is intransigent and refuses to release her, he will die on the spot.'

The two men went to the king's hall and there, following St Columba's directions, they repeated to the king all he had said. The king and Broichan, his foster-father, were very much afraid when they learnt all this. Within the hour the slave-girl was set free and handed over to St Columba's messengers. The stone was dipped in some water, where, in defiance of nature, it floated miraculously on the surface of the water like an apple or a nut, for that which the saint had blessed could not be made to sink. When Broichan drank from it, though he had been near to death, he recovered completely his bodily health.

The stone itself was kept in the royal treasury. Whenever it was put in water, it floated, and by the Lord's mercy it brought about the healing of many ailments among the people. But if the sick person seeking help from the stone was one whose appointed term of life was finished, then — strange to say — no way could the stone be found. So it happened on the day King Bridei died. The stone was sought but it could not be found in the place where till then it had been kept.

[Ir 34] *Of St Columba's resistance to Broichan the wizard, and of a contrary wind*

It was after these events that one day Broichan addressed St Columba, saying:

'Tell me, Columba,²⁹⁵ when do you intend to sail?'

'God willing and life lasting,²⁹⁶ replied St Columba, 'we plan to start our voyage in three days' time.'

'You will not be able to,' said Broichan combatively, 'for I have the power to produce an adverse wind and to bring down a thick mist.'

'The almighty power of God rules all things,' said the saint, 'and all our comings and goings are directed by his governance.'

Why say more? On the same day as he had planned in his heart St Columba, with a great crowd of people following, came to the long loch at the head of the River Ness.²⁹⁷ At this point the wizards began to congratulate themselves, seeing a great mist covered the loch and a stormy wind was blowing against them. One must not be surprised that such things happen occasionally by the art of devils — when God permits it — so that the wind and waves can be stirred up to a storm. For in this way St Germannus was once attacked by legions of evil spirits as he sailed from the bay of Gaul to Britain in the cause of man's salvation.²⁹⁸ They rushed at him on the open sea, putting perils in his path, stirring storms and blotting out the daylight sky with a mist of darkness. But in an instant, at St Germannus's prayer, the mist was wiped away, the storms were stilled and all perils ceased.

Our own Columba, seeing that the elements were roused to fury against him, called upon Christ the Lord. Though the sailors were hesitant, he was steadfast. He boarded the boat and ordered them to hoist the sail into the wind. This was done, and all the crowd of people looking on saw his boat move off directly into the wind at marvellous speed. In only a little time the contrary wind backed round and, to everyone's wonder, turned in their favour. And so all day they enjoyed a gentle following breeze for their journey, and the boat arrived at its intended destination.

Consider, reader, how great was that venerable man, and what kind of man he was, in whom almighty God declared

[1140] *Concerning a certain young woman who as a daughter of Eve suffered great pains during a difficult childbirth*

One day, on Iona, St Columba suddenly got up from his reading and said with a smile:

'Now I must hurry to the church to beseech God on behalf of a poor girl who is tortured by the pains of a most difficult childbirth and who now in Ireland calls on my name. For she hopes that through me the Lord will release her from her anguish, because she is related to me, for her father belonged to my mother's kindred.'

St Columba was moved by pity for the girl and ran to the church where he knelt and prayed to Christ the Son of Man. Then after praying he came out and said to those of the brethren who met him:

'Now has our Lord Jesus, who was born of woman, shown favour on the poor girl and brought timely help to deliver her from her difficulties. She has safely given birth and is in no danger of death.'

At exactly that time, as St Columba predicted, the poor woman who had called on his name was relieved and regained her health. The story was confirmed by people coming from the district of Ireland where the woman herself lived.

[1141] *Concerning a man called Luigne 'the little hammer', a steersman, who lived in Rathlin, ³²⁰ whose wife hated him for his ugliness*

Once when St Columba stayed as a guest in Rathlin Island, a layman came to him and complained that his wife had an aversion to him, so he said, and would not allow him to lie with her. The saint called the wife to him and, so far as he was able, began to reproach her, saying:

'Why, woman, do you attempt to deny your own flesh? For the Lord says, "Two shall be in one flesh". Therefore your husband's flesh is your flesh.'³²¹

To which she answered:

'I am prepared to do anything you order me to, however much of a burden, except one thing. Do not make me share a bed with Luigne. I do not shirk from all the work of the house, or if you tell me to cross the seas and remain in some woman's monastery I would do it.'

'It cannot be right to do what you say. For as long as your husband is alive, you are subject to the law of your husband. It is unlawful to put apart those whom God has joined together.'³²²

Having said this, he went on with this suggestion:

'Today, the three of us - husband and wife and I - shall fast and pray to the Lord.'

'I know,' she said, 'that things which seem difficult or even impossible will be possible for you, for God will grant you what you ask.'

Why say more? Both husband and wife consented to fast that day with St Columba. That night, while the couple slept, St Columba prayed for them. The next day, in this husband's presence, he charged the wife:

'Woman, will you today do what yesterday you said you were ready to do and enter a monastery of women?'

'Now,' she said, 'I know that the Lord has heard your prayers for me. For the husband whom I hated yesterday I love today. For during last night, I know not how, my heart was changed within me from loathing to love.'

Why linger? From then until the day of her death, the heart of the wife was fixed entirely on her husband's love, so that she never afterwards refused the dues of the marriage bed as she used to.

his glorious name in the sight of a heathen people through these miracles of power.

[11 35] *How the gates of the royal fortress suddenly opened on their own*²⁹⁹

Once, the first time St Columba climbed the steep path³⁰⁰ to King Bridei's fortress, the king, puffed up with royal pride, acted aloofly and would not have the gates of his fortress opened at the first arrival of the blessed man. The man of God, realizing this, approached the very doors with his companions. First he signed them with the sign of the Lord's cross and only then did he put his hand to the door to knock. At once the bars were thrust back and the doors opened of themselves with all speed. Whereupon St Columba and his companions entered.

The king and his council³⁰¹ were much alarmed at this, and came out of the house to meet the blessed man with due respect and to welcome him gently with words of peace. From that day forward for as long as he lived, the ruler treated the holy and venerable man with great honour as was fitting.

[11 36] *About a similar opening of the church-door at Terryglass*

Likewise, on a different occasion when St Columba was staying for a time in Ireland, he had gone to visit the monks who lived at Terryglass and who had invited him.³⁰² But it happened by some misfortune that when he arrived the keys to the door of the church could not be found.³⁰³ The saint heard the monks complaining to one another that the door

was locked and the keys had not been found, and so he himself went up to the door.

'The Lord has the power,' he said, 'to open his house to his servants even without keys.'

At his word the bolts were forcefully drawn back and the door opened of itself to everyone's astonishment. St Columba was the first to enter the church. He was received as a guest and treated with honour and reverence by all the monks.

[11 37] *Of a certain layman, a beggar, for whom St Columba made a stake and blessed it for hunting wild animals*

Once, a layman who lived in the district of Lochaber, and who was very poor, came to St Columba. He had no means of providing food for his wife and children, and so St Columba took pity on him. He gave such alms as he was able to the poor man, who was begging, and said:

'My poor fellow, get a stick of wood from the forest here and bring it to me quickly.'

The dejected man obeyed the saint's command and fetched the piece of wood, which the saint took from him and sharpened to a point. He did this with his own hands, then blessed it and gave it to the needy man, saying:

'Keep this sharp stick carefully. It will not harm any man, I believe, nor any cattle, but with it you may kill wild animals and fish.³⁰⁴ As long as you have this stake, your house will never be short of game for the table.'

The poor beggar was delighted to hear this and returned home. He set the sharp stick up in an out-of-the-way place where there were wild creatures, and after only one night he went to check his stake-trap in the early morning. There he found a stag of amazing size had fallen on the stake.

Why say more? It is said that no day could pass but he found a stag or a hind or some other creature had fallen on the stake where it was fixed. Also, when the house was filled with game, he sold to neighbours the surplus that the hospitality of his house could not use. But the devil's hatred reached this pitiable man, as it did Adam, through his wife. She, like a fool without any sense, spoke to her husband saying this kind of thing:

'Take up that stake from the ground, for if any person or cattle should be killed by it, then you and I and our children will be killed or led into slavery.'³⁰⁵

'Nothing like that will happen,' said her husband, 'for St Columba said to me when he blessed the stake that it would never harm people or cattle.'

But after exchanges of this kind, the beggar gave in to his wife and went to take up the stake, which he brought back to the house as though he loved it and kept it inside by the wall. However, not long afterwards, a house-dog fell on it and died. At this the wife resumed her complaint:

'One of your children,' she said, 'will fall on that stake and be killed.'

So the man took the stake from the wall and carried it back to the woods, and he set it in a place where the brambles grew so thick, he thought no living creature could be hurt by it. But the next day he went back and found that a goat had fallen on it and been killed. He again moved the stake and set it where it was hidden underwater, though near the bank, in the River Lochy.³⁰⁶ Again, returning to it one day, he found a salmon of amazing size stuck on the stake. Indeed, it was so big he could hardly lift it from the river and take it home. He took the stake away with him too and this time set it on top of his roof outside. Here a raven flying past dropped on to it and died. After this, the poor man, ruined by the advice of his foolish wife, took the stake down, chopped it into pieces with his axe, and threw the fragments in the fire. From then on he returned

to begging, a fate he deserved, for he had thrown away the means of no small relief from his poverty; for this relief from penury had depended on that stake which had stood him in good stead as snare or net or any other means of hunting or fishing, because it had been blessed and given by St Columba. But now that it was thrown away, the wretched layman and his whole family, to whom it had brought prosperity for a time, regretted its loss too late during all that remained of his life.

[In 38] *How a milk-stein was carried away on the ebb and brought back to the same place on the next tide*

Once, St Columba sent a man called Lugaíd Láitir to sail to Ireland as his representative.³⁰⁷ In making his preparations Lugaíd looked for a milk-skin among the equipment of the saint's boat. Having found one, he put it in the sea, weighted down with large stones, in order to saturate it.³⁰⁸ When he went to St Columba, he told him what he had done with the skin, but the saint smiled and said:

'This time, I think, that skin which you say you have put to soak will not accompany you to Ireland.'

'Why,' he said, 'should I not be able to have it with me in the boat?'

'Tomorrow,' said St Columba, 'you will see what happens.'

So, early next day, Lugaíd went down to the sea to recover the skin. But overnight the ebbing tide had washed it away. Not finding it, he returned sadly to St Columba and, kneeling on the ground, admitted his negligence. The saint reassured him, saying:

'Do not grieve, brother, over such perishable things. The skin that the ebb-tide washed away will come back to where it was on the flood.'³⁰⁹ But you will have sailed by then.'

The same day, though after Lugaid's departure from Iona, St Columba spoke to those standing near him after Nones, and said:

'Now one of you go down to the sea. Yesterday Lugaid was complaining about a skin that had been carried away on the ebb-tide, but now the flood has returned it to the spot where it was.'

A young man who heard him say this quickly ran to the shore. He found the skin as the saint had foretold, and ran back carrying it, happy to return it to St Columba. All who were present marvelled.

In these two stories, as we have often remarked before, though their subjects be as trivial as a stake or a skin, yet prophecy and a miracle of power are seen together. Now let us go on to other matters.

[1139] *St Columba's prophecy about Libran of the reed-bed*

Once, during the period when St Columba lived in Iona, a layman who had only lately assumed the clerical habit crossed by sea from Ireland to the blessed man's island monastery. One day the saint encountered him sitting alone in the guest-house where he was lodged, and spoke to him. He asked first about where the man came from, who his people were and what was the reason for his journey. The man replied that he belonged to the province of the Connachta, and that he had made the effort of the long journey in order to wipe out his sins on a pilgrimage.³¹⁰ St Columba then set out for him how strict and burdensome were the demands of monastic life, for he wanted to test the strength of his penitence. The man's answer to the saint came without hesitation:

'I am ready for anything you choose to demand of me, however harsh, however degrading.'

Why say more? There and then he confessed all his sins³¹¹ and kneeling on the ground gave his word that he would do whatever the rules of penance required.

'Rise,' said St Columba, 'and have a seat.'

When the man was seated, the saint continued:

'You must spend seven years in penance in Tíree. But by God's gift you and I shall both live to see those seven years through.'

The saint's words gave the man strength, and he thanked God. Then he said:

'What should I do about an oath I once swore but which I did not keep? For while I still lived in my own district, I killed a fellow. After this I was held in chains as a guilty man. But a relative of mine, in fact one of my immediate kindred, who was extremely rich, came to my rescue in the nick of time. He paid what was needed to get me off though I was bound in chains, and he saved me, though guilty, from death. After he had bought my release, I promised to him with a binding oath that I should serve him all the days of my life. I had only been in this servitude for a matter of days when, disdaining to serve any man and preferring to live in obedience to God, I broke my oath and went away, a fugitive from my worldly master.³¹² The Lord favoured my journey and now I have come to you.'

St Columba could see that these matters were causing the man real anxiety, and returned to his previous prophecy, saying:

'As I said to you, when a term of seven years is completed, you shall come to me here during Lent so that at the Easter festival you may approach the altar and receive the sacrament.'

Why dwell on words? The repentant pilgrim obeyed St Columba's instructions in everything. At that date he was sent to the monastery in Mag Luinge, and there he spent seven whole years in penance.³¹³ Then during Lent he returned

in accordance with the saint's previous prophetic command, and during the celebration of the Easter festival, he approached the altar as he was bidden. After Easter, the man came to St Columba and again questioned him about his oath. This was the saint's prophetic answer to him:

'Your worldly master, of whom you once spoke to me, is still living. So are your father and mother and your brothers. Now therefore you must prepare yourself for a voyage.'

As he was saying this, he produced a sword decorated with carved ivory,³¹⁴ and continued:

'Take this to carry with you as a gift that you can offer to your master in return for your freedom. He has a wife with many virtues, whose sound advice he will follow. Without delay he will grant you your freedom, untying according to custom the slave's belt from your loins, and he will do it without taking payment.³¹⁵ Though you will be released from this cause of anxiety, there will be another near at hand from which you will not escape. For your brothers will force you to make good the service due from son to father which you have for so long neglected.³¹⁶ But you must obey their will without hesitation and take your old father into your dutiful care. Though this may seem to you a heavy burden, you should not be disheartened for you will soon have discharged the debt. One week from the day when you begin to look after your father, you will lay him in his grave. When your father is buried, your brothers will again press you to be a dutiful son to your mother also, and serve her. Your younger brother, however, will deliver you from this obligation, for he will be ready to do all that you ought in the way of filial duty and to serve her in your place.'

The brother, whose name was Librán, took the sword and set out, after the saint had bestowed his blessing on him. When he reached his native district he found that everything the saint predicted was proved true. He showed the sword to his master, offering it as the price of his freedom; the master would have taken it, but his wife at once refused, saying:

'How can we accept this precious gift which St Columba has sent? We are not worthy of this. Let this dutiful servant be delivered to the saint without payment. For the holy man's blessing will bring us more benefit than this gift which is offered.'

The husband listened to his wife's sound advice and readily freed his slave without payment.

After that, according to St Columba's prophecy, Librán was made by his brothers to serve their father, whom seven days later he laid in his grave. Next he was made to serve his mother also, but with the help of his younger brother, who took his place, he was released from this duty as St Columba had indicated. This is what the younger one told the brothers:

'It is not right that we should hold back our brother in this district who has for the last seven years been with St Columba in Britain, working for the salvation of his soul.'

Librán was now released from all his burdens, and taking his leave from his mother and brothers, he returned as a free man to Derry. There he found a ship under sail and just drawing away from the mooring. He shouted from the shore, begging the sailors to take him with them since he wished to sail across to Britain. But they refused him, for they did not belong to the community of St Columba.³¹⁷ At this point, Librán spoke to the saint – for although he was a long way away, he was present in the spirit, as the event soon showed – saying:

'Does it please you, St Columba,' he said, 'that these sailors have full sails and a following wind for their voyage, though they refuse to take me, your friend, with them?'

He had hardly finished speaking before the wind, which had until then been favourable, swung round against the boat. Meanwhile, the sailors saw that Librán was running along the riverbank beside them. Discussing the situation with one another, they called after him from their boat, saying:

'Perhaps it is because we refused to take you with us that the wind has turned round against us so quickly. But if we now ask you to join us in the boat, you will have power to change the wind again, so that what is now a head wind will become a following wind.'

Hearing this, the traveller said to them:

'St Columba, to whom I am going and whom I have obeyed for the last seven years, will be able to get you a favourable wind from his Lord by the power of prayer if you take me with you.'

On the strength of this they brought their boat to the bank and asked him to get in with them. As soon as he had climbed on board, he said:

'In the name of the Almighty, whom St Columba serves without blame, hoist the sail and fix the sheets.'

At once the wind which had been blowing against them veered round, and they had a fair voyage to Britain with their sails full.

On reaching Britain, Librán left the boat and, after blessing the sailors, made his way to Iona, where St Columba was living. The saint welcomed him joyfully and related, though no one had brought him news, everything that had happened to Librán on his journey: of his master and the wife's sound advice, how he was freed by her persuasion, of his brothers, of his father's death and burial within a week, of his mother and the timely help of his younger brother, and of the events during his return journey, the change of wind, the words of the sailors who would not take him, his promise of a favourable wind and how the wind improved when he was taken on board. In fact, all that the saint had said would happen, he now described as it had happened. After this, the traveller returned to St Columba the price of his deliverance which he had received from the saint. At that time the saint gave him a name, saying:

'You will be called Librán because you are free.'

During the next few days Librán took the monastic vow. St Columba sent him back to the monastery where he had served the Lord for seven years before as a penitent, taking his leave with these prophetic words:

'You will enjoy long life, and will end this present life in good old age. Nevertheless your resurrection will not be in Britain but in Ireland.'³¹⁸

These words made Librán weep bitterly kneeling in front of the saint. The saint was sad to see him so, and began to comfort him, saying:

'Stand up, and do not distress yourself. You will die in one of my monasteries and you will have your share in the Kingdom among my elect monks, with whom you will awake from the sleep of death into the resurrection of eternal life.'

This was no little comfort, and Librán was much cheered to hear it. Then enriched with St Columba's blessing, he went away in peace.

What the saint had truly foretold about him was in due course fulfilled. He served St Columba as a monk in the monastery at Mag Luinge for many years, even after St Columba had passed from this world. When he was a very old man, he was sent to Ireland on some business of the community. He left the boat on the coast of Brega and crossed the plain to the monastery of Durrow. There he was hospitably received and given lodging in the guest-house, where he fell ill and after a week of illness he went to the Lord in peace. There he was buried among the elect monks of St Columba, where he will rise again to eternal life in accordance with the saint's prophecy.

These true prophecies that I have written about Librán must be enough. He was known as Librán of the reed-bed because for many years he worked gathering reeds in the reed-bed.³¹⁹

[In 42] *St Columba's prophecy concerning the voyage of Cormac Ua Lathain*

Once, Cormac, a soldier of Christ about whom we said a few words in Book One of this work, tried again, a second time, to find a place of retreat in the ocean.³²³ It was after he had set sail over the boundless ocean with his sails full that St Columba stayed for a time at the other side of Druim Alban. While there, he commended Cormac to King Bridei, in the presence of the under-king of the Orkneys, saying:

'Some of our people have sailed off hoping to find a place of retreat somewhere on the trackless sea. Commend them to the care of this sub-king, whose hostages you hold, so that, if by chance their long wanderings should bring them to Orkney, they should meet with no hostility within his boundaries.'³²⁴

The saint said this because he already knew in the spirit that Cormac would arrive in Orkney after several months. This afterwards came about, and, thanks to the saint's commendation, he was delivered from imminent death there.

Several months later, when St Columba was back at home in Iona, the brethren were talking to one another in his presence, and at one point the name of Cormac came up in the conversation. Someone said:

'No one knows whether Cormac's voyage turned out to be successful or not.'

St Columba heard this and said:

'Today, you will soon see this Cormac whom you talk of, for he will arrive here.'

It was only perhaps an hour later that, strange to tell, look, there was Cormac. Quite unexpectedly he arrived in the church to give thanks, to the astonishment of everyone there.³²⁵

Since we have briefly talked of this prophecy concerning

Cormac's second voyage, we shall now set down a few words about St Columba's clairvoyant knowledge of his third voyage.

When this Cormac was travelling on the ocean for the third time, he found himself in such danger that he came close to death. His ship had been driven with full sails by a steady wind from the south for fourteen summer days and nights, so that a straight course brought them to an area under the most northerly skies. They reckoned that they had passed beyond the range of human exploration, and had reached a place from which they might not be able to return. There it happened, after the tenth hour of the fourteenth day, that a source of terror appeared, rising up on all sides, most fearsome, almost unendurable. To that day, assuredly, no one had ever seen such a thing: the whole sea was covered with deadly loathsome little creatures. They struck with horrible force against the keel, against the sides of the boat, against the stern and the prow, and the pressure of them was so great that it was thought they would pierce the skin covering of the boat. These creatures (as those who were present afterwards described) were about the size of frogs, but exceedingly troublesome because they had spines, though they did not fly but merely swam.³²⁶ They were also a great nuisance to the blades of the oars. Nor were these the only prodigies that Cormac and his fellow sailors saw, though there is not time here to describe them.³²⁷ They were greatly disturbed and frightened, and with tears they prayed to God, who is a loyal and ready helper in time of trouble.

At that time our own St Columba was there in spirit, in the boat with Cormac, though his body was far away. In the moment of their worst trouble he sounded the bell to call the brethren to come to the church. Then entering the church, he gave this prophecy to those standing there, according to his usual practice, saying:

'Brethren, pray with all your might for Cormac, who is

sailing out of control and has now passed beyond the limit of where man has gone before. There he suffers horrific terrors, monstrous things never seen before and almost indescribable. We should therefore share in our minds the sufferings of our brethren, members of the same body as ourselves, who are placed in unendurable danger. Now, behold, I see Cormac and his fellow sailors earnestly imploring Christ's help, their faces streaming with tears. We too must help with our prayers and call on him to have pity on our brethren, to turn the wind that has driven them northwards now for fourteen days, and to give them a wind from the north, which would bring Cormac's boat back out of danger.'

So saying, he knelt before the altar, praying to almighty God, who governs the winds and all things. After praying, he rose quickly, wiping away his tears, and joyfully gave thanks to God, saying:

'Now, brethren, we may share in the joy of those of our dear ones for whom we pray. The Lord has now turned the wind from the south to a north wind, which will carry our fellow members out of danger and bring them back once more to us here.'

At once, the south wind ceased, the wind blew day after day from the north, and Cormac's boat was brought back to land. Cormac himself came to St. Columba, and by God's gift they looked again on each other's face, while everyone wondered and rejoiced greatly.

The reader should therefore ponder how great and of what nature was this blessed man who possessed such prophetic knowledge and who was able, by invoking Christ's name, to command the winds and the ocean.

[Fr 43] *How St Columba rode in a chariot without the necessary protection of linchpins*

Once, when St Columba spent a number of days in Ireland, travelling in the interests of the church, it was necessary for him to mount into a chariot, which he first blessed. It was already hitched up, but by some extraordinary oversight the necessary linchpins had not been fitted into the slots for them at the ends of the axles. That day the chariot was driven by Colmán mac Echdach, a saintly man who had founded the monastery of Slanore.³²⁸ Though shaken about by a whole day's driving over a long distance, the wheels did not separate from the axle-shoulders, nor did they slacken even though they were secured by no linchpins.³²⁹ But it was the Grace of God which alone preserved the saint so that the chariot in which he sat kept to a straight course, safely and without hindrance.

To this point we have written about those miracles of power which almighty God worked through this praiseworthy man while he lived in this present life. We have given sufficient examples of these. Now we must record a few of those which were granted by the Lord after St Columba had passed from the flesh.³³⁰

[Fr 44] *How in honour of St Columba the Lord brought rain to ground parched by months of drought*³³¹

[The miracle which by God's favour we are now about to recount took place in our own time and we witnessed it with our own eyes.]³³² It happened about seventeen years ago. Right through the spring a severe drought lasted unrelieved so that our fields were baked dry. It was so bad that we

thought our people were threatened by the curse which the Lord imposed on those who transgressed, where it says in Leviticus: 'I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass. And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit', and so forth.³³³ As we read this and thought with fear of the blow that threatened, we debated what should be done, and decided on this. Some of our elders should walk around the fields that had lately been ploughed and sown, carrying with them St Columba's white tunic and books which the saint had himself copied. They should hold aloft the tunic, which was the one he wore at the hour of his departure from the flesh, and shake it three times. They should open his books and read aloud from them at the Hill of Angels, where from time to time the citizens of heaven used to be seen coming down to converse with the saint.³³⁴

When all these things had been done as we had decided, on the same day – wonderful to tell – the sky, which had been cloudless through the whole of March and April, was at once covered, extraordinarily quickly, with clouds rising from the sea, and heavy rain fell day and night.³³⁵ The thirsty ground was quenched in time, the seed germinated and in due course there was a particularly good harvest. In this way the commemoration of St Columba's name, using his tunic and his books, on that occasion, brought help to many districts and peoples in time to save their crops.

[I 45] *How the intercession of St Columba changed contrary winds into favourable winds*

The present-day miracles that I have seen myself confirm my faith in such events in the past, which I have not seen.³³⁶ For

example, the changing of a contrary wind to a favourable one I have myself witnessed on three occasions.

On the first of these, pine trees and oaks³³⁷ had been felled and dragged overland. Some were to be used in the making of a longship,³³⁸ and besides ships' timbers there were also beams for a great house to be brought here to Iona.³³⁹ It was decided that we should lay the saint's vestments and books on the altar, and that by fasting and singing psalms and invoking his name, we should ask St Columba to obtain for us from the Lord that we should have favourable winds. So it turned out, that God had granted it to him; for on the day when our sailors had got everything ready and meant to take the boats and currachs and tow the timbers to the island by sea, the wind, which had blown in the wrong direction for several days, changed and became favourable. Though the route was long and indirect, by God's favour the wind remained favourable all day and the whole convoy sailed with their sails full so that they reached Iona without delay.

The second time was several years later. Again, oak trees were being towed by a group of twelve currachs from the mouth of the River Shiell to be used here in repairs to the monastery.³⁴⁰ On a dead calm day, when the sailors were having to use the oars, a wind suddenly sprang up from the west, blowing head on against them. We put in to the nearest island, called Eilean Shona, intending to stay in sheltered water. All the while I complained of this inconvenient change of wind, and began after a fashion to chide our St Columba, saying:

'Is this troublesome delay in our efforts what you wanted, St Columba? To this point I had hoped that by God's favour you would bring help and comfort in our labours, since I thought you stood in high honour with God.'

Hardly a minute had passed when the west wind dropped and, strange to say, a wind immediately blew from the north-east. Then I told the sailors to hoist the yards cross-wise,

spread the sails and draw the sheets taut. In this way we were carried by a fair, gentle breeze, all the way to our island in one day quite effortlessly, and all who were with me in the boats, helping to tow the timbers, were greatly pleased.

My little complaint against St Columba, trivial though it was, brought us considerable advantage. It is obvious how great and how special is the saint's merit with the Lord, who made the wind change as soon as he heard.

The third time this happened was during the summer, when I had been to the meeting of the Irish synod,³⁴¹ and on the return journey found myself delayed for some days by contrary winds among the people of Cenél Loairn.³⁴² We had reached the island of *Saine*,³⁴³ and the eve of St Columba's solemn feast saw us still held up there. I was much disappointed by this, for I very much wanted to be in Iona for this joyful day. So, as on the previous occasion, I complained, saying:

'Is it your wish, O saint, that I should stay here among the lay people till tomorrow, and not spend the day of your feast in your own church? It is such an easy thing for you on a day like this to change an adverse wind into a favourable one, so that I might partake of the solemn masses of your feast day in your own church.'

When night had passed and we rose at first light, we realized that the wind had dropped completely and we set out in the boats in still weather. Soon a south wind rose behind us, and the sailors shouted for joy and raised the sails. In this way God gave us a fast and fair voyage without the labour of rowing for St Columba's sake, so that we achieved our desire and reached the harbour of Iona after the hour of Terce. So we were able to wash our hands and feet before entering the church with the brethren to celebrate together the solemn mass at the hour of Sext, for the feast of St Columba and St Baithéne.³⁴⁴ It was the same day that we had sailed all the way from *Saine* since early morning.

The law requires two or three witnesses,³⁴⁵ but there are a hundred and more who will testify to the truth of this account.

[r 46] *About the plague*

This story too, I think, should be counted among the major miracles of power. It concerns the great plague which twice in our time has ravaged a large part of the world.³⁴⁶ Though I do not speak of the broader regions of Europe – Italy or the city of Rome, Cisalpine Gaul or the province of Spain beyond the Pyrenees – yet the islands of the ocean, Ireland and Britain, have been twice ravaged by a terrible plague. Everywhere was affected except two peoples, the population of Pictland and the Irish who lived in Britain, races separated by the mountains of Druim Alban.³⁴⁷ Although neither of these peoples is without great sin, by which the eternal Judge is moved to anger, none the less to this date he has been patient and has spared them both. Surely this grace from God can only be attributed to St Columba? For he founded among both peoples the monasteries where today he is still honoured on both sides.³⁴⁸

It is not without sorrow now that I say this, that there are in both nations many foolish people who ungratefully fail to recognize that they have been protected from the plague by the prayers of saints, and who abuse God's patience. But we often thank God that through the intercession of our holy patron he has preserved us from the onslaughts of plague, not only at home among our islands, but also in England. For I visited my friend King Aldfrith³⁴⁹ while the plague was at its worst and many whole villages on all sides were stricken. But both on my first visit after Ecgrith's battle³⁵⁰ and on my second two years later, though I walked in the midst of this

danger of plague, the Lord delivered me, so that not even one of my companions died nor was any of them troubled with the disease.³⁵¹

Here we must end the second book concerning St Columba's miracles of power. Readers should take notice that I have omitted many well attested examples so that they should not become weary.

