Abstract

St. Columba is an iconic figure in the early Irish Christian Church. His life and works are testament to the spread of Irish monasticism and the success of Christian colonization of the British Isles. His legacy in the literary canon is simultaneously soldier, scholar and saviour. Two biographies written nearly one thousand years apart are used to analyse the saint’s life as exemplar of spiritual and political probity. The *Vita Columbae*, penned in the seventh century C.E. by Adomnán, the abbot of Iona, presents the figure of Columba as an early Christian soldier and pioneer; a politically savvy individual conscious of his royal heritage and dynastic responsibilities. He is a figure who bridged the gap between the secular and the ecclesiastical realms of interest, demonstrating the potential for mutual benefit arising from the co-operation between church and state which resulted in the creation of a unique Gaelic Christian identity. In contrast, stands the sixteenth century life of Columba, the *Betha Colaim Chille* by Manus O’ Donnell who was a direct descendant of the saint. This account inverts the characterization of Columba to reveal him as a figure of resistance to English colonization, a soldier of destiny who will remind the Gaelic peoples of their history and bring about a renaissance in Irish culture and identity. For Adomnán this identity is tied to Columba and the monastery at Iona and articulated as synonymously Irish and Christian under the banner of Columbine monasticism. O’ Donnell utilizes and builds on this legacy, depicting Columba as a revolutionary figure who combines the virtues and valour of his pre-Christian forbearers, the Gaelic chieftains. This image is one that all Gaelic peoples might ascribe to and thus avoid the colonisation and consequent Anglicization by the Tudor conquest of sixteenth century Ireland. Both works are important in the development of Irish Language, literature and culture upon which ideas of ‘Gaelic Identity’ were articulated. The literary tradition of Columba is a part of a larger
body of work that engages with these ideas and demonstrates the importance of Columba and his legacy in the historical record.
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Dedication

Do mo mháthair.
1. Introduction

Columba or Columchille as he is also named in the Irish literary tradition is one of the earliest and most influential saints of Ireland. He is best known as the founder of the monastery of Iona in Scotland from where Christianity was promulgated to the British Isles. Accounts of his life are found in Latin, Old and Middle Irish. The most complete examples are the *Vita Columbae*, an early seventh century account by Adomnán the Abbot of Iona and the sixteenth century version the *Betha Colaim Chille*, written by a descendant of Columba, one Manus O’Donnell.

This thesis seeks to address aspects of the scholarship on Columba, specifically as he is represented in the *Vita Columbae* and the *Betha Colaim Chille*. I shall focus on the characterization of the saint by examining eschatological prophecies contained in these works, their interpretation and utilisation as tools of Christian conquest and politics of national Gaelic identity.

I propose to argue for a reading of the texts as representing specific ideologies concerning Gaelic identity which are contextualized by particular historical circumstances. Adomnán's biography reflects the traditions of early medieval Ireland where Columba is presented as both holy man and politician. He cleverly interweaves these two elements to illustrate a royal monk who will unite the secular and sacred by bringing Christianity to the British Isles; thereby locating Irish monasticism at the forefront of political and religious power in this region. This marks a significant beginning in the creation of a Gaelic Christian identity where the saint, and
by implication Gaelic Christians, are represented in terms of conquest and control. He juxtaposes the spiritual power of Columba with that of the forces of darkness or evil, the heathen populations or unbelievers that he encounters making Columba the model Gaelic Christian, ‘the soldier of Christ’, and legitimating the role of the new spiritual centre at Iona. This reading of the text advocates for a very specific identity and role for the followers of Columba and his descendants. These are written into the historical record and accorded pride of place in both the spiritual and secular governance of the British Isles. It gives the kinsmen of Columba, the Cenél Chonaill and his associates an explicitly Christian identity and an impeccable claim to political power and influence.

Next I shall argue that Manus O’ Donnell’s sixteenth century work the *Betha Colaim Chille* marks another transition in the literary history and cultural importance of this figure. O’ Donnell’s account of Columba also reflects its time of writing. In the sixteenth century the English conquest of Ireland continued and was in many respects facilitated by the faction and clan warfare that dominated the indigenous response to the colonial threat. The O’ Donnell rendition references the ‘golden age’ of the Gaelic past to advocate for the creation of a national identity using Columba as its symbolic personification. Here Columba is represented as both a religious and revolutionary icon. Manus’ account continues the idealisation of the saint in personal, spiritual and political domains. I shall analyse the sixteenth century account of the life of the saint and argue that the author attempts to utilize the work as a forum for creating/renewing Gaelic national identity. The earlier characterization of Columba as ‘soldier
of Christ’ is merged with old Irish epic to construct a figure symbolic of the golden age of Irish pre-Christian history, a ‘soldier of destiny’ who will revitalise and unify the oppressed people.

1.1 Chapter Breakdown

Chapter one will outline the methodological approaches used in this paper. I shall briefly outline the works and theories of Alan Smith\(^1\) and Niels Hvidt\(^2\) who have published on national identity and eschatology respectively. When discussing the prophecies I shall draw upon the work of Hvidt to analyze the eschatological nature of these excerpts and seek to contextualise them to documented religious and historical conditions. Smith, a supporter of the ethno-symbolic approach to the topic of identity, supports the argument that identity is one based upon common myths, symbols, religion and other cultural artifacts such as literature, art and archaeology to describe what populations past and present perceive to be true representations of their distinctiveness. Identity is therefore fluid and can be constructed with reference to time and place.

Chapter two will focus on the depiction of Columba in Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*. This section will present the early narrative attributed to the saint in the *Vita Columbae*, and examine the politics of identity and his role as a colonizing figure. Adomnán, a kinsman of Columba, develops the textual associations to claim a spiritual dynasty for all those connected to the saint either by virtue of familial bloodlines or monastic association. The discussion will illustrate this process and examine Adomnán’s conceptualisation of Columba as *soldier of*

Christ. Thus, it will be argued that Adomnán's account of the saint encompasses both the religious and the secular and creates a very specific Christian identity for the saint and his followers.

Chapter three will concentrate on Manus O Donnell’s sixteenth century work the *Betha Colaim Chille*. I will discuss how O’ Donnell re-frames Columba as a symbol of Gaelic heritage and culture while showcasing the lineage, legitimacy and role of the O’ Donnell family in the resistance to the colonization of Ireland by the England. I contend that this discourse is part of Irish literary tradition and can be seen most evidently in Bardic poetry which emerged from the 'Gaelic Resurgence' in fourteenth century. Manus O Donnell’s work on Columba forms a part of this body of literature. The eschatological prophecies unique to this work will be discussed in this light and I shall argue that they advocate for a form of national identity in the wake of English occupation. The Columba narrative is inverted from *soldier of Christ to soldier of destiny* to legitimate the struggle against the invader/coloniser.

The final chapter will summarize the findings of this thesis, address the shortcomings and propose further areas for scholarly enquiry and research. Much of the scholarship on Columba is concentrated on the *Vita Columbae* with comparatively little work completed on the text of the *Betha Colaim Chille*. This thesis seeks to address that lack of scholarship on the later text. It also endeavours to draw linkages between the two, another area which shows a remarkable lack of inquiry. In addressing differences in the approaches utilized by the authors I hope to open up the debate on both works and create further research possibilities in this field.
2. Methodology: A framework for discussion

In developing the methodology and defining the parameters of this study, some concepts and caveats require clarification. It is impossible to discuss medieval Irish history only in a secular manner. Religion and politics have shaped Irish history in a way that leaves no doubt that they are often one and the same. This fusion is exemplified in the contextualisation by Patrick Pearse and other leaders of the 1916 Rebellion as a historical and religious event. The juxtaposition of the epic figure of Cú Chulainn with that of Jesus is used to illustrate and support this interpretation. Old Irish Epic and biblical sources have often been combined in an effort to unite the traditional and the revolutionary in Irish history. Cú Chulainn is one of several figures to fill this role. Classical references and material from Virgilian poetry or Greek heroic myths were also used to produce subversive literature that merged the epic and the religious in a narrative that contextualised its reception to that audience.³

The use of Columba as a figure for change and continuity is one well that is well established in Irish tradition to the modern day. It is this dichotomy which is of particular interest in this study. From the early work Adomnán in the seventh century to the later account by O’ Donnell in the sixteenth century, Columba has been used to bridge the gap between the secular and the

³ The Aisling poetry of the sixteenth century and onwards makes use of classical and biblical motifs to describe the destruction and colonization of Ireland. Authors such as Antoin O Raifteiri, Eoghan Ruadh mac and Bhaird, Padraigin Haceid and Aoghan O Rathaille are among those who used such motifs.
religious. In fact, Columba has become one of the more celebrated Irish saints to have achieved parity of esteem in the canons of Irish historical and literary rhetoric.

### 2.1 Nationality and Identity

The methodological analysis that will underpin this study is ethno-symbolism. This derives from the study of nation and national identity that has become a vogue in the literature in recent years. There are three main branches in the study of this area: the primordialists, the modernists and the ethno-symbolists. Primordialists argue that nations have existed since time immemorial, and that the nation is a social grouping as natural as the primary social groupings of family and kin relations. It is a view that held favour primarily in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries as it was believed that divisions between nations and countries were coterminous with ethnic and cultural boundaries. This argument is synonymous with the idea that the nation exists because a people with a supposed common historical and cultural origin inhabit a particular geographical space that had been occupied by their ancestors. Modernists saw this primordialist view as the motivating factor behind such movements as fascism in Germany, communism in Soviet Russia and imperialism in Japan, deeming it an illusory and exclusionary ideology. Instead they advocated for the nation as an inherent function of modernity, stating that political and economic factors such as capitalism,
industrialism, urbanization and secularism contributed to the rise of the nation-state as the base form of government.⁴

Ethno-symbolism as a method of analysis relies on the myths, symbols, religion and other cultural artifacts such as literature, art and archaeology to describe what the people of the past and present perceive to be true distinctions between various groupings. While these assumptions may in some cases be irrational or even impossible to substantiate using any sort of qualitative or even quantitative scientific method they undeniably influence how people behave in relation to ‘the other’.⁵ Thus issues concerning the nature of identity, the importance of religion in building identity and the role played by relics in this phenomenon, allied to notions of latent apocalypticism will provide the necessary lens through which to examine Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* and Manus O Donnell’s *Betha Colaim Chille*.

I will draw on the work of Anthony Smith to support my analysis and approach to this topic. In promoting ethno-symbolism, Smith argues that the modernist view is incorrect in its insistence that the nation is a completely new phenomenon, since past ethnic groupings that can approximate a nation serve as the basis for future developments of nations, thus leading to a national identity which builds upon the historical narrative of the past. While the past and

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present are not the same, conditions in past societies contribute to the structures found in present societies.⁶

While it is difficult to conceive of a nation in early medieval Ireland, it is possible to define and demarcate familial groupings and dynastic communities. The term *natio* in medieval Ireland was used in the older sense of *familia* or *gens*. By the end of the fourteenth century the term was used to describe particular political factions in Ireland.⁷ The figure of Columba has been used extensively in the construction of the O’ Donnell personal and clan identity. Later he becomes the symbol through which Manus O Donnell expresses his own views on Gaelic-self-identity. The first aspect, the O’ Donnell history and legacy, is easy to identity. In fact Manus begins with a dedication to the saint that makes their familial ties clear.

“And be it known to the readers of the Life that it was Manus O’ Donnell son of Aed son of Aed Ruadh son of Niall Garbh son of Toirdelbach of the Wine, that bade put it into Gaelic the part of the is Life that was in Latin and bade make easy the part thereof that was in hard Gaelic, to the end it might be clear and easy of understanding to all...And having conceived the affection and the love of a brother for his high saint and kinsman by lineage and his dear patron that was bounden to in steadfast devotion.”⁸

However when the lens focusses on national identity a difference in emphasis and diversity in interpretation arises. For example in the 'Gaelic Resurgence' of the fourteenth century the Bardic poets sought to define Gaelic identity through poetry, a concept that has

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been explored by Finan.⁹ In the sixteenth century, Manus presents a reinvention of Columba to represent the very best in the Irish literary and linguistic tradition. Columba is an accessible figure, seen though a body of literature which depicts him in a variety of different characterisations including the warrior saint, the pious pilgrim, and the idealized Irish scholar. Each rendition of the saint’s life writes another chapter weaving the O’Donnell identity and the concept of an indigenous Gaelic identity into the historical record. This interpretation also serves to reaffirm the importance of the indigenous lords of the Cenél Chonaill.

The *Vita Columbae* paints Columba as a soteriological figure, one who will illuminate the world in its last days and establish a Christian kingdom in Ireland and Britain, or in Scotland at least, by virtue his deeds and miracles. Adomnán begins his hagiography with a prophesy: “‘In novissimis’, ait, ‘saeculi temporibus filius nasciturus est cuius nomem Columba per omnes insularum ociani porvincias devulgabitur notum, novissimiaque orbis tempora clare inlustrabit.’”¹⁰ This translates as “In the last years of the world a son will be born, whose name Columba will become famous through all the provinces of the islands of the Ocean, and will illuminate the latest years of the earth.”¹¹ Adomnán continues in this vein, describing a figure that through his miracles and prophecies brings Christianity to the rulers of Scotland and to the 'heathen' tribes of the Picts. He is a soldier of Christ and one who is guided by the Holy Spirit. However, though Adomnán takes great measures to show his holiness the political element is

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¹⁰ *Vita Columbae*, Secunda Praefatio 3a.
ever present. Columba’s voyage to Scotland, often described in folklore as an exile, is no random event. Rather there appears to have been a political association between Columba’s Uí Néill relatives and the Dál Riata leadership of Scotland. The *Vita Columbae* describes Columba as often in the company of Conall mac Comgaill, the ruler of the Scottish Dál Riata. Thus, though he had relinquished his seat of political power in Ireland he did not abandon his political acumen. The *Vita Columbae* rather indicates he had frequent contact with the Dál Riata rulers. According to Adomnán, he ordained Áedán mac Gabráín, a king of the Dál Riata into his kingship thus ensuring continued good will between the Cenél Chonaill, the Dál Riata and most importantly his monastery at Iona.

Adomnán describes Columba as a Christianizing force in the British Isles, one who will bring salvation to that part of the world in the last days. Adomnán unequivocally establishes a Columban dynasty. Columba is a royal figure, descended from Irish nobility and also religiously superior in that his mission is guided by the Holy Spirit. His successors are all from the Cenél Chonaill family, a line that remains strong until the 8th century and the advent of the Viking raids. By giving the saint a valid hagiography he sets the precedent for what later becomes the cult of Columba. His relics become objects which are utilized in dynastic struggles and were carried into battle up until the early modern period. The Cenél Chonaill dynasty uses Columba

13 *Vita Columbae*, III.8.
as one of the identifying ancestors of their line and by implication evidence of their superior heritage. His work lays the foundations for the later work of Manus O Donnell who goes one step further, utilizing Columba as a figure of national importance. Manus' Columba is a unifying force one who becomes a representation of Irish identity and salvation. He will bring about a renaissance in Irish culture and serve as a symbol of Gaelic ethnic identity in the face of British colonialism in Ireland in the sixteenth century.

2.2 Eschatology

One of the terms that I propose to engage with in this thesis is eschatology, specifically eschatological prophecy, revelations that engage with the last things or final days. In doing so, I will draw from the work of Niels Hvidt. Eschatological prophecy is often described in terms of destruction. Hvidt notes that prophecy describing destruction is necessary for the re-creation of perfection.\textsuperscript{14} The world of the author or community of the text is described as unjust, demonic and abominable; fortunately it is already decaying and catastrophes have already begun to occur. Soon it will be completely destroyed and paradise will be regained.\textsuperscript{15} The images of destruction in these eschatological prophecies have a clear purpose, to re-create perfection. This perfection is often described in terms of a historical or mythical golden age where all the values that the prophecy seeks to restore are freely practiced.\textsuperscript{16} The term eschatology is a problematic one and needs to be defined when used to describe literary works. In using the

\textsuperscript{15} Eliade, \textit{Myth and Reality} (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), 78.  
definitions put forth by Hvidt I hope to avoid any discrepancies in understanding the use of this term in my analysis.

There are eschatological elements to be found in both Adomnán’s and O Donnell's work. The authors use these elements to showcase Columba’s role in the fight for Christianity as a soldier of Christ. The battle between the forces of darkness and the saint are described in terms of superior spirituality. Columba overcomes these foes or engages a king in a prophecy as a means to ends. Thus, I am hesitant to call these works apocalyptic writings as the sentiments are veiled and the emphasis is on change, there is no sense that divine forces will intervene, rather the impetus is on the followers of the saint to bring about this transformation. I have chosen instead to specifically use the term eschatology rather than apocalypticism in discussing the prophetic passages throughout this thesis. Apocalyptic texts generally expect an imminent divine intervention in history to permanently expunge evil.\(^\text{17}\) This expectation is not explicitly found in Columba's hagiography though future events are discussed. J.J. Collins has outlined extensively elements that should be found in apocalyptic writings such as otherworldly journeys, encounters with angels and imminent divine intervention.\(^\text{18}\) Many of these elements are not present in the prophecies found in Columba and the details are more in line with the elements outlined by Hvidt. While the description of the community of apocalyptic and


eschatological texts may be seen as similar and here I refer to Cook's work on the subject,\textsuperscript{19} I believe that the prophecies in the two works examined in my thesis bear the mark of eschatology rather than apocalypticism.

Columba indeed engages with demons, and his birth is foretold as occurring in the final days of the earth. These are elements of the end of days narrative which Adomnán suggests give vigour to Columba's mission to convert all to Christianity however the focus is on the coming of a new golden age at Iona and not a specific judgement day or ending. Such elements are combined with his hagiography which is political in tone and seeks to canonize the founder of the Columban dynasty.

\textbf{2.3 Summary}

Adomnán ensured that Columba's legacy will not be forgotten. He adopted the ubiquitous model utilized in many continental European hagiographies of this period which emphasizes the miraculous powers of the saint in order to demonstrate his religious legitimacy.\textsuperscript{20} He 're-Christianised' the biography to give a more erudite and political form to pre-existing fragmentary accounts. Adomnán, in wishing to ensure the continuity of Columba's

\textsuperscript{19} Cook, \textit{The Apocalyptic Literature}, 24. Cook contends that apocalypticism applies to a specific body of literature that is attributed to a particular group within society, one often threatened or in crisis. The period of history documented in Adomnán’s work, was one of uncertainty, as Viking raids on the monasteries were a frequent occurrence. Adomnán’s work expresses the view that the community of Iona had a divine mission to Christianize the surrounding areas, with the figure of Columba representing the ideal to which the monks should aspire. O’ Donnell includes more prophecies than those found in the \textit{Vita Columbae}. Both blame the Gaels themselves for the foreign occupation.

\textsuperscript{20} Herbert, \textit{Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba}, 33.
legacy documented it in Latin, the official language of the church and tailored it to the model of
the hagiography eschewing older pagan poetic traditions and folklore concerning the saint and
firmly establishing him as a biblical hero. He introduces the notion of Columba as ‘solider of
Christ’, a man who will bring all the islands of the Ocean under the rule of Christianity. This
incarnation of Columba is one which casts the saint as a figure of change, one who will ensure
that the Irish monks maintain a presence in the Christian record. In contrast, O’ Donnell’s
account inverts this idea to reveal him as a figure of resistance to colonization. He is the Saint
who will remind people of their history and bring about a renaissance in Irish culture and
identity in the wake of the Cromwellian colonization. Columba whose writings were carried into
battle as a talisman against defeat, is used to personify the legitimate face of rebellion. His
importance in Irish religious history cannot be ignored. He appears most frequently in times of
crisis and uncertainty and is consistently used as a soteriological model/salvific figure. While the
nature of his life is changed to suit the context, he is consistently found in this role.
3. I dtosach báire: Columba’s literary history

This chapter will examine Columba’s life and times to explore how issues of identity were framed and re-framed to present his life course from sainthood to political and messianic icon. The literary milieu of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*, essentially a hagiography of sainthood will be examined. The construction of identity and its use as a religious and political tool of influence will be explored. At the core of this examination is the juxtaposition of personal/spiritual identity with national identity as evidenced in the eschatological prophecies that underpin much of the discussion on Columba’s transition from *Soldier of Christ* to *Soldier of Destiny*.

3.1 Adomnán: Profiling the Biographer

Adomnán was the ninth Abbot of Iona born c. 628 C.E. His lineage descends from the same family as Columba namely the Uí Néills of Donegal in the province of Ulster. His father was descended by five generations from Columba’s grandfather. Like his subject, Adomnán identified himself as Irish, more specifically Gaelic as ‘Irish’ as a concept did not exist in this period, and refers to Ireland as his country in the *Vita Columbae*, using the term *nostram Scotiam*. He had spent much of his life as a monk in Ireland, arriving in Iona when he was approximately fifty-two years old. He had strong political connections in Donegal and the first recorded act of his Abbacy emphasizes his status as a royal intermediary. This is evidenced in *Cáin Adomnáin*, a document which details the legal practice initiated by the Abbot, whereby all

\[\text{21} \text{ Anderson, Adomnán’s Life of Columba, xxxix.}\]
\[\text{22} \text{ My Ireland-Scotia was the Roman term for Ireland. Vita Columbae, III.23.}\]
\[\text{23} \text{ Herbert, Iona, Kells and Derry, 48.}\]
women, children and clerics were held under the protection of Iona with the support of prominent political leaders from among the Uí Néill family and their allies. The act was signed by fifty-one Irish Kings, the Pictish King and forty of the leading Gaelic clerics representing a major feat of diplomacy for this period. Adomnán became an Abbot in 679 C.E. He continued the work of Columba in maintaining ties with the royal Uí Néill clan in Donegal and much of his early rule was dedicated to advancing the position of the Columban federation in Irish ecclesiastical life. Through his composition of the *Vita Columbae* which was completed c.700 C.E he honoured the founder of the Iona community emphasized his unity with it and reinforced his kinship with this powerful dynasty.

### 3.2 Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*

Adomnán’s work is divided into three sections. The first details Columba’s prophecies and their fruition. The Abbot presents Columba as a man whose visions were not limited by time or space; rather he could prophecy events far way and in the future. His prophecies were not like those in the Hebrew Bible, they show him as a man joined with God in spirit. The second section provides an account of all the miracles performed by the saint. Some of these miracles clearly parallel those of Jesus in the New Testament and attempt to draw a close comparison

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24 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 51.
26 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 51-52.
27 Picard, “Structural Patterns in Early Hiberno-Latin Hagiography,” *Peritia* 4, (1985): 67-82. Picard maintains that this far reaching spiritual sight is a common structural feature in Irish hagiography and is central to this tradition as the further the distance of the vision, the stronger the presence of the spirit in the monk/priest.
between the two. As both prophecies and miracles are evidence of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Adomnán strongly advocates sainthood for Columba. The final section testifies to his conversations with angels and his ascension to heaven following his death.

3.3 Columba’s Early Life and Ordination

Adomnán’s Life of Columba provides a biography of the saint compiled from the scarcity of material available from this period. Columba was born in the province of Ulster in Northern Ireland. The Annals of Ulster record the year of his birth as 519 C.E., though debate concerning the contemporary recording of such entries remains on-going. While his birth cannot be conclusively dated, scholars place it sometime between 519-522 C.E. Adomnán names Columba’s parents as Fedlimnith son of Fergus and Ethne daughter of Mac Naue. On his Father’s side Columba was descended from Niall Uí Néill (Niall of the Nine Hostages), a former

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30 Thom, Early Irish Monasticism, 132.
31 See Appendix A for a timeline of dates.
34 Anderson, Adomnán’s Life of Columba, xxvii.
35 Anderson, Adomnán’s Life of Columba, xxvii; Herbert, Iona, Kells and Derry, 10.
36 Niall Uí Neill was named Niall of the Nine Hostages as he took five hostages from the provinces of Ireland and four from Scotland. He is the traditional patriarch of the O’Neill clan in Ulster and the MacNeill’s in Scotland. The O’Neill clan was one of the most powerful land owning royal families in Ulster from the 5th century to the early modern period. See Thom, Early Irish Monasticism, 126; Campbell, Canna: The Story of a Hebridean Island, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
High King of Ireland. Columba’s mother was also of royal lineage, hailing from the race of Cairbre Nia Fear, the Kings of Leinster. With this background he was rooted in the Uí Néill/ O’Neill clan of Ulster, members of the Cénel Chonaill dynasty, and thus was eligible for election to the High Kingship of Ireland. He was fostered, as was the tradition among the Irish nobility, by Cruithnechan a high ranking priest whose name suggests he was one of the Cruithne, the Picts of Ireland. Adomnán states that it was this experience which changed Columba’s life course and marked the beginning of his religious training.

As a young man under deacon’s orders, Columba studied under Bishop Finian, founder of Clonard Abbey in Co. Meath, adjacent to the hill of Tara, the traditional seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Clonard produced some of the most significant names in the history of early Irish Christianity, namely St. Brendan of Birr and St Brendan of Clonfert, the Navigator, who undertook the journey across the Atlantic known as the Brendan Voyage and who is credited with the discovery of America prior to Leif Eriksson and the Vikings; St. Finian of Moville and St. Laisren mac Nad Froich. The latter was brother to Aengus the first Christian King of Munster. Finian or Findbarr as he is known in the Irish tradition is often mentioned as the presiding

37 Thom, Early Irish Monasticism, 126-127.
38 The term Céneél Conaill can be used to refer to three things: the ancient royal dynasty of Donegal, the people of Donegal over whom this dynasty ruled, or the territory over which the royals ruled. For a more detailed discussion see Lacey, Cénel Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms, A.D. 500-800, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).
39 For a detailed map of Ireland and the division of territories in the 6th century C.E. see Appendix B.
40 Thom, Early Irish Monasticism, 127.
41 Vita Columbae, III.2.
42 Tara also held significance in the Christian tradition in that it is the site at which Christianity was first introduced into Ireland.
Bishop in these saints’ lives. Little is preserved of Columba’s early life before he came to Clonard other than his distinguished lineage and his baptism at Clonwal, County Donegal by his uncle and Foster Father, St. Crunathen.

Columba’s ordination is also mentioned in the *Martryology of Oengus*. This lists his conferring as presided over by Bishop Etchen, his cousin, who was also Abbot of Clonard during this period. It is worthy of note that Columba’s wealth and noble birth enabled him to pursue this path. Monks and priests at this time were generally learned men with the benefit of wealthy familial ties that ensured continuing patronage and enabled them to establish monasteries and scriptoriums. Columba’s choice of the monk’s life did not mean an abandonment of his political influence; rather he used it extensively in his missionary work in western Scotland. He is also credited with using this considerable influence at the Conference of Druimm Cete, where his intervention saved the poets (also called the bards/filí) as a class from extinction in Ireland. This episode in his life is given much attention in his biographies, largely as Columba was considered a poet and valued this craft and its heritage in Irish society. The poetic class were the historians and keepers of the stories of the clan and the older

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traditions. Thus, as a scribe and fellow professional it is conceivable that Columba believed that Ireland would not prosper should the poets, the literary class of Ireland, perish.\footnote{Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 127}

In the period following his ordination he was active in founding several monastic centres at Kells, Derry and Swords. These monasteries later became noteworthy because of the ornate manuscripts completed in their scriptoriums. The most famous of these is the Book of Kells, which is now on permanent display in Trinity College Dublin.

### 3.3.1 Exile from Ireland

Adomnán states that Columba left Ireland for Britain in his forty-second year, two years after the Battle of Cúl Drebene.\footnote{Cúl Drebene (Cúl Dreibne) was the battle that occurred between Columba’s supporters and those of St. Finian following the latter’s accusation that Columba illegally completed a copy of a borrowed manuscript.} This indicates a departure time of 563 C.E. The chronological conjunction of these two events has led to much speculation in the Irish sources. The medieval legend states that the Battle of Cúl Drebene came about as a result of an altercation with St. Finian of Moville c.560 C.E. In his eagerness to possess a copy of a psalter, which later became known as *The Cathach* (the Battler), Columba unlawfully completed a copy without Finian’s permission. This argument ultimately led to the battle in which the lives of many men on both sides were lost. In its aftermath, a Synod of clergy and scholars met to review his offence which resulted in a threat of excommunication. The Synod comprised of clerics who were the primary judicial body in Ireland during the early medieval period and they operated according to the Old

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\footnote{Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 127}
Irish legal code, known as the *Brehon Law*. The law in this case was favourable to Finian and dictated that Columba hand over his copy and pay restitution. Columba took the judgement to heart but refused to hand over the psalter and instead chose to exile himself to Scotland.\(^4^9\)

In his interpretation, Binchy suggests the mention of the Synod in the *Vita Columbae* (III.3) may well have been a meeting of ecclesiastical and secular dignitaries that was held subsequent to the battle at the Fair of Tailtiu.\(^5^0\) The Annals of Ulster reflect a more realistic interpretation of events in which the King of Tara was defeated by an alliance of northern rulers which included the uncle and first cousin of Columba. Thus, Binchy posits it is probable that the King of Tara may have taken his revenge for the defeat by inducing some of the churchmen from within his own dominions to excommunicate the northern cleric for his political and clan associations.\(^5^1\) Herbert suggests that Columba’s family connections make it difficult for him to pursue the ideals of monasticism. A renunciation of wealth and claims to kingship in Ireland may not have seemed to fulfil his ascetic goals and therefore he sought to regain his spiritual standing by undertaking a *potioris peregrinationis locus* (a better place for pilgrimage) in Scotland.\(^5^2\) This *peregrinatio* was the best form of ascetic renunciation available to a monk in Ireland in this period.\(^5^3\)

\(^4^9\) A full account of this is found in Manus O Donnell’s *Betha Colaim Chille*.


\(^5^1\) Binchy, “The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara,” 122-23.


3.3.2 Iona: Destination and Destiny

The destination of this pilgrimage was not random, rather there appears to have been a political association between Columba’s Uí Néill relatives and the Dál Riata leadership of Scotland. The *Vita Columbae* describes Columba as often in the company of Conall mac Comgaill, the ruler of the Scottish Dál Riata.\(^{54}\) Thus, though he had relinquished his seat of political power he did not abandon his political acumen. The *Vita Columbae* rather indicates he had frequent contact with the Dál Riata rulers. According to Adomnán, he ordained Áedán mac Gabráín, a king of the Dál Riata into his kingship thus ensuring continued good will between the Cenél Chonaill, the Dál Riata and most importantly his monastery at Iona.\(^{55}\) Furthermore, Columba seems to have been a known presence at Irish gatherings such as Druimm Cete,\(^{56}\) ‘the conference of the kings’, which took place between the Uí Néills of Ulster and the Dál Riata of Scotland. This seems to suggest that his exile may not have been unending as commonly represented. It seems he returned to Ireland to facilitate political alliances and peace-making, a detail supported by the lasting peace that existed between the Uí Néill clan and the Dál Riata rulers from Columba’s day until 637 C.E.\(^{57}\) Adomnán mentions Columba spending ‘some days’ in the midlands of Ireland at Mag Breg in County Tipperary and also near Slanore, County Cavan.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{54}\) Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 28; *Vita Columbae*, I.7.

\(^{55}\) *Vita Columbae*, III.8.

\(^{56}\) For further discussion see Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974); Byrne, “The Ireland of St. Columba,” *Historical Studies* 5, (1965): 37-58. Byrne argues that the primary purpose of this conference was to secure the Dál Riata’s freedom from the Ulster ruler Báetán mac Cairill.


\(^{58}\) *Vita Columbae*, I.38; II.36; II.43.
The *Vita reports* that as an old man he was welcomed by the Abbot Alither to Clonmacnoise, where he resided for a few months while founding his monastery at Durrow.\(^{59}\) Thus it seems clear that Columba’s association with Ireland continued throughout his life until his death in 597 C.E. following a long illness.\(^{60}\)

### 3.4 Sources, Scholars and Scripts

The period of Columba’s life in the 6\(^{th}\) Century CE is one that yields few complete sources. With such a scarcity of primary material his historiography has been largely pieced together using later sources. Adomnán’s seminal work on Columba, the *Vita Columbae*, is the most complete version of the saint’s life though there were other hagiographical works completed by his successors. The earliest known work is the *Amra Choluim Chille*, ‘The Eulogy of Colum Cille.’ This is a fragmentary poem composed in the tradition of the heroic Gaelic lament. Scholars date it to c. 600 C.E., immediately following the death of the saint.\(^{61}\)

There is also a fragmentary work by Abbots Ségéne and Cumméne who were also involved in promoting the sainthood of their patron in the period immediately following his death. Ségéne and Cumméne were contemporaries and successors to the position of Abbot of Iona. Scholars suggest that their work was a joint endeavour; Cumméne gave literary form to the evidence collected by his uncle Ségéne. The resulting work was given the title ‘*liber de virtutibus sancti Columbae*,’ (The book concerning the virtues/sacred deeds of St. Columba).

\(^{59}\) *Vita Columbae*, I.29;III.15.  
This work was an important source of information for Adomnán’s work on Columba and contained more contemporary evidence as well as including extracts from the *Amra*. However, it remains only in fragmentary form in *Lebor na hUidhre*.

### 3.5 Columba: The Hagiography

Adomnán’s life of Columba is congruent with other hagiographies of this period; which seek to define what it is to be a good Christian. The period between the late seventh and early eight century was one that gave rise to the image of the Irish as a Christian society and also when monasteries began to produce the lives of the their founders along with other texts. Bray notes that the life of a saint reflects a mainstream hagiographical tradition within the church. It also serves as means of interpretation of that tradition within the society in which the saint is venerated. The saint is presented in the manner of the hero in epic texts; he performs an action both extraordinary and exemplary. He is the incarnation of the human ideal and his proper name is the expression of a social norm. These Lives function as paradigms of ideal

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63 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 28. *Lebor na hUidhre* is a vellum manuscript dating to the 12th century C.E. It is the oldest extant manuscript in Irish.
64 I am using the term hagiography here to describe Adomnán’s work on Columba as it primarily concerned with his religious persona. I am aware that the term itself is a contested one but have chosen to take the term as it is translated here as sacred writing. For further discussion on the term and its place in the genre of Christian writing see Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); P. Loewen, “Critical and Edifying? A Historiography of Christian Biography,” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2008).
65 Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1972), 227; Ritari, *Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland: Moral Theology in the lives of Saints Brigit and Columba*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 1-6. There was increased annalistic activity in Iona at the same time that Adomnán undertook the *Vita Columbae*.
manhood and social ordering, a means through which the reality is read and understood by
groups or communities in which these lives originate. Herbert has completed a study of the
*Vita* in the context of Irish hagiography and asserts that the model adopted by Adomnán is
congruent with other Irish hagiographical sources in that it emphasizes miracle-working as a
clear indication of the sanctity of the saint. This type of writing is also found in earlier
continental European hagiographies such as Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* and Sulpicius Severus’
*Life of St. Martin.* An analysis of this work in the context of dynastic and ecclesiastical politics
which were instrumental to its composition has been completed by Herbert and Sharpe. Both
have examined the representation of scripture in the *Vita.* Herbert argues that Adomnán
utilizes references to the Christian canon to demonstrate how Columba exemplified all the
fundamental precepts illustrated in the figures of the prophets and Jesus himself. O’ Reilly has
published a study of the use of scripture in the *Vita Columbae.* She contends that Adomnán
deliberately avoided including Columba’s own exegesis of scripture in order to present him as a

figure who received direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit while transcribing biblical texts in his scriptorium.  

3.5.1 Soldier of Christ: Hawk or Dove  

Adomnán gives an account of how the saint acquired his ordained name Columba, or Colum Cille as he is known in the Irish tradition.  

He states that Columba's name is so good and so great that it must have been granted to him by God himself. Moreover, the connection between his name, which translates from the Irish Colum Cille to mean 'Dove of the Church,' can be seen as a direct reference to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus in the form of a dove. Columba becomes aligned directly with the Holy Spirit. “Hence often in sacred books a dove is understood to signify mystically the Holy Spirit.”  

The dove represents simplicity and innocence. These virtues become identified with the person of Columba; an innocent with a dove-like disposition. He is the subject of a miraculous prophecy prior to his birth which details the central role he will play in spreading Christianity in the British Isles. These depictions stand in contrast to the first title given to the saint, that of a soldier of Christ. This title does not suggest a peaceful or even innocent person, one who will spread the word of the Holy Spirit through words and his mystical attributes rather it suggests a strong and militaristic context for

72 Thom, Early Irish Monasticism, 125. Columba is known by many names in the sources: Colm, Columba, Colman and Columban are all version of the same name with the latter two being diminutives. In Latin the meaning of his name is ‘dove’, this translates to Colum in Irish to which Cille was later added meaning ‘Dove of the Church’.  
73 Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio 2a.  
74 Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio 2b.
Columba's missionary work. The epithet 'soldier of Christ' is the first religious title attributed to Columba by Adomnán. This is paradoxical to the orthodox characterization of holy men as peaceful ascetic individuals. This duality continues to be referenced in the description of his early life. Columba's noble birth and early life place him among the elite of early Irish society. Thus he would have been instructed equally in literature and martial arts. This is supported by the link that Adomnán makes between Columba and the Battle of Cúl Drebene. He also says of Columba “Living as an island soldier for thirty four years, he could not pass even the space of a single hour without applying himself to prayer, or to reading, or to writing or some kind of work.” The word used here by Adomnán is miles thus there can be no misunderstanding of the term soldier as this term is used to refer to a military soldier, one who would certainly participate in battle. Once again Adomnán contrasts this description with “...with all this he was loving to everyone, his holy face ever showed gladness, and he was happy in his inmost heart with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” What then does this suggest about the character of Columba? Some scholars argue that Columba embodies some of the characteristics of Samuel evidenced in the extensive inclusion of stories that deal with the appointment and inauguration of kings. I do not believe that this is Adomnán's only inspiration. The king making aspects owe more to Columba's or Adomnán's noble heritage than to biblical influence; it is another example of the

75 Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio 3a.
76 Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio 4b.
77 Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio 5a.
fusion of Irish and biblical traditions. Kings and kingship feature frequently in the *Vita Columbae*, each appearance giving more information on the status of kings and the central message of the text. Adomnán was keen to portray the ideal attributes of kingship, based on principles of justice, power and authority. He promulgated the *Lex Innocentium* 697 C. E. to protect non-combatants in wartime by instituting a system of fines.  

This preoccupation with kings and idealized constructs resonates with instances in the Old Testament, most obviously in the contrasting portraits of Saul, David and Solomon in the Books Samuel, I Kings and I Chronicles. Succession is connected with divine legitimation. Only through their commitment to Christianity will a son become the next king. “...whom the Lord has chosen from among them to be king will at once run to my knee.”

This idea of kingship coheres neatly with the belief system of Old Ireland whereby kings ruled by virtue of the divine right. In the *Vita Columbae* (I.14) Adomnán states,

> “Praecavere debes filii ne tibi a deo totius Everniae regni praerogatium monarchiae preadinstinatam parricidali faciente peccato amittas. Nam si quandoque illud commiseris, no toto partris regno sed eius aliqua parte in gente tua brevi frueris tempore.”

Adomnán’s account begins the process of uniting the monasteries and royal houses; of fusing kingship and church. The kings must rely on divine legitimation from the monks.


81 *Vita Columbae*, I.14. “You should take care son lest by reason of the sin of parricide that you may lose the prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of all Ireland, predestined for you by God. For if you ever commit that sin, you will not enjoy the whole of your father’s kingdom, but only some part of it, in your own tribe and for only a short time.”
merging old and new traditions under the auspices of the Christian church. This contextualization is evident in the Columba hagiography which seeks to unify old traditions and new norms under the banner of Christianity, thus shaping the way in which the character and work of Columba is presented. Smith contends that the construction of identity relies upon myths, symbols, religion and other cultural artifacts such as literature, art and archaeology to describe what the people of the past and present perceive to be true distinctions between various groupings. Columba is both warrior and saint; a combination of priest and poet. Columba's own supernatural abilities also reflect the fusion of old and new traditions. His frequent encounters with angels and non-corporal entities contain both Christian and Celtic elements. Book three in the *Vita Columbae* documents the prophecies resulting from these engagements with supernatural entities, demons, angels and spirits. MacQueen maintains that the emphasis on the prophetic abilities of the saint would have found special resonance among the Irish audience who could link this gift to conceptualizations of the *filí*, 'the seer or learned poet.' Its inclusion in the narrative of an Irish hagiography was not unusual as it acknowledged the emphasis found in the older literary tradition on apparitions, the concept of second sight or precognition of events.


3.6 Columba’s Eschatological Prophecies

Adomnán’s purpose in writing the *Vita Columbae* was to establish the glory and spiritual gifts of the saint as a notable figure, a soldier of Christ. The inclusion of the eschatological prophecies regarding the fate of the monasteries merit attention as they are found among his miracles and prophecies respectively. Their importance lies in the precedent they establish for his role as an Irish prophet. Many of these prophecies concern Iona specifically though their content links them to Ireland. He blesses the island of Iona and states that:

“From this moment of this hour, all poisons of snakes shall be powerless to harm men or cattle in the lands of this island so long as the inhabitants of that dwelling place shall observe the commandments of Christ.”

This prophecy closely mirrors those attributed to Saint Patrick. Thus a link is made between Columba and the founding father of Irish Christianity. Adomnán was more than aware of the connection between Patrick and Columba as the latter’s birth was referenced in the prologue of the *Vita Columbae*. The banishing of snakes from sacred space and snake-poison motifs recur in sacred texts and were interpreted as relating to spiritual life. This can be seen in Christ’s own promise in Luke 10:19, “Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and

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84 *Vita Columbae*, II.28.
85 *Vita Columbae*, Secunda Praefatio 3a. “Nam quidem proselytes brito homo sanctus sancti Patricii episcopi discipulus Maucteus nomine ita de nostro profetizauit patrono sicuti nobis ab antiquis traditum expertis conpertum habetur."
86 O’ Reilly, “Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba,” 94-95.
scorpions.” By demonstrating his ability to trample serpents and render harmless the demonic forces of evil and temptation, Columba illustrates his spiritual authority and his place among the followers of Christ. This interpretation enables his elevation to the status of apostle or perhaps more accurately of disciple; as he was known as one of the twelve disciples of Ireland. However, there is more to his prophecy than the spiritual greatness of the saint. Iona and by implication the other realms which have banished snakes will only remain safe from the powers of evil if they remain Christian and follow the way of Christ. Ireland can be included in this prophecy. Thus, the demonic powers will return should the people not hold to this promise and remain faithful to the teachings of the church and monasteries. Columba’s blessing was conditional on the Ionian community’s observation of the tenets of Christianity is not a mere charm against snake bite. It was a summons for divine aid for the future spiritual well-being of the island monastery. The assurances would also extend to the other monastic communities on the mainland of Ireland as the blessing is directed towards all in his flock.

O’ Reilly notes that there is a similar account of snakes found in the *Life of Saint Anthony*. Here the vipers against which he protects his followers allude to spiritual discord and the factions within the church who spread this discord. Whether this was also Adomnán’s intent is unclear. However, this was certainly the way his warnings were interpreted by later writers,

87 Luke, 10:19. This motif is also found in Mark 16:18 whereby Christ prophesied that the ability to take up serpents and drink deadly poison but remain unharmed would be among the signs by which his followers would be known. There is a fulfillment of this found in Acts 28:3-6 when Paul miraculously survives a snake bite on the island of Malta.
most notably Manus O’ Donnell who believed that the source of all the evil in Ireland lay in social disharmony among the various clans.  

Adomnán’s other use of an eschatological prophecy is found in the last book of the *Vita Columbae* as it advocates for Iona as the New Jerusalem. In this way the saint recalls the eschatological teachings of Isaiah and connects this with the island of Iona.

“On this place, small and mean thought it is, not only the kings of the Irish with their peoples, but also the rulers of the barbarous and foreign nations, with their subjects, will bestow great and especial honour; also special reverence will be bestowed by saints even of other churches.”

Here, the prophecy demonstrates that Adomnán has cast Columba in the role of an Irish Christ and the fate of Iona and also all the surrounding world rests in the hands of the monks at Iona. The language used here and indeed Adomnán’s use of scripture alludes to a covenant like promise, with Columba as the intermediary. There is more use of Hebrew Bible imagery than New Testament; the figure of Christ is not utilized to the same extent as scriptural references to Moses, Isaiah and even Genesis, both in the banishing of the snakes and the call to found a new spiritual homeland on Iona in the tradition of Abraham and Moses. Columba is cast in

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88 See specifically *Betha Colaim Chille*, 118. Here O’ Donnell gives the reason for the destruction of Ireland as the strong taking from the rich and disunity among the Gaels.
89 *Vita Columbae*, III.23.
90 Exodus 17:1-7, the story of deriving water from a rock is also found in Adomnán’s work with many similarities to the Exodus narrative.
91 Isaiah 2:2-3, Adomnán utilizes the idea of the eschatological pilgrimage to the temple to re-create this image for the Monastery at Iona which will see a similar pilgrimage of all kings and peoples.
92 Genesis 3:14 ff. The idea of the banishment or punishment of the serpent found in this narrative is also found in the text to demonstrate the power of the saint and his dominion over the forces of evil.
93 Genesis 12:1ff. Adomnán utilizes similar imagery to describe Columba’s pilgrimage to Scotland he is called by the Lord much like Abraham to set up a new home and spread the word of the Lord.
the role of the saviour, a missionary to the barbarians and the non-Christians, one who is forging a new Christian ideology throughout the British Isles and one who establishes a ‘Jerusalem’ in Iona. The imagery associated the day of judgement, the eschatological banquet described in Isaiah are all biblical ones there is no indigenous ideology or imagery incorporated into the prophecies.

Adomnán’s Columba is however, a soldier of Christ; he wrestles with demons and is victorious. Adomnán utilizes this characteristic to demonstrate that Columba was able to defend the monastery and that he received help from the angels to ensure his victory. The reference may be a veiled reference to Viking pillagers that attacked the monasteries during this time. This is further supported by the words attributed to Columba after his victory:

“The deadly foes have been driven away today from the region of this little land to the land of Eth, by Gods favour and with the help of the angels, will cruelly invade the monasteries of brothers there and will bring deadly disease to them; and may that suffer from these diseases will die.”  

While not a pure eschatological prophecy it is one of the few references that Adomnán makes to the nature of the evil forces from which Iona needs protection. It suggests that Columba was indeed true to the idea of the soldier of Christ, that he was willing to take up arms and fight for the defence of the Christian community.

94 Exodus 17.1-7 is the most explicit reference used by Adomnán but there are many elements of the narrative used here by Adomnán, he is the one that will lead the people of the British Isles to God, much in the way of Moses and Abraham he has received a call and is cast in the role of such prophets.
95 Vita Columbae, II.8.
3.7 Sacred Landscapes: Iona as the New Jerusalem

From Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* it is possible to extrapolate characteristics inherent in this idealized figure and to examine how these embody the ideal in the identity of the early Columban monastic federation. Meckler contends that Adomnán deliberately cast his subject in the role of Samuel and stressed Columba’s king-making activities in order to copper-fasten the relationship with the secular power and thus support the claims of later Iona abbots to consecrate the king of the Dál Riata. However, there is more in this depiction than just a Samuel characterization; otherwise it is likely that Adomnán would have been more explicit. He never shies away from connecting the saint with biblical figures such as God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Moses, Jonah and various apostles. While Columba may embody some of the characteristics of Samuel I do not believe that this is Adomnán’s only inspiration. The figure most often connected with Columba either explicitly or implicitly is that of Jesus himself. A more accurate construction therefore would be Columba as a messianic figure. This is a concept explored by Adomnán’s creation of the sacred landscape throughout the hagiography. He sketches a holy land located at the northernmost edge of the Christian world where Christ’s work of redemption continued to be articulated through Columba. This enables him to develop the concept that Columba is a messianic figure and the Christian Irish are presented as the

chosen ones. The most striking instance of this conceptualisation is found in the *Vita Columbae* (II.9).

“On another occasion, then, when the saint was engaged in one of his journeys, a child was presented to him in the course of his travels for baptism by its parents; and because there was no water to be found in the neighbourhood, the saint turned aside to a rock that was near, and kneeling down prayed for a short time; then rising up after his prayer, he blessed the face of the rock, from which there immediately gushed out an abundant stream of water; and there he forthwith baptized the child. Concerning the child that was baptized he uttered the following prophecy, saying, ‘This child shall live to a very great age; in his youth he will indulge freely the desires of the flesh; afterwards he will devote himself to the warfare of a Christian until the very end of his life, and thus depart to the Lord in a good old age.’ All this happened to the man according to the prophecy of the saint. This was Luguccencalad, whose parents were from Artdaib Muirchol (*Ardnamurchan*), where there is seen even to this day a well called by the name of St. Columba.”

This passage presents Columba’s role in Christianity as akin to Moses who also led his people to redemption. Perhaps it he could even be described as an Abrahamic figure in that he received the call and went to found a nation/community in Iona at God’s behest. This association with the biblical tradition is common in hagiographies of this period; combining older biblical elements with those found in the New Testament gave the saints a more authentic feel. In Adomnán’s work it reinforces the idea that God has called upon Columba to bring the people of Ireland out of exile. O’ Reilly contends that this excerpt more than glorifies Columba through this implied identification with Moses. The water from the rock was provided to enable Columba to baptize the child in a manner that indicates the sacramental continuation of Christ’s work of redemption and provision of spiritual refreshment for his pilgrim people.

\[98\] *Vita Columbae*, II.9
The substantial circumstantial local details such as his Irish name, parents' place of origin and the continued existence in the seventh century of the holy spring/well in his name, reinforce the identity and legacy of Columba as the one who heralded the salvation of the Irish people.¹⁰⁰

The veracity of references to Irish locations and figures attest to the geographical contextualizing of this hagiography to a specifically Irish tradition.

Building on the sacred landscape narrative enabled Adomnán to link the monastery of Iona with the city of Jerusalem and thus represent it by association with Columba as the most holy place in the British Isles. At the end of his life Columba blessed the island of Iona and banished the power of snakes from ‘then to the present day.’¹⁰¹ This connects him with the other great saint and Patron of Ireland, Saint Patrick, who is also credited with banishing snakes from Ireland. The similarity of textual positions may be read allegorically as referencing the banishment of the old order of druids and the druidic religion thus giving a powerful message contextualized to the Irish tradition. In the wider Christian context snakes also reference the Book of Genesis allying Columba with God’s power over the forces of evil, contention and discord which seek to pollute the paradisiacal life of Iona through heresy or apostasy.¹⁰²

“On this place, small and mean thought it is, not only the kings of the Irish with their peoples, but also the rulers of the barbarous and foreign nations, with their subjects, will bestow great and especial honour; also special reverence will be bestowed by saints even of other churches.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ O’Reilly, “Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba,” 96.
¹⁰¹ Vita Columbae, III.23.
¹⁰² O’ Reilly, “Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba,” 96.
¹⁰³ Vita Columbae, III.23.
The language used is similar to prophecies of Jerusalem in Isaiah 2:2-3; Galatians 4:26; and Hebrew 12:22. In Isaiah the idea is promulgated that the holy citadel of Jerusalem on Mount Zion would be revered by all and draw peoples from far and wide.\textsuperscript{104} This facilitates the introduction and allows parallels to be drawn with the Hill of Tara, the most sacred site in pre-Christian Ireland and the traditional site for the inauguration of the High Kings. Weaving Old Testament figures with Kings of Irish epic; terraforming Tara with Iona and by implication with Jerusalem, he creates a new hybrid identity for the Irish which encompasses both the biblical and the indigenous under the banner of Christianity. Adomnán cleverly composes a narrative that interweaves the symbolism and mythology of ancient Irish poetical tradition with sacred history and fuses them in the new religious movement that is Christianity. The Gaels, specifically the Cénel Chonaill clans and Columba’s own monks, become a chosen people under Columba. He solidifies the power base of this new religion by uniting it with royal kingdoms and re-creating the idea of divine kingship. This ensures the continuing success and relevance of the monastery at Iona which becomes the new seat of religious and political power. Tara, the old sacred site of Druids and High Kings, is eclipsed by a new revered landscape designed to match the new Irish Christian identity.

\textsuperscript{104} O’ Reilly, “Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba,” 97. C.f. Isaiah 2:2-3 “In the last days /the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established/ as the highest of the mountains/it will be exalted above the hills/and all nations will stream to it./Many peoples will come and say/“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord/ to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.”/The law will go out from Zion/the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”
3.8 Identity: Building Spiritual and Political Alliances

Two primary activities dominate Columba's public activities in the *Vita*. These involve forging alliances with kings of the Dál Riata/Scotia/Picts and establishing a network of churches and monasteries in the British Isles. Whether these two activities are a reflection of the reality of Columba's life cannot be determined in truth, however, the relevance attributed to them in the texts contributes to our understanding of Adomnán's own priorities.\(^{105}\) While these pursuits do not initially appear compatible with his image as a penitent pilgrim, it is necessary to remember that Columba was a member of a royal family and did not neglect to use these family relationships in establishing churches and alliances. He almost certainly used his royal connections to spread Christianity and to gain powerful support and patronage for the church. He also appears to have been happy to provide Christian legitimation for kingship and to offer prayer and protection for his royal kinsmen, other monarchs and princes. The way in which he united these institutions was to have a profound and lasting impact on medieval British society.

Máire Herbert the foremost expert on the monastic dynasty of Columba states:

“...overall, perhaps the most important aspect of the achievement of Colum Cille was the fact that he bridged the divide between secular and ecclesiastic reams of interest. More than that, his career may be seen to have shown the potential for mutual benefit arising out of co-operation between church and dynasty.”\(^{106}\)

The seventh century in Ireland was a time of transition, with the anarchy of tribal warfare giving way to a more peaceful and settled system of government based on rule by a


\(^{106}\) Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 35.
number of royal dynasties. Columba's own family the Cenél Chonaill were among one of the most powerful dynasties of this period and dominated politics in the northern territories of Ireland. This movement towards greater order was paralleled in the development of monastic confederations which enjoyed close relations with the emerging royal households and shared their territorial boundaries. The monastic family of Columba, consisting of the monasteries founded by the saint and his successors, became the biggest and most influential of these confederations. Its fortunes where closely linked with those of both the Northern Irish Uí Néill (a branch of the Cenél Chonaill dynasty), and the rulers of the Dál Riata. This close relationship between the institutions of the Church and the monarchy in the sixth to tenth centuries is essential to understanding the nature of Christianity in the Gaelic regions of the British Isles. It had a significant impact on the literature of the time, in particular in the poems and prayers written by clerics who used the language and imagery of kingship in their depiction of God and Christ and sometimes by extension of the saints in the hagiographies.

Adomnán gives much attention to these aspects in his life of Columba whom he presents as an astute politician as well as pilgrim. He does not conform to the common portrayal of the holy man in antiquity. Adomnán's biography reflects the traditions of early

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medieval Ireland where Columba is presented as both holy man and politician. He cleverly interweaves these two narratives in the hagiography to show a royal monk. This device enables the idealisation of the saint in personal and political domains. There is political ideology to be found also in the prophecies in that Adomnán solidifies the place of the Columban order in the king making ventures and also the power behind the coming of God’s kingdom showing Columba as a force for change both politically and religiously.

3.9 Summary

Adomnán constructs a new and highly complex identity for the community of Iona and all those associated with the monastic federation of Columba. It is a hybridized image of old Irish and new Christian values. This enables him to reframe the Irish monks and indeed even the royal lines of Columba's family as the chosen ones, thus placing him in a messianic/prophetic role. However, there is also a consistent political element to be found throughout the Vita Columbae. While Adomnán is constructing a theoretical image for this community he is also redefining the role of the monks within the political system. They are inextricably linked with ruling monarchies. They will provide the religious legitimation for the secular elements of government. The messianic features attributed to the saint are not without purpose and this merging of the secular and the religious demonstrates one of Adomnán’s primary intentions in constructing his image of Columba.
4. Columba II

One thousand years later Columba’s life and identity re-emerge into the public domain with the publication of *The Life of Columchille, Betha Colaim Chille*, by Manus O’ Donnell his noted kinsman and ancestor. This rendition appears similar in intent and purpose to the earlier work. Through the use of prophecies, some of his own creation, O’Donnell re-locates the life in the context of 16th Century Ireland which allows for its re-interpretation in political/military terms which would have had a contemporary relevance. Three prophesies are relevant to this reinvention. One depicts the destruction of Tara, the quintessentially sacred site of Ireland. The others focus on the immanence of foreign invasion, a real and every present threat at this time.

This chapter will analyze these prophetic passages and will suggest how the re-imagining of Adomnán’s work fits with the Gaelic revival and anti-colonial identity of the sixteenth century Ireland. In choosing these selections I intend to demonstrate the shift that occurred in Columba’s identity from an embodiment of exclusive and noble Christian monasticism to *soldier of destiny* that would represent the beginnings of the modern construction of Gaelic national identity. Of particular interest in the analysis of this text is the way in which O' Donnell recreates the image of Columba from one of the pious ascetic depicted in Adomnán’s *Vitae Columbae* to one who is more of an epic figure.

The O’ Donnells were one of the most powerful dynasties in Ireland during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and maintained autonomy in their region of Donegal despite recurrent invasions by both Anglo-Irish alliances and other neighbouring clans. They were one
of the driving forces behind the Gaelic resurgence, and saw themselves as an indigenous Gaelic people. Much of Manus O' Donnell's work aims to illustrate his knowledge of Irish literary tradition and history. His rewriting of Columba is one that incorporates these aspects; he connects past and present in his work, combining epic themes and motifs with contemporary Christian ideology. While his undertaking pays homage to his celebrated ancestor it is also a way of showcasing his own heritage as distinctly Irish and advocating for return to Irish cultural practices in the wake of the persistent settlement of English forces which attempted to anglicise the Island. The prophecies in this work are clear examples of this Gaelic propaganda. Columba is the vehicle by which this expressed through his transformation from a soldier of Christ to soldier of destiny, the one who will show the Gaelic-Irish the road to redemption and lead to a renewal of the golden age of Ireland. In this sense it is a work which advocates for the beginnings of a national identity, one based on the idea of the native Irish as a people descended from kings and heroes of epic and united through tradition, history and language.

4.1 Manus O' Donnell’s *Betha Colaim Chille*

Manus O'Donnell, like his predecessor Admonán, was also descended from Columba’s lineage, albeit one thousand years later. He completed the *Betha Colaim Chille* in 1532 C.E. Manus was the son of Aodh Dubh O’ Donnell, the Chieftain of the Cenél Chonaill\(^\text{110}\) or Tír Chonaill, the Lordship based on the

\(^{110}\) The term Cénel Conaill can be used to refer to three things: the ancient royal dynasty of Donegal, the people of Donegal over whom this dynasty ruled, or the territory over which the royals ruled. For a more detailed discussion see Lacey, *Cénel Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms, A.D. 500-800*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).
territory now comprising County Donegal in the province of Ulster.\textsuperscript{111} From the middle of the fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century the O’ Donnells were one of the most powerful aristocratic families in Ireland.\textsuperscript{112} They traced their royal line back to the very beginnings of recorded history. This enabled them to claim connection with Columba a celebrated early ancestor of the Cenél Chonaill. This relationship was a source of personal pride to the family. It may also have been the catalyst for Manus in his undertaking of the \textit{Betha}.\textsuperscript{113}

Manus’ interest in Columba was passionate and personal. It led him to collect all material sources available to him. There had been some developments and re-interpretations in the legend of Columba since the time of Adomnán. The tradition of Columba contained in O’Donnell’s work can be conclusively classified as a medieval one. This medieval legend of the saint developed between the sixth and sixteenth centuries; it was particularly influenced tradition established in the \textit{Amra Choluim Cille} identifying Columba with Old Irish traditions of the hero and emphasizing the theme of exile.\textsuperscript{114}

Manus O’Donnell combined all available sources on the life of St. Columba to provide what he considered an \textit{organized} account of the life. His two principal sources have been identified as a short recension of Adomnán’s \textit{Vita Columbae} and the Middle Irish Homily, the \textit{Amra}.\textsuperscript{115} To this combination, he added his own unique embellishments in the form of prophecies which

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Lacey, \textit{Manus O’ Donnell: The life of Colum Cille}, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 8.}
\footnote{For a map of counties and kingdoms in 16\textsuperscript{th} century Ireland see Appendix B fig. 2.}
\footnote{Lacey, \textit{Manus O’ Donnell: The Life of Colum Cille}, 8-9.}
\footnote{Sharpe, \textit{Adomnán of Iona: Life of St. Columba}, 91.}
\footnote{Sharpe, \textit{Adomnán of Iona: Life of St. Columba}, 92. cf. Lacey, \textit{Manus O’ Donnell: The life of Colum Cille}, 13.}
\end{footnotes}
detailed the degradation and destruction of Ireland in the wake of foreign invaders. O’Donnell’s work was written during the period immediately prior to the initial plantations of Ulster which led to the abolition or flight of Gaelic-Irish nobility and their replacement by English overseers.

The *Betha Colaim Chille* is a long work, comprising thirty-six chapters in total in its manuscript form. This work remained unpublished until the critical edition in 1918 by O’Kelleher and Schoepperle of the Rawlinson Manuscript housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. There has been relatively little work completed since 1918 with the exception of Lacey, whose translation is the most recent. However, Lacey only provides an English translation which is not accompanied by any critical apparatus or reference to the Irish text. He divides the *Betha* into thirteen concise chapters choosing instead to break when the subject matter dictates it.\(^{116}\)

This lack of scholarship on the *Betha Colaim Chille* makes it difficult to assign exact divisions to the text and each evaluation of the manuscript differs in length and chapter division. I propose to refer to the seminal O’Kelleher and Schoepperle edition which approaches the work more coherently by dividing it according to time periods, an assertion they claim represents most closely O’Donnell’s approach to the work.\(^{117}\) In this sense they have been instrumental in giving the *Betha* a form and critical arrangement which has been built upon by later translators.


\(^{117}\) O’Kelleher and Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille: The life of Columchille*. 44
such as Brian Lacey. However, the earlier translation and edition of the text remains the most complete compilation of the manuscript.

O’ Donnell’s work cannot be considered to be any more historically accurate than Adomnán’s. However, it yields a wealth of information concerning the dominant traditions of Columba particularly in the northern counties of Ireland. Lacey classifies the *Betha* as a cross between a historical novel and a collection of folk stories.\(^{118}\) Thus scholarship on the *Betha* remains sporadic and eclectic. Much of the scholarship on O’Donnell is centred on the Renaissance and on his role in the revival of Irish literary culture in the sixteenth century.

Bradshaw contends that the literary motifs that make up the *Betha Colaim Chille* undoubtedly characterize it as a Renaissance work. Its lay authorship, antiquarian form, and vernacular language are referenced by the author himself in the preface; a feature which Lacey argues is significant as it demonstrates the assimilation of certain features of Renaissance scholarship and the conscious effort of the author to draw attention to this.\(^{119}\) In Manus’ own words it is a work of history which vindicates the use of the vernacular as a literary language.

“Bídh a fhis ag lucht legtha na bethadsa gorab é Maghnuas mac Aeda,..do furail an cuid do bhí a Laidin don Bethaid-sí do cur a n-Gaidhilc, agus do furail an chuid do bhí go cruaid a n-Gaidilc di do cor am-buga, innus go m-beith si solus sothuicsena do cách uile.”\(^{120}\)


\(^{120}\) *Betha Colaim Chille*, 10. Let it be known to the readers of this life that it was Manus O Donnell who had the part of this life in Latin put in Gaelic and made parts in difficult Gaelic easy so that it might be understood clearly by all.
He also claims that the work bears the distinct mark of humanist philosophy which preaches the message of religious renewal through the lens of Columba’s life. Lacey contends that the emphasis on the interiority of religion, expressed in the story of a monk who doubted the efficacy of light penances given in sacramental confession, is at the core of humanist philosophy. Columba’s scruples provide the opportunity to develop a discourse on the sacrament of penance- which advocates for grace only obtainable through the internal attitude of the penitent rather through any external works.\(^\text{121}\)

Mac Craith concurs with the humanist interpretation. He maintains that this motif is reinforced throughout the work by means of the main narrative surrounding Columba and also the meta-narratives such as the freeing of the priest from purgatory. For example, the sin attributed to a priest freed from purgatory was vanity. By ornamenting his church, he showed concern with the external rather than the internal aspects of religion.\(^\text{122}\)

Much of the scholarship on O’Donnell’s work is centred on the Renaissance and how Manus typifies the ideals of a 'Renaissance Prince.' Mac Eiteagán also makes a Renaissance link by his contention that the work is the basis for the development of the modern Irish language. His support of Irish literary works meant that the dialect used in his region of Tír Chonaill

\(^{121}\) Bradshaw, “Manus 'Magnificent': O' Donnell as Renaissance Prince,” 26-27.
became the predominant form of the language and led to the development of modern Irish which is linguistically most similar to this dialect in form. He contends that O’ Donnell’s role as a patron of literature in Donegal is paralleled with that of Lorenzo Di Medici in Florence whose support of the arts lead to the Florentine dialect of Italian becoming the dominant and indeed national language of the country. Mac Eiteagán asserts that Manus’ efforts affected resurgence in Irish literature and lead to a renewed interest in the language.123 He suggests that the *Betha Colaim Chille* is an important source of information on late medieval lordship in Ireland, in particular as it expresses sentiments harboured by O’ Donnell toward the English colonizers. O’ Donnell is seen as modelling himself on Brian Boru, a famous High King of Ireland, historically credited with vanquishing the Vikings and expelling them from Irish soil. O’Donnell harboured similar ambitions thus re-enforcing the links with the golden past.124 However, neither O ‘Donnell nor the lords of Tír Chonaill acted upon these sentiments. Instead they maintained their central position of power though the politically expedient comprise of recognizing the new administration in Dublin. As a result of this astuteness no English army ever entered Donegal or even challenged the Lord of Tír Chonaill until the dynasty collapsed over fifty years later c. 1555 C.E. The O’ Donnells were shrewd politicians and their ability to operate within this system while maintaining a Gaelic identity made them a dominant power in Ireland. However, while a compromise was practical and necessary for political stability, the *Betha* can be viewed as

representing those sentiments not openly expressed. The prophecies ascribed to Columba, reveal the real visceral opinions of Manus O’ Donnell:

“Though truly I am afraid
Of death itself and Hell
I am frankly more afraid
Of an axe sound west in Derry
My fear is that foreign strangers
Here to Clooney yet will come
And bear my Church away with them
To Bun Sentuinne, cold and numb”\textsuperscript{125}

This documents the very real social crisis that was taking place in the sixteenth century and gives it a voice. Verses such as these found in the \textit{Betha} are not found in other works detailing the life of Columba and are Manus’ own additions to the tradition. However, little has been written on the prophecies and their contextual relevance to sixteenth century Ireland. I intend to examine these more oblique references to what would later become crystallized in the tradition that became known as \textit{Aisling} poetry, which documents the erosion of Irish tradition and culture in the wake of colonial occupation.

\section*{4.2 Colonization: Occupation and Opportunity}

The history of the relationship between Ireland and England is a long and complex one. The twelfth century was a crucially formative period in the occupation of Ireland which officially became an English Colony in 1169 C.E. under the Norman Invasion which briefly brought much of Ireland under the control of the Plantagenet Kings. From the thirteenth century onwards

\textsuperscript{125}Lacey, \textit{Manus O’ Donnell: The Life of Colum Cille}, 54.
when there was no significant royal army in Ireland, these Norman lords effectively acted as independent rulers of their own areas. The remaining Lordship that was actually controlled by the English monarch shrank accordingly and as parts of its perimeter were fenced or ditched, it became known as the Pale from the Latin, *palus* (stake). This region encompassed the counties of Louth, Kildare, much of Dublin and parts of Meath,\(^{126}\) representing a de facto partition of the country into the Pale and the territories of the Gaelic Lordships.\(^{127}\) Many of the Normans intermarried with the indigenous families, becoming more Irish than the Irish themselves and forming the nucleus of the Hiberno-Norman and latterly the Anglo-Irish families who would become influential over the long course of Irish nationalism.

In 1366 C.E. the Irish Parliament was formed and convened in Kildare until it was moved back to Dublin under the Tudors in 1485 C.E. English rule during the fifteenth century was delegated to the Anglo-Irish families such as the Fitzgeralds of Kildare and the Butlers of Ormond. However, in the early 1530's the Crown was persuaded to involve itself in regenerating the residual colony. The ambitions of these reformers soon extended to the whole island and ushered in a phase of unitary sovereignty. This policy remained until 1540 with the arrival of Lord Deputy St. Leger when reconciliation and reform were abandoned in favour of conquest and colonization. This was the beginning of what was later consolidated by

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\(^{126}\) See Appendix B fig. 3 for Map.

Cromwell's plantations in which a more aggressive policy of settlement was implemented, one which would secure the total rule of the island and not just the region surrounding the Pale.\textsuperscript{128}

The Lords of Tír Chonaill conducted a long term strategy of allying with any potential enemy of their neighbours in Tír Eoghan allowing them to maintain autonomy in their territory and deflect all incursions into their seat of power in Donegal. Aodh Dubh, Manus' father maintained a sporadic alliance with the earl of Desmond in Kildare and good relations with English administrators sent periodically to govern Ireland. Manus continued this policy of cordiality with the English overlords. In this sense the O' Donnell's were pragmatic rather than pro-English and had determined that in order to maintain their position of power it was best to come to an arrangement with whoever had control of the administration in Dublin. However, sentiments expressed in literature such as the *Betha*, Bardic poetry and the contemporary Annals record that all Lords of Tír Chonaill, including Manus harboured ambitions of driving the foreigner from Ireland just as Brian Boru had reportedly accomplished in the golden past.\textsuperscript{129}

\textbf{4.2.1 Patronage: Policy and Politics in Late Medieval Donegal}

The region known as Tír Chonaill or modern day Donegal, had a thriving economy during the late medieval period. It held long and well established trading links with ports such as Bristol in England, St. Malo and Morlaix in Brittany, and Glasgow in Scotland.\textsuperscript{130} In continental

\textsuperscript{129} Mac Eiteagán, “The Renaissance and the Late Medieval Lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1451-1555,” 222-223.
\textsuperscript{130} Mac Eiteagán, “The Renaissance and The Late Medieval Lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1461-1555,” 206.
Europe, the Lord of Tír Chonaill was famed for his wealth, one contemporary describing him as 'the best lord of fish in Ireland.'¹³¹

With economic prosperity came the need for cultural capital as typified in contemporary renaissance Europe. As a result patronage in the region grew accordingly and was extended to the learned classes, who enjoyed privileged positions. While the resurgence in patronage may have been partly inspired by the Renaissance there had been a long standing tradition in Ireland prior to the Renaissance. The fourteenth century heralded the Gaelic Resurgence, a period characterized by renewal of the long standing tradition of literary patronage and the re-emergence of Bardic poetry. This was named after the learned class of poets, the Bards, who had held a distinguished place in Irish society prior to the seventh century. The vocation of the Bard was often a hereditary one. Certain families were known primarily for their literary contributions either as poets or historians. Some of the most famous families in the northern regions were the Mac an Bhairds and the Ó Cleirighs, family names associated with many Gaelic compositions of this period. In the southern region of Munster, the Ó Maoil Chonaires and Ó Dálaighs held similarly respected positions. Simms notes that the surplus wealth spent by Gaelic Irish Chieftains on feasting and poetry corresponded to funds dispensed by the ruling classes of other European countries on entertainment and also on processions, statues, art, jewellery and architecture.¹³²

¹³¹ Notes on Ulster (Cal. Carew MSS, 15-74, No.29, 181).
The O'Donnells had a very real interest in Irish literary heritage. The library of ancient Irish manuscripts in Donegal suggests equivalence with the collections of classical Greek and Roman texts assembled by the humanist rulers on the European mainland. It is probable that the O'Donnell's had a substantial library whose primary difference lay in the greater emphasis given to works of indigenous interest than those of the classical golden age. This interest in the Irish Golden Age evident in contemporary texts such as the *Betha Colaim Chille*, the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Annals of Connacht* and the *Annals of Loch Ce* was by no means restricted to the northern territories of Ireland. In particular, the O'Donnell's appear to have modelled themselves on Brian Boru, the last High King of Ireland, striving to draw analogies between his accomplishments as protector of the weak, the Church, and his epic victory over the Vikings with their own careers.\footnote{133}

Allied to the literary and cultural sphere the O'Donnells forged strong links between the late medieval church in Tír Chonaill and many famous European educational centres. Clerics from this area attended the University of Glasgow and even further afield. Meanma Mac Carmaic who was Bishop of Raphoe from 1438-1514, was educated at Oxford. Bradshaw contends that ventures such as these were part of the O'Donnell foreign policy to advance their own diplomatic, administrative and commercial needs.\footnote{134} These endeavours ensured that the ruling dynasty had a well-educated and very sophisticated clerical civil service and noble class. The Observantine friars, who compiled the *Betha Colaim Chille* under Manus O'Donnell's

\footnote{133} Mac Eiteagán, “The Renaissance and the Late Medieval Lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1451-1555,” 217.  
\footnote{134} Bradshaw, “Manus the Magnificent,” 21.
supervision,\textsuperscript{135} cultivated this close relationship with the lords of Tír Chonaill becoming their spiritual and political advisors. This relationship between church and state wielded considerable influence in all areas of Irish life and would continue until well into the middle of the twentieth century.

**4.3 Columba: The Hagiography Updated**

One of the most important points of divergence between Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* and O’ Donnell’s account concerns the Saint’s love of Ireland. In the latter account great emphasis is placed on Irish aspects of the life. O’ Donnell consistently attempts to locate the Saint in and to his Irish context. Where Adomnán sought to make Iona the centre of the Christian movement in the British Isles and place Columba firmly at the forefront of this endeavour, O’ Donnell seeks to return him to Ireland as a distinctly Irish person and one who would never willingly leave his own people. The comparison between the two is epitomized in the following excerpt:

“...for it is more joy to thee to be in Erin than to me to be in Alba, and if I might be in Erin I would never leave her and I would readily die in Erin than to have life forever in Alba. And then he made this quatrain:

“It is my soul tells me without sin,
   No blame can be to me:
   Better life in Erin without stain
   Than life forever in Alba.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{135} Mac Eiteagán, “The Renaissance and the Late Medieval Lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1451-1555,” 211.
\textsuperscript{136} *Betha Colaim Chille*, 275.
Columba's pilgrimage to Iona is conceptualized in terms of exile. It is an unwilling departure from the land of his birth. Adomnán depicts his departure as a willing pilgrimage: “…and the forty-seventh record of his age, desiring to make a journey for Christ from Ireland to Britain, he sailed forth.”¹³⁷ This idea is also maintained in the Old Irish life of Columchille which is utilized in points in the _Betha Colaim Chille_. Another tradition that developed in the Irish context was of his forced exile by a clerical synod who excommunicated him to Britain. This fact may account for the rather oblique allusion to a synod in book XII of the _Vita Columbae_. This tradition developed or became more prevalent after the composition of Adomnán's _Vita Columbae_ as Irish clerics and scholars attempted to repatriate the saint to his Irish context. A persistent tension between the community in Iona and those in the monasteries founded in Ireland concerned who held a greater claim to the saint. The question of how to represent his departure to Iona was an issue for O' Donnell. Relating the story of Columba's protracted sojourn in Iona posed a dilemma for Manus. Should the Scottish be allowed to claim that their saint had chosen to spend the greater part of his life among them of his own free will? On the other hand, to represent him as having been condemned to depart from his own country by an Irish synod would not represent Ireland or the Saint himself in a favourable light. O' Donnell chose a middle way in which accommodated both versions of events. Columba's journey to Iona is depicted as an unwilling exile but one that was a self-imposed penance. It was a tragic

¹³⁷ _Vita Columbae, Secunda Praefatio_ 4a.
necessity, so that neither he nor Ireland would be shamed by previous actions. The importance attributed to Ireland and the Saint's Irish connections are emphasized repeatedly throughout the work. O' Donnell presents Erin as superior to Iona in all comparisons that arise between the two. Of Ireland he writes:

“Wise are her clerics, melodious her birds, Beautiful her women, gentle her elders, Generous her rich folk without greed; Good her king for abundance of gifts.”

In contrast he describes Scotland as:

“Many here the lanky (Scottish) fellows, Many diseases here and distempers Many those with scanty clouts, Many the hard and jealous hearts.”

Thus, Manus O' Donnell's Columba is more ‘Irish’ than Scottish. Many of the verses attributed to the Saint in this work are congruent with the literary form of Bardic poetry. The themes found in these verses are also present in the Bardic mode. Motifs include war with foreigners; foreign conquest of Ireland; Ireland's present woes foretold in prophecy; laments

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\[139\] *Betha Colaim Chille*, 275.
\[140\] *Betha Colaim Chille*, 275.
\[141\] I am using the term Irish here in a geographically focused sense and not as an identifying term as this concept was not in use in this period.
for the destruction of Ireland and Irish culture; and fertility in the reign of a just prince.\footnote{Simms, “Bardic Poetry as Historical Source,” in The Writer as Witness: Historical Studies XVI, edited by T. Dunne, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), 58-75. See also Finan, A Nation in Medieval Ireland? Perspectives on Gaelic National Identity in the Middle Ages, 10-29; Bradshaw, “Native Reaction to the Westward Enterprise: A Case-Study in Gaelic Ideology,” in The Westward Enterprise, edited by K. Andrews, N. Canny and P. Hair, (Liverpool: 1978): 66-80; Dunne, “The Gaelic Response to Conquest and Colonialisation: The Evidence of the Poetry,” Studia Hibernica XX, (1980): 7-30; O Riordan, The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World, (Cork: Field Day Books, 1990); Leersen, Mere Irish and Fior-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publications, 1986).} Bardic poetry was written to encompass two primary groups in its literature; the Anglo-Normans and the native Gaelic people. These two groups are given divergent ethnic identities and worldviews in the poetry which reprised the motifs of land conquest and political strife. The Bards, as the poets were known, often represented their patrons as heroes in the epic mould of Brian Boru, the last High King of Ireland whose defeat and expulsion of the Vikings, was celebrated in history, literature and folklore. In addition, many poets cited prophecies that foretold the contemporary political situation and described the patron as a saviour for the Gaelic-Irish people. That the poets documented the contemporary political situation citing ancient prophecies, offers both insight and explanation of expectations held by the learned poets and their patrons. Prophecy becomes another form of political propaganda. Much of this is centred in the debate concerning nationality and drawing clear and distinct boundaries between the Gaelic-Irish and the English Lords. This construct is found in the Betha. It is not only a recounting of a Saint’s life but also a forum to express the concerns of the Gaelic nation. This places it firmly in the literary tradition of the time as well as linking it to the debate that
has been taking place for hundreds of years. O’Donnell was less concerned with the Anglo-Normans than the English forces that had begun to colonize Ireland more forcefully in the sixteenth century. Much like the Bards he uses Columba as a means of representing the native Gaels. He looks back to the golden age of Irish history and assimilates this ideology into his figure of Columba thus uniting past and present in a hybridized version of Irishness. This is much like the work of the Bards who often linked their patrons with famous or legendary mythical kings to pay tribute to their great ancestry or heritage.

4.4 The Fate of Ireland: Gaelic Identity under threat

The use of prophecy to represent the present is evidenced in Manus' embellishments to the life of Columba. Three prophecies appear in the *Betha Colaim Chille*, each demonstrating the growing concern among the native Gaelic population regarding the aggressiveness of the English settlement and the strictures which were having a severe impact on Irish society and culture. The prophecies also demonstrate O'Donnell's own dynastic concerns and contain eschatological elements.

4.4.1 The Fly, Wren and Cat: The Fate of Ireland I

The first of the prophecies attributed to Columba occurs in Book X entitled 'Of Sundry Miracles and Prophecies of Columchille and Certain Visions.' The passage is the very first of this book and is contained in almost parable form. The narrative unfolds as follows:

“There were three pets that Columba had; a cat, and a wren, and a fly. And he understood the speech of each of those creatures. And the Lord sent messages to him by them, and he understood all from them as he would understand an angel or human
fold that might be sent with a message to him. And it happened that the wren ate the fly, and the cat ate the wren. And Columchille spoke by the spirit of prophecy, and he said it was thus men should do in a later time: the strong of them should eat the weak, that is to say, should take his wealth and his gear from him, and should show him neither right nor justice. And Columba said that while the Gael of Eriu, were thus, the power of foreigners would be over them, and whenever right and justice were kept by them, they should themselves have power again. And such love had Columchille for those little creatures of his that he asked God to revive them for him for him...And he obtained that from God...Wherefore he made this quatrain:

“The deed they have done.
If God wills it, may he hear me:
May he get form my cat my wren;
May he get from my wren my fly.”\textsuperscript{143}

Like many prophetical works, this passage uses allegory to represent ideas and persons. However, O' Donnell also provides an exegesis of the obscure lines directly following it. The symbolism found in the animals here is interesting as it appears to be a reference to early Irish epic. Animals were used to bring knowledge directly by speech, through what they symbolized, and through their use in rituals. Exceptionally magic or shamanic animals speak the language of humans and can pass on their wisdom through speech. By and large birds are associated with this phenomenon. They are also associated with speech and frequently connected with death, transitions and omens of death, and destruction in mythology. Cats often function as gatekeepers to the other-world or demonic monsters. In general they are associated with destruction and otherworldly events.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{143} Betha Colaim Chille, 118.
\textsuperscript{144} Davidson, \textit{Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions}, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 87, 90, 107.
Hvidt notes that prophecy describing destruction is necessary for the re-creation of perfection.\textsuperscript{145} That is to say that this world—the world of history is unjust, demonic and abominable; fortunately it is already decaying and catastrophes have already begun to occur. Soon it will be completely destroyed and paradise will be regained.\textsuperscript{146} Destruction in eschatological prophecy is not without a clear purpose— to re-create perfection. Destruction and purification are essential for a new beginning. Hvidt maintains that Christian prophets often presented powerful apocalyptic images of the ages to come, characterized by chastisement and purification of sin. It is worth noting that prophets’ sole aim was not to tear down all existing structures in order to arrive at the new beginning but rather, the catastrophes they predicted were ordained for the purification of the people. They advocated for building up through purification rather than a tearing down of the old social and religious order.\textsuperscript{147} This 'new age' is often imagined as a historical period specifically one of poverty that nonetheless excelled in virtue and spiritual plenitude. This historical period is often referred to as a golden age and many prophets and indeed prophecies look back to this golden age and advocate for a return to traditions and practices associated with this time.\textsuperscript{148}

O’ Donnell's work is congruent with this tradition. He consistently seeks to recall the golden age of Irish history. He does not seek a total reinvention of the social order rather he

\textsuperscript{146} Eliade, \textit{Myth and Reality} (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), 78.  
\textsuperscript{147} Hvidt, \textit{Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition}, 262.  
\textsuperscript{148} Hvidt, \textit{Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition}, 262-263.}
seeks to bring the various factions into harmony with each other and the church. This is evident from the later lines in the prophecy:

“the strong of them should eat the weak, that is to say, should take his wealth and his gear from him, and should show him neither right nor justice. And Columba said that while the Gael of Eriu, were thus, the power of foreigners would be over them, and whenever right and justice were kept by them, they should themselves have power again.”

Here there is a clear call for the Gaelic people to return to the values associated with the 'golden age'. As Hvidt contends, the prophecy looks back to a period which has an almost utopian quality. The strong protect the weak and there is no inter-clan warfare/looting, an occurrence which is most certainly what is referred to by the phrase “take his wealth and gear from him.”

There is also a connection to the symbolism of the fly, wren and cat here as their destruction by each other is replicated in the behavioural patterns of the Irish themselves. It is their own practices and inherent disunity that is tearing them apart. Redemption or salvation will only come once these patterns have been changed and a return to older more honourable traditions is achieved.

The prophecy culminates in the resurrection of the three pets of Columba. This suggests that O’ Donnell had an idea of a new order or re-creation of the past in mind when writing this concluding quatrain. The fly, wren and cat are resurrected, an action which he links to the

149 Betha Colaim Chille, 118.
150 Betha Colaim Chille, 118.
return of power to the Gaels and the end of foreign occupation. It is interesting that O’Donnell utilizes the metaphor of resurrection to convey this message. The triumph over death becomes synonymous with the triumph over foreign occupation thus presenting a very powerful political message. Though in this case it is metaphorical rather than literal, implicit is a desire for the unification of the warring factions of the Gaelic and Gaelicized Anglo-Norman Lords, and a revival of Gaelic practices which had been the norm during the reign of Brian Boru. This is all contextualized in a distinct mix of Old Irish and Christian imagery.

The symbols found in this first prophecy can be seen to represent this idealization of the past. The wren was considered the king of all birds and therefore an important symbol in mythology. Cats were often used as guardian figures either to the other world, akin to the angels or demons of Judeo-Christian tradition. Through the use of traditional literary motifs O’Donnell presents his view of Ireland’s golden age. Simultaneously he provides a glimpse of his vision for a future golden age, a time of heroes and kings; independent and self-ruling. The exact meaning of the prophecy is unclear but it is an undeniable allusion to elements found in epic tradition such as the Táin. The elements could imply a mixture of Old Irish symbolism, designed to bring old myths to mind and could even represent specific ages or people. It is unclear. I am inclined to argue that the animals chosen specifically draw the reader to the old epic tales in order to create an Irish context for the prophecy.

The fly is an interesting symbol and is often associated with representations of divine birth in the Irish epic. There are numerous stories of daughters of chieftains being impregnated
by swallowing a fly or insect in wine. The most notable example of this is Deichtine, the mother of Cú Chulainn. The fly signifies the first of a tripartite birth narrative that heralds the birth of a semi-divine hero. This allusion to divine birth is certainly probable given O’Donnell’s preoccupation with Irish mythology and history. Ascertaining exactly who Manus envisioned as this figure is virtually impossible. The divine figure could be Christ himself or perhaps more broadly the Christian church in Ireland. It could also represent, given O’Donnell’s skill at integrating Old Irish Epic into the Christian narrative, a semi-divine hero such as Brian Boru or Cú Chulainn. The death of this figure at the hands of the wren then leads to further speculation about the symbolism of the next animal. Traditional characterization of wrens as kings cannot be dismissed out of hand. In a Christian context the wren could allude to the imperial forces of Rome who were responsible for the death of Jesus. On a more personal level to O’Donnell it could also represent the English Monarchy. However this is somewhat of a stretch. It may simply be a reference to kingship. I am more persuaded that there is a progression of ages at work here. The fly is undoubtedly connected to mythology, the wren to kingship and the cat to change or destruction. In this sense there is a progression from the mythical age to the golden age of kingship to the state of present Ireland, a society in the midst of social crisis and change.

The social context of the text makes the interpretation somewhat easier though not by much. The O’Donnell’s were concerned with maintaining autonomy in Ireland and with preserving Irish culture in the face of the strictures laid down in the various statutes imposed by the English in thirteenth century. These prohibited the inter-marriage of English settlers with
the native Irish and proscribed the use of the Gaelic language and indigenous customs such as Brehon Law in the settled areas. While not initially successful, attitudes towards the Irish became increasingly negative, culminating in the sixteenth century with the renewed conquest by the Tudors in 1541.151

Clan warfare was also rife among the different alliances to the point that there were frequent and costly skirmishes on an annual basis. The O' Donnells were no strangers to this process. There was large scale warfare between Tír Chonaill and the other great northern kingdom of Tír Eoghain almost continuously from 1513-1524. This war involved an enemy alliance from Connacht, Munster and the Earl of Desmond who had allied himself with the opposing forces.152 With such widespread animosity among the Gaelic chieftains what hope did the Gaels stand in the face of the ever increasing army of English forces in the east of the country. This image of a country divided is more clearly delineated in the second prophecy.

4.4.2 Location, Location, Location: The Fate of Ireland II

Opinions on the fate of Ireland find resonance and are more clearly expressed in Columba's second prophecy which appears later in the work as follows:

On a time that Columchille was in Tara of the Kings, he prophesied and said that many as were her hosts and her legions, and many her feasts and banqueting, and delightful as were her assemblies and her gatherings, yet in the end of time she should be waste and desolate and there should be in her nor lords nor rulers. And he made that same

152 Mac Eiteagán, “The Renaissance and the Late Medieval Lordship of Tír Chonaill, 1451-1555,” 222.
prophecy of Cruachu and of Aillend and of Emain Macha. And so it came to pass, for that which his Chosen servant did say, thereof did God never aught gainsay.\textsuperscript{153}

Here again O' Donnell connects Columba with older prophecies found in the Táin. Emain Macha was historically the dwelling of the leader of Ulster where it symbolized the seat of royal power. In locating the prophecy, the modern site of Tailtiu, a location for ecclesiastical and secular meetings, was abandoned in favour of two sites most resonant with the ancient tradition. Cruachu was the royal assembly point and royal capital of Connacht. Aillend or Dún Ailinne is thought to have been a royal assembly point in Leinster. It is noteworthy that O'Donnell chooses sites that were centres of power in Irish mythology. Tara was the sacred site upon which the High Kings were inaugurated and was the seat of traditional power in pre-Christian Ireland. It was the location at which the secular and sacred were connected. It also marked the boundary of the 'other-world'. The hill of Tara was thought to have been inhabited by the Tuathu Dé Danann, the race of divine beings who first inhabited Ireland and later created the human race. The symbolic role of this site survived the emergence of Christianity. Peace talks or important treaties continued to be concluded there until the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{154}

Once again O'Donnell connects the prophecy to old Ireland, looking back to the golden age in which Columba can be re-imagined in the role of soldier of destiny. Ireland is subject to a fate that pre-dates that of Christianity but also incorporates it. It is interesting that he chooses to

\textsuperscript{153} Betha Colaim Chille, 126.

\textsuperscript{154} Breathnach, “Perceptions of kingship in early medieval Irish vernacular literature,” 25-26. For further discussion on the importance of Tara in tribal kingship and Irish tradition see Byrne, Irish Kings and High Kings, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 48-70. For continued use of Tara in inauguration rites in the later medieval period see Simms, From Kings to Warlords, (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1987).
include all of Ireland in this prophecy which demonstrates his desire to create some continuity among the peoples and to solidify traditions. While Manus attempted to create a sense of national unity it cannot be argued that this was a selfless endeavour rather it was a calculated move to consolidate his own power base and ensure the continued prosperity of Tír Chonaill. Bradshaw and Mac Eiteagán both contend that O' Donnell's links with Renaissance Europe were very influential in shaping his character to such an extent that he imagined himself as a 'Renaissance Prince' in the model outlined by Machiavelli, Erasmus and Castiglione to varying degrees. Bradshaw argues that Manus exemplified the hard headed political entrepreneur, the scholarly Christian ruler and the prince-aesthete combining characteristics of all three works on the ideal Prince. However, there is no mention of his Irish context. While O’ Donnell was very well educated and certainly would have been familiar with and influenced by Renaissance culture, I believe there is a direct mapping of Italian culture onto his Irish context with no discussion of his own cultural influences.

The ideal Irish King also exemplifies these Renaissance characteristics. Political acumen, scholarly knowledge and the cult of beauty are not foreign to Irish tradition. The O’ Donnell's history exemplifies this in itself. They held one of the few territories which never saw any long term incursions of enemy forces Gaelic, Norman, or English. This speaks of a history of shrewd political knowledge. Regardless of how it is envisioned Manus, saw himself in the role of

156 Bradshaw, “Manus the Magnificent,” 23.
Kingmaker. I suggest that he is less of a prince as outlined in Machiavelli and more of a Machiavellian figure in and of himself. He uses this conceptualization to set up the climax for the third and final prophecy in which the context for renewal and national autonomy is offered. By extension the fate of Ireland is in the hands of Manus O’ Donnell. These prophecies reflect his own world view and not that of Columba or Adomnán. This is evident from the lines “many as were her hosts and her legions, and many her feasts and banqueting, and delightful as were her assemblies and her gatherings, yet in the end of time she should be waste and desolate and there should be in her nor lords nor rulers.” Here the second stage in the process is revealed. In his initial prophecy the Gaels are destroyed because of their behaviour towards each other and the church. The result of this destruction is the demise of the Lordship. This is designed as a powerful warning to the reader, with added potency achieved by reference to the old centres of power which were still in use as parley and meeting sites in the early modern period. This warning or omen of the total annihilation of the Gaelic Lordship was particularly important in the wake of the Kilkenny statutes which moulded a political community where legislation was concerned solely with the needs of the English, and in which the Gaelic Irish had no status in

157 *Betha Colaim Chille*, 126.
law and their culture and customs were proscribed.\textsuperscript{158} The concluding prophecy will outline Manus' solution to this problem. It solidifies his claim to the role of king maker and by clever use and reference to the legend of Brian Boru provides a model for conducting political policy in the current period. Manus and Adomnán both use Columba to broker political alliances and to ensure that the O’Donnell family remain at the forefront of political affairs in Ireland.

In his work on Manus O’Donnell, Bradshaw notes that Gaelic Ireland like Renaissance Italy possessed a strong sense of cultural identity but lacked the structures and a clear concept of a national polity. The unit of political organization was local or regional but not national. He contends that during the fifteenth century an ethos developed which removed politics from the sphere of the sacred to the secular.\textsuperscript{159} However, it is not entirely plausible to argue that religion

\textsuperscript{158} Bradshaw, \textit{The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5. These statutes were effective in the area under colonial rule, which was mainly the area within the pale. Lords that had pledged loyalty to the crown were included within this jurisdiction. A substantial part of Ireland was still held by Gaelic Lords and Gaelicized Ango-Norman Lords who held their territories without the grant of tenure and in many cases in defiance of a royal title conferred under feudal law and as long as the crown was incapable of expropriating these areas of the country the government could to exercise sovereign jurisdiction over them. Efforts were made to exact vows of obedience from these Lords when possible and to allow them to continue to operate relatively independently until the renewed efforts in the Elizabethan period whereby the crown began to re-colonize Ireland in the late sixteenth century. Manus O’Donnell was one of the Lords who held his territory independently of sovereign rule though he did hold a de facto agreement of tenure with the crown. However, though these measures were designed to provide some stability among the Gaelic population it also isolated the Gaelic people and lead to continued unrest. For further discussion see Bradshaw, \textit{The Irish Constitutional Revolution in the Sixteenth Century}; Kane, \textit{The Politics and Culture of Honor in Britain and Ireland, 1541-1641}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); FitzPatrick, “Parley sites of Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill in late sixteenth century Ireland,” in \textit{Regions and Rulers in Ireland, 1100-1650}, edited by D. Edwards, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004): 201-217; Ellis, \textit{Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule}, (London: Longman, 1998).

\textsuperscript{159} Bradshaw, “Manus the Magnificent”, 28-29.
and politics separated entirely as the clergy still held important positions within the political establishment. There is still a sense that tradition and religious validation contributed to the success of the Gaelic Lords. There was disunity among clerical groups which arose primarily from the patronage system and led to the emergence of a sectarian community of religious orders. Religion and politics became interwoven and were difficult to separate, as evidenced by the use of relics, specifically those of the early Irish saints such as Brigit, Patrick and Columba, which were carried into battle by warring clans as apotropaic tools. The O’ Donnell's were renowned for carrying the *Cathach* into battle, the oldest surviving manuscript and one thought to have belonged to Columba himself, in order to ensure victory and reinforce the notion that their family held a divine right to the kingdom of Tír Chonaill by virtue of their notable ancestry.

If the sacred was no longer a factor in the political sphere then the literature would surely reflect this trend which it does not. More than ever, religious texts such as the *Betha Colaim Chille* and the compilations of poetry known as *Dunairí* became forums for the families to showcase their inherent right to power by virtue of their noble ancestry and divine blessings. This reading does not dismiss the increase in political activity especially in more secular pursuits but it cannot support the view that late medieval Ireland can be characterized as a secular society. This is solidified in the final prophecy.
4.4.3 Treachery, Might and Redemption: The final Fate of Ireland

And Columchille said prophesying: “It grieves me for the treachery and the slaying of kinsmen that the Gaels of Erin shall do hereafter, each upon other, and for the wrong and injustice that their kings and lords shall do against them that be weaker than they; and for the dishonour they shall do to the chapels and churches of Erin. And it grieves me yet more for all that shall come upon them hereafter, to wit, the anger of God coming upon them at the supplication of the saints against whose churches they do wrong and for their evil deeds so that they shall be driven from the land of their fathers to the glens and the mountains and the rough places of Erin by the might and strength of strangers and foreigners. But when the Gaels do justice and right among themselves I make great joy and when they do honour and worship to the chapels and churches of Erin and in especial to the churches of Padraic and mine own churches and the churches of Brigid. And when there shall arise strife and division among the foreigners themselves and they shall do after the Gael in respect of treachery in respect of kinsman slaying each other and in respect of wrongdoing and injustice against the chapels and the churches of Erin, then God shall give back again to the Gaels their strength and their might. And they shall drive out the strangers and the foreigners from Erin through my supplication and through the supplication of the other saints besides."160

This third and final excerpt is the most developed of the prophecies and provides the climax of this tripartite prophetic endeavour. It details more clearly the reasons for the 'punishment' of the Gaelic people and gives the first glimpse of redemption and of what will be entailed in the righting of wrongs. In-fighting, treachery and sins against the churches are listed as the primary sins of the Irish. Here the context of sixteenth century Ireland is most apparent. Clan warfare, religious sectarianism and the instability of Gaelic society are all clearly described.

“It grieves me for the treachery and the slaying of kinsmen that the Gaels of Erin shall do hereafter, each upon other, and for the wrong and injustice that their kings and lords shall do against them that be weaker than they; and for the dishonour they shall do to the chapels and churches of Erin.”161

160 Betha Colaim Chille, 127.
161 Betha Colaim Chille, 127.
This is the first reference to the churches and is important in the context of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Bradshaw notes that the *Betha* demonstrates Manus' concern for one key aspect of the reforming impulse at the core of humanism, the renewal of religion. He argues that the work is undoubtedly a work of Christian humanism and can be characterized as such almost exclusively.\(^{162}\) While the work displays characteristics of humanism, and at points imitates Erasmus' reform of society, see above, it cannot be called exclusively humanist in nature. It may also provide some opportunity for Manus to voice his scruples from the mouth of Columba using the discourse of penitence and religious reform,\(^{163}\) though this cannot be viewed as the only function of the work. His exhortations for reform extended beyond the sphere of his own immediate spiritual community as is seen in this excerpt below from his large work. The political and religious are intertwined and both become synonymous with O'Donnell's power base. By following the steps outlined in this prophecy the Gaelic Lordship will once again regain their holdings and will be successful in ridding the country of the foreign overseers. This will be accomplished only by following the example of O'Donnell himself who cleverly writes himself into this prophecy as an authority.

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\(^{162}\) Bradshaw, “Manus the Magnificent,” 26.

“But when the Gaels do justice and right among themselves I make great joy and when they do honour and worship to the chapels and churches of Erin and in especial to the churches of Padraic and mine own churches and the churches of Brigid.”

The steps outlined for the redemption of the Irish are contingent on a renewal of old values and traditions. The churches of Patrick, Brigit and Columba are listed as the most important in the entire monastic and religious community. Thus O' Donnell ensures that Tír Chonaill will remain at the forefront of the new religious authority. His choice of saints is significant. In addition to being among the most famous, they all have a distinguished literary tradition associated with them. Patrick is acknowledged as the founder of Christianity in Ireland and therefore can represent the totality of its churches. Brigit is a unifying saint, popular because of her connection to ancient Irish pagan religion. She also has a literary history similar to that of Columba. Columba's legacy is of course the legacy of the O' Donnell. Manus continued the monastic endeavours of Columba, founding a Franciscan community at Kilmacrennan. He adheres to Columba’s paradigm where the churches remain the forum for political alliance and reform. Here O' Donnell is most evident in the role of kingmaker. Patrick and Brigit had no descendants, unlike the O’ Donnells who have a documented lineage of descent from the Saint. It is the dynasty of Columba that will be at the forefront of the renewal. This is clearly laid out in the following lines:

164 Betha Colaim Chille, 127.
165 For a discussion of the Life of Brigit see Ritari, Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland: Moral Theology in the Lives of Saints Brigit and Columba, 17-44.
“then God shall give back again to the Gaels their strength and their might. And they shall drive out the strangers and the foreigners from Erin through my supplication and through the supplication of the other saints besides.”

The terminology used is of note here. The redemption and reform will clearly come through supplication to the saints, in particular to Columba. No other saint is mentioned by name. There is a martial element here that has not been included in any of the other passages which hints at the readiness of the Lordship to go to war should the Gaels unite. This may be a very subtle indicator of Manus’ consistent use of Brian Boru as a model of kingship and leadership. With the alliance of the Gaelic Lords they could emulate the achievements of Brian Boru in the golden age and drive the foreigners from the land. In this sense O'Donnell represents Columba as more of a soldier of destiny than a soldier of Christ, but the destiny here is of the O'Donnell's and Manus' own bid for power.

4.5 Summary

O'Donnell's re-creation of the Life of Columba, the *Betha Colaim Chille* collates all the existing work on the saint. Through the use of prophecies, some of his own creation, O'Donnell re-locates the life in the context of sixteenth Century Ireland which allows for its re-interpretation in political/military terms which would have had a contemporary relevance. These prophetic passages outline a tripartite development in the fate of Ireland. These writings are congruent with both the style and thematic form of Bardic poetry which formed the basis

167 *Betha Colaim Chille*, 127.
for later *Aisling* poetry, a genre which deals with the political and social strife created in the wake of colonial occupation. These prophecies are representative of the social unrest and tension between the English overseers and the Gaelic people; the Gaelic Lordship and the crown. O’Donnell utilizes the *Betha* to air his own personal sentiments concerning this situation and offers measures for reform which promote a kind of national polity among the Gaels. Here Columba is recast from Christian coloniser and soldier of Christ to inspirational indigenous leader and *soldier of destiny*. 
5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the life of Columba who was one of the most influential saints in the Irish canon. As founder of a monastic dynasty he has been recognised as central to the promulgation of Christianity in the British Isles. His life and work have stimulated interest for millennia. Two biographies written nearly one thousand years apart offer an insight into the saint’s life as exemplar of spiritual and political probity. Both accounts feature eschatological prophecies that mark significant developments in Irish history and cultural identity. The *Vita Columbae* written in the seventh century documents the creation of a Gaelic Christian identity where the saint, and by implication Gaelic Christians, are presented as ‘chosen’ and develops the narrative of Columba as soldier of Christ. The second account from the sixteenth century marks another transitional point in the literary and historical depiction this figure. Here Columba is re-presented as both religious and revolutionary icon in the role of soldier of destiny.

The two lives of Columba examined in this thesis have been used as a literary forum to advocate for a specific religious, political and ideology by their authors, Adomnán and Manus O’Donnell. In the words of Burke, “One is never a saint except for other people- in other words; the history of the saints is fundamentally a history of collective perceptions.”\(^{168}\) This is certainly evident in the two works examined here. Though situated in different periods of Irish history both represent the tradition associated with Columba while equally offering evidence of their

authors’ ideological purposes. These are embedded in a social context and relate in particular to the degree of institutionalization of office and the nature of authority. In this sense the realities of the authors’ context can be seen in the writings. Even the supernatural elements are mired in an explicit social consciousness and serve a specific purpose.

The first rendition of the life is Adomnán’s Columba. This represents the efforts of the seventh century Abbot of Iona to secure the position and provide for continuity of the early Christian church within the evolving political system of the time. The relationship between the monastic federation founded by Columba, his Cenél Chonaill clansmen and their subsequent alliance with the Scottish Dál Riata Kings is clearly demonstrated in the *Vita Columbae*. In this work, Adomnán presents Columba as a soldier of Christ, a missionary figure, almost a Gaelic Christ. His prophecies concerning the fate of Ireland rest on the characterisation of Columba as the saviour figure. Ireland is presented as the last the bastion of civilization and hope for the redemption of the British Isles. The fate of the island is contingent on the legacy left by the saint, to wit, the centrality of the monastery of Iona and the Columbine monks to the role and process of spiritual leadership. The concept of a Gaelic identity is introduced. This Christian ideal and identity are fused to support the emergence of the O’ Donnell dynasty which in embryonic form represents one of the earliest forms of Gaelic identity building.

Adomnán's Columba becomes the template for defining this identity in Manus O' Donnell's *Betha Colaim Chille*. The 'historical narrative' of the *Vita Columbae* provides the basis for O' Donnell’s re-presentation of a Gaelic identity one thousand years later. Manus belonged to the dynasty of Cenél Chonaill, which meant a shared ancestry with Columba and Adomnán. For Adomnán identity is tied to Columba and the monastery at Iona and articulated as synonymously Irish and Christian under the banner of Columbine monasticism. O' Donnell utilizes and builds on this legacy, depicting Columba as a revolutionary figure who combines the virtues and valour of his pre-Christian forbearers, the Gaelic chieftains. This image is one that all Gaelic peoples might ascribe to and thus avoid the colonisation and consequent Anglicization by the Tudor conquest of sixteenth century Ireland.

Manus’ work on Columba presents a more sophisticated image drawn from historical rather than biblical references. Thus the picture of the saint that emerges is different from his predecessor. O' Donnell's work is as much a political as a religious endeavour. He deliberately uses the Life of Columba as a forum for articulating his views on the state of Ireland in the sixteenth century, a particularly turbulent time in Irish history. Here, he focuses on the Irish heritage of the saint, choosing to contextualize him in the Irish literary tradition rather than the biblical one. He includes his own unique prophecies which advocate for the dynastic Tír Chonaill identity as the template for a universal Gaelic national identity.

The analysis of the two texts suggests a number of interesting conclusions. Both represent important points within the historical record. The *Vita Columba* is integral to understanding the
development of Christianity in Ireland and demonstrates the process by which the religion became allied with the structures of political power. Christianity became synonymous with legitimations of Irish identity; the monks playing a key role in royal inaugurations and the monasteries the essential forums for the validation of authority in all forms. This model was exported from Ireland to Iona thus re-enforcing the influence of the Tír Chonaill dynasty by unifying the arenas of church and state, military and political in the character and work of Columba-the soldier of Christ. Manus uses the historical narrative to associate Columba with the golden age of Ireland, which honoured Adomnán’s interpretation of Ireland as the island of saints and scholars; a stereotype which is embodied by the figure of Columba himself. However Manus’ other purpose was to lay claim by association to Brian Boru, the Saviour/Liberator who vanquished the Vikings from Ireland during that golden age. Manus sought to re-create these achievements in the context of 16th century Ireland, specifically, the overthrow of English rule by the descendants of Columba-soldier of Destiny.

The political nature of the texts in which the figure of the saint closely incorporates the views and aspirations of the Authors is worthy of note. Adomnán's figure of Columba is firmly contextualized in the Ionian tradition of Columbine monasticism and represents the tradition of that community first and foremost. It is primarily a religious treatise but with an unquestioned political motif that justifies the religio-political alliances and structures that it documents. The Columba in the *Betha Colaim Chille* is a different figure entirely as it appears to showcase the
characteristics and ambitions of Manus himself. Thus, this particular life of the saint is as much a political endeavour as it is a religious one.

The millennium sweep of the texts proved challenging. By situating and relating the texts to their historical contexts, it is inevitable that a full analysis of that considerable portion of Irish history could not be undertaken. A more detailed analysis of the historical, social and cultural contexts of the 7-16th centuries may be an endeavour of future scholarship.

Additional lacunae emerge due to the scant scholarship existing on the links between the texts other than the most obvious: O' Donnell's use of the *Vita Columbae*. The Renaissance character of the *Betha Colaim Chille* was not explored as extensively as it might. This was due to my decision to preference discussion of the Irish context of the text rather than focus on its relationship to the wider European tradition. This may prove fertile ground for future enquiry and scholarship.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the role of both works in the development of Irish Language, literature and culture which fostered subsequent ideas concerning 'Gaelic Identity'. The poetry, myth and symbols of Druid, Bard, Aisling and Resistance literary movements are clearly linked in the chain that can be drawn between Adomnán and Manus. Columba is the person who reveals this progression through microscopic or kaleidoscopic lens as events and their authors dictate. The literary tradition of Columba is a part of a larger body of work that engages with these ideas. Its frequent re-writing and re-imagining during times of
crisis both social and political demonstrate the importance of Columba and his legacy in the historical record.
**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


### Appendix A: Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>519-22 C.E.</td>
<td>Birth of Columba.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>563 C.E.</td>
<td>Departure to Iona.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>597 C.E.</td>
<td>Death of Columba.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600 C.E.</td>
<td>Composition of <em>Amra Choluim Chille</em>, oldest literary source on the saint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>628 C.E.</td>
<td>Birth of Adomnán.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>679 C.E.</td>
<td>Adomnán becomes Abbot of Iona.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700 C.E.</td>
<td>Completion of <em>Vita Columbae</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800 C.E.</td>
<td>First reported attack of Vikings at Lambay Island, Dublin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>914-920 C.E.</td>
<td>Vikings establish settlements at Dublin, Waterford and Limerick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>940 C.E.</td>
<td>Birth of Brian Boru.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>976 C.E.</td>
<td>Brian Boru succeeds his brother as king of Munster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>999 C.E.</td>
<td>Brian Boru defeats the Vikings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1002 C.E.</td>
<td>Boru becomes high King of Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1014 C.E.</td>
<td>Boru is killed at the Battle of Clontarf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1167-69 C.E.</td>
<td>Normans arrive in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1171 C.E.</td>
<td>Arrival of King Henry II and the beginning of English presence in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1166-75</td>
<td>Reign of Rory O’ Connor last high king of Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1272 C.E.</td>
<td>Most of Ulster, Connaught and Munster are under English rule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1366 C.E.</td>
<td>Statutes of Kilkenny forbade Irish/English marriages and preventing English to use Irish language, custom or laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1394 C.E.</td>
<td>King Richard II invades Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1447-1603 C.E.</td>
<td>Tudor Monarchs re-conquer Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1490 C.E.</td>
<td>Birth of Manus O’ Donnell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1495 C.E.</td>
<td>The Pale and boundaries are established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1532 C.E.</td>
<td>Completion of the <em>Betha Colaim Chille</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1541 C.E.</td>
<td>Henry VIII declares himself king of Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1562 C.E.</td>
<td>Elizabethan Wars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1564 C.E.</td>
<td>Death of Manus O’ Donnell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1603 C.E.</td>
<td>Invasion of James I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<td>------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1606 C.E.</td>
<td>Six of the northern counties in Ulster are seized by English forces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1649 C.E.</td>
<td>Cromwell’s Plantations of Munster, Leinster and Ulster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The area of Ireland known as modern day Donegal was known as the territory of Cenél Chonaill, a part of the country which was under the jurisdiction of the Uí Neóills, the most important northern political dynasty of the 600’s. It is into this family that Columba was born, a heritage which allowed him to pursue such a high profile career as a monk in both Ireland and Scotland.
Fig. 2 The Division of Territories 1500-1600 C.E.
Fig. 3 The Pale in 1450 C.E.