

example, he draws our attention to the importance of the African, Gustavus Vasa, to the British anti-slavery movement, whose autobiography in 1791 sold 19,000 copies in Ireland alone, yet who is barely noticed in the literature. Or again he brings out the importance of that brief moment in time, the 70s and 80s of the nineteenth century when Roman Catholic and Protestant missions had penetrated deeply into Africa, way beyond white colonial influences, and, in that period interacted with African society uncomplicated by the massive 'Scramble' that in almost the blinking of an eye, was then to lead to Africa's total subjugation by European power.

It has been usual for most historians and missiologists to deplore the terrible missionary competition that grew up late in the nineteenth century and lasted well into the twentieth. It reveals otherwise good men and women at their worst on too many occasions. Yet again, Hastings brings a refreshing approach to this topic. The missions would never have worked so hard as they did but for fear of people falling into Protestant heresy or Popish idolatry, he insists, but even more important and more seriously, he points out that it gave African people a real choice in many situations. It also gave them references with which to judge the packages they were offered and all this was a check on missionary authoritarianism. "Missionaries had to explain themselves more than otherwise and too great high-handedness might lead to mass desertion to another church".

Adrian Hastings has produced a book of great usefulness and importance, it is therefore to be regretted that it is priced outside the reach of most students in Europe and of almost all the Christians of Africa whose story it tells.

ANDREW C. ROSS

IONA; THE EARLIEST POETRY OF A CELTIC MONASTERY by edited by Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus. *Edinburgh University Press, 1995. 271 pp. £12.95.*

The name 'Iona' in the title of this book could suggest that the island itself is the focal point of the poetry in the volume, or, alternatively, that the poetry has all been composed in that island. The publishers and editors want us to believe that the latter is true, but the editors themselves, in their scholarly discussions of each poem, do not provide conclusive evidence that all eight poems were actually composed in Iona. They may have been, but final proof eludes us, and indeed there is evidence to the contrary in certain cases. Two of the poems may have been composed in Rum, while most of the others would fit a location anywhere within the *paruchia* of Columba. The common thread of the volume is not Iona but Columba, the famous saint who established his monastery in Iona around 563 A.D. One cannot help feeling that the growing importance of Iona, which came to fame on the basis of the saint's former presence, is now tending to eclipse the saint himself. The island of the title is not the *terrula* of Adomnán, but a much less concrete *locus cordis*, a unifying concept rather than a precise geographical location. It is, however, fair to say that the poems do have 'a firm connection with Iona', as the editors claim in

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their discussion of the last item in their selection.

The title raises other questions. Can we be absolutely sure that this really represents the 'earliest poetry' composed in the monastery? And can we have any confidence that Iona was a 'Celtic' monastery? Again, the editors provide excellent arguments against believing that Iona was 'Celtic', or that the monks who lived there, including Columba, would have perceived themselves in this way. They might have regarded themselves as Irish or Gaelic, if indeed they had any rudimentary notion of these matters. More probably, they would have defined themselves over and against the Picts and the Britons with whom they came in contact. It does look as if this scholarly coracle, which otherwise sails so effectively against modern currents, is trimming its sail to attract some of the breezes that are blowing from the eternally popular image of the 'sacred isle' and its association with 'Celtic Christianity'.

The contents of the book are broader than the title suggests. It has much to say, by way of background, about the prose literature available to, and composed in, the monastery in Iona. It is, in effect, a literary portrait of Columba and his island, based on both poetry and prose, though poetry is the primary concern of the book.

The editors' approach sets Iona in its wider context. The book is not so much a view over the *vallum* of the Iona monastery, as the editors claim. Rather, it is a view from the *vallum* — for it looks out from 'Iona' to the international world of early medieval Christianity. It is therefore an excellent corrective to those popular and suggestive writings which are bidding fair to re-invent the nature of Christianity in the so-called Celtic lands, since it provides us with the first conveniently assembled, scholarly treatment of poetic texts displaying the theology of the Latin and Gaelic poets who celebrated God and the saint within the framework of the Columban *paruchia*. It illumines brightly not only the significance of Iona within early medieval Christendom, but also the manner in which the saint was remembered and interpreted by those nearest to him (at least in chronological terms). The editors, who have academic strengths in patristics and theology on the one hand, and in the development of Christian thought in the Insular (dare one say 'Celtic?') context on the other, are well qualified to identify those strands of the 'Iona' material which belong to Christendom as a whole, and to assess its relationship to what is now fashionably called 'Celtic Christianity'.

Their responses to 'Celtic Christianity' are woven into the exposition which accompanies each poem. For example, in the discussion of *Adiutor laborantium*, a Latin poem attributed to Columba, the editors take the opportunity to dismiss the idea that 'Celtic Christians' were avid followers of Pelagius, whose theology was supposedly much less off-putting and much more hell averting than that of the sinister and deadly Augustine, whose writings are seen by the devotees of 'Celtic Christianity' as the source of the theological sickness of the West. As Márkus and Clancy make clear, Pelagius's theology, demanding perfect personal obedience, was the fast road to self-inflicted damnation, since those who went along that route lacked the safety-belt of grace which undergirded the perspectives of Augustine. It was not a route travelled by the Irish

pilgrims, who recognised the need for God's grace in their struggles with life and death. Again, the editors point out that Augustine had a warm appreciation of the God-created beauties of the natural world. They also demonstrate quite rightly that the early Gaelic poets within the Christian tradition were not living in happy, spaced-out communion with nature; they feared the storms, thunder and lightning. This is hardly surprising, since (unlike modern romanticisers) they had intimate knowledge of the weather of the Hebrides. Occasionally, however, the editors worry in a wistful way about such points as the allegedly one-dimensional texture of the *Altus prosator*. The emphasis of this hymn, attributed rightly or wrongly to Columba, shows very forcibly that Gaelic Christians feared hell and judgement, and lived in the light of their reality (unlike many who have espoused the 'Celtic' cause). As the early Gaelic hymns show, Columba, alongside Mary, became their very Catholic guide and protector in their desire to avoid the fire of hell and gain heaven—a point which deserves to be noted by those who think that the 'Celtic Church' was the precursor of the Free Church of Scotland!

Yet, if this book takes issue with the 'Celtic Christianity' lobby, it also shows that there was a distinctively Gaelic dimension to the portrayal of Columba, as in Dallán Forgaill's elegy on the saint, *Amra Choluimb Chille*. There it is fascinating to see how the language of Gaelic heroic panegyric is used to 'smuggle in an alternative hero'. Whatever our views on 'Celtic Christianity', we must accept that Columba, the Christian hero, was perceived through Gaelic linguistic and cultural perspectives. It is easier to demolish 'Celtic Christianity' than to analyse the real cultural 'wrap'. This can be done only by those who know how to handle Gaelic culture from the inside. Such an analysis, which is initiated by Clancy and Márkus, will provide the only credible answer to externally-based reconstructionism. Further work is likely to support the evidence of this book, which shows that, although Christians in the Gaelic world expressed their beliefs in terms of their own culture, they were not the authors of some happy 'Celtic' heterodoxy. Rather, they maintained the cardinal doctrines of the Christendom of their day.

The commentaries that accompany each poem are a pleasure to read, with wide-ranging and elegant discussion of both theology and early history. The brave stab at editing and expounding the *Amra Choluimb Chille* is noteworthy in this regard. The translations of the texts are well executed. Certain texts (e.g., the *Amra*) will, however, bear further editing in due time, as the editors themselves are aware. Inevitably, the enterprise is indebted to the labours of such scholars as Máire Herbert and Richard Sharpe, but the new book offers a very great deal of original and important reflection, in a beautifully accessible manner.

This is a fine book, worthy of Columba. Alongside the volumes by Sharpe (*Adomnan of Iona*, Penguin) and MacArthur (*Columba's Island*, EUP) it takes its place as one of a trinity of excellent volumes relating to Iona which have appeared in 1995.

DONALD E MEEK