

The Family of Bruce and the Saints

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{Note: Nothing in this article should be understood by the reader as either an endorsement or criticism of a particular brand of Christianity or of any particular religious practice and/or event.}

What about the members of our family of Bruce? We are good people – mostly. I think I will just leave it at that. So what are saints? Friends of my parents used to refer to my mother as a saint, primarily because she had managed to live in a mostly peaceful fashion for sixty-two years with my Bruce father. I think I must concede that to live with a Bruce for that long is indeed an accomplishment some would think worthy of sainthood. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a saint is “a very holy or unselfish person, worthy of veneration”, this usually within the context of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church has very strict protocols for the identification and veneration of a person as a saint, and relatively few individuals are ever accorded this status.

The first persons to arrive in what today is Scotland and who were to be called saints were representatives of the old Celtic Church which had a polity and worship quite different from the Roman Catholic version which would supplant it in later centuries. These persons came from what today is Ireland. The earliest prime figure in the process of the evangelization of Scotland was Saint Columba, who along with a dozen of his closest associates established themselves on the Hebridean island of Iona, from which they traveled into both Dal Raita and Alba. They were spectacularly successful, and by the early 800's, virtually all of Scotland was Christian. We have reason to believe that all of these early missionaries were considered to be saints of the Celtic Church.

So what is it that we “mostly good” Bruce's have to do with the “holy and venerable”. There is an old Scottish proverb that says “we come into this world cold, naked and wet – and from there it just gets worse”. The story of the “Bruce Curse” fits that proverb quite well, and it is Saint Malachy who is to be credited (or blamed) for this unfortunate incident – or maybe it was the involved Bruce? I will let you decide.

Malachy:

Saint Malachy was the Bishop of Armagh in Ireland. He was considered to be a very holy man and was venerated by many. Indeed, everywhere he traveled he was treated with the utmost respect and deference. It is possible that he came to expect to be treated that way. In approximately 1148, on his way for a visit in Rome, he stopped in Annan, the home of the second Robert Bruce. While a guest of this Robert, he happened to hear of a thief who had been judged by Bruce and sentenced to hang, justifiably so. Nonetheless, Malachy asked Robert to pardon the thief, and apparently he agreed. The next day as Malachy was leaving Annan, he saw the lifeless body of the thief, having been hanged by Robert despite his promise. This so enraged Malachy that he placed a perpetual curse not only on this Robert, but on all the family of Bruce for all time to come. Such a curse would have been taken very seriously, and according to one source, “thorough, comprehensive and devastating” in its impact. Not long after this incident, a large portion of Annan Castle was washed away in a flood and the family moved to Lochmaben. The flood was said to be a result of the curse. Many negative events in the area and in the life of the family were also attributed to the curse. Subsequent generations took the curse very seriously. In 1272, another Robert Bruce known as “The Competitor”, grandfather of King Robert I, was on his way home from the crusades when he paused at Clairvaux in France, where he visited the Cistercian Abbey which was the burial place of Malachy. It is said that after praying at Malachy's tomb, he arranged for land in Annan to be given in order to pay the cost of lights to burn “forever” at Saint Malachy's shrine. Some believed that atonement had been made and that the curse was lifted through the means of this gift, but others were not quite so sure. Even King Robert I, “The Bruce”, had cause to wonder if many of the setbacks early in his reign were the result of the curse of Saint Malachy. So, do we of the Name and Family of Bruce carry this perpetual curse with us yet today? I leave that to your own thoughtful mind and conscience.

Fillan:

Saint Fillan is said to be the son of none other than the revered Saint Kentigern (also known as Saint Mungo), one of the very earliest Christian missionaries to what would become Scotland. His story has more real physical substance than much other which comes from the annals of lore, legend and myth. Indeed,

two objects linked to Saint Fillan are in the keeping of the National Museum in Edinburgh, having been gifted to the Society Of Antiquaries Of Scotland. They are known as St. Fillan's "bell" and "crozier". The crozier was turned over to the Society in 1877 by Mr. Alexander Dewar, the last of its hereditary keepers, through the good offices of Dr. Daniel Wilson. The March 12, 1877 edition of "Proceedings", the primary publication of the Society of Antiquaries, contains papers by Professors Wilson and John Stuart in regard to the recovery of the crozier, one of Scotland's oldest and most significant antiquities. I am indebted to those articles for some of the information presented here. (Note: A crozier is a staff carried and used by clergy, today primarily by bishops, to signify their "pastoral" office.)

So what is the connection between Saint Fillan and the Family of Bruce? It was not long after his murder of Red John Comyn and his coronation as King Of Scots (1306), that King Robert was excommunicated by the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, this as punishment for the murder, and that in the chancel of the church at Dumfries. Cut off from the support of the church (but not from the support of key Scottish clergy), Robert must have felt very discouraged, especially in the light of the many defeats and other misfortunes he suffered early in his reign. The capture, torture and death of two of his brothers at the hands of Edward I must have weighed heavily on him and added to his fears of being cursed. Nigel Tranter in his "Bruce Trilogy" (historical fiction) tells the quite believable story that while pausing in the area of Glendochart in Strathfillan, near the ruins of a church dedicated to Saint Fillan, that "The Bruce" was approached by two ragged Highlanders who turned out to be the Dewar of the Coigreach (Quigrich) and the Dewar of the Main. These two were the hereditary keepers of St. Fillan's crozier and a portion of St. Fillan's arm bone. Being only Gaelic speakers, it was difficult to make themselves understood, although King Robert had some command of the language through his Gaelic speaking mother. As it turned out, they had come to bless the new king in the name of Saint Fillan, an event which provided Bruce with renewed hope and which he would never forget. Rejected by the Roman church, he had found acceptance and blessing in the old celtic (Culdean/Columban) church with a much longer history in Scotland than the Roman.

Virtually all of the early sources of information regarding the Battle at Bannockburn, tell the story of how, on the eve of battle, the Scots army heard mass, received the sacrament, were blessed by the clergy there present, and also received absolution for their sins, in preparation for their possible deaths in the battle to come. It was not uncommon at the time, for relics of saints and certain other national symbols to be carried onto the field of battle to give heart (confidence) to the troops. Some sources tell us that among these symbols present at Bannockburn was what is called the Monymusk Reliquary. This object is linked to Saint Columba (b. 521 d.597) and may have been made as a gift for him on the order of King Brude of the Picts. It is said that this gift was in thanksgiving to Columba and the Christian God for the part Columba played in the healing of Brude's daughter from some grievous illness. Columba, usually credited as the saint responsible for the initial evangelization of Scotland, probably used it to carry holy oil and other "tools of his trade". Later, it is said to have contained fragments of his bones as a reliquary. It has, remarkably, been preserved and is on display at the National Museum in Edinburgh. At least one of the credible sources tells us that two relics of Saint Fillan were also present at Bannockburn and used for this same purpose, the crozier and a fragment of arm bone. Later, some gave a measure of credit for the victory to Saint Fillan (possibly Columba as well) and it is probable that "The Bruce" was among them.

What we do know for certain is that later in his reign, King Robert again visited the sites related to Saint Fillan and endowed lands and other resources for the purpose of their preservation. Today, at least some of these sites are still known and are destinations of pilgrimage for the faithful. I cannot help but wonder if there are Bruce's out there who still today look to Fillan as their personal patron saint.

Margaret:

Saint Margaret was Margaret Atheling, a Hungarian/Saxon princess, sister to Edgar Atheling the legitimate Saxon heir to the English throne who had been dispossessed by none other the Norman, William, known as the Conqueror. She was also grand-daughter to King Stephan of Hungary, later canonized as Saint Stephen. According to legend, she was on her way back to continental Europe with her mother, sister and brother after a decisive defeat of her brother's forces in England, when a severe storm forced her ship to beach in an area where King Malcolm Canmore of Scotland was conducting a raid into English lands, this in 1070. Malcolm and his troopers rescued the crew and passengers. The legend also tell us that he brought Margaret and her family back to Scotland with him and became so enamored of her that he disposed of his wife in order to marry her. If the name Malcolm Canmore sounds familiar, it should. This is the same Malcolm who in William Shakespeare's famous play brings Birnam Wood to Dunsinane and later **becomes king after** a companion slays MacBeth, a real historic event. It is recorded that Margaret was an extraordinarily devout Roman Catholic who found Scotland's indigenous Columban/Celtic Church to be in

error" and who worked tirelessly to introduce Roman Christianity into Scotland. One of the many ways in which she accomplished her goal was to initiate the construction of a "Romish" church in Dunfermline (to be called "Holy Trinity") alongside the palace which her husband had built there for her, and also adjacent to the Abbey which was originally Columban. The church was used to introduce the Scots to a style and environment for worship entirely alien to anything in their previous experience. Her personal piety and good works on behalf of those not of noble birth, made her, with little doubt, the most popular queen consort the Scots had ever known. Along with her other ventures, including support of commerce, industry and transportation, she raised huge sums of money to subsidize her religious activities, including the building of the church at Dunfermline. This church quickly became a destination for pilgrims, even during its construction and more so after its consecration. This church was later expanded and completed by Margaret's son, King David I. Both Margaret and Malcolm are buried in Dunfermline Abbey Church. Most historians credit Margaret, in large measure, for the ascendancy of the Roman Church over the Columban. It would virtually eclipse the Columban Church over the next two centuries. It was for these reasons that she would become a "Romish" saint, canonized in 1250.

So what is the Bruce connection? Somewhere around 1320, Dunfermline Palace came to be the preferred residence of King Robert Bruce and his English born queen, Elizabeth DeBurgh. The Abbey Church became the burial place for King Robert after his death in 1329. The exact location of the grave was lost, probably during the excesses of the protestant reformation, but was located again in 1818 during renovation work. Today the church is fully intact. The chancel and about half of the nave have been further enclosed to provide worship space for an active Church of Scotland congregation. The grave site is marked with an impressive marble slab which legend suggests may have come from the tomb of Constantine and is inlaid with a bronze representation of a medieval knight. It is located in the chancel, beneath the pulpit. The adjacent palace is, unfortunately, a ruin. Historic Scotland has taken steps to manage that part of the property and to insure that what remains is preserved. On the other side of the church is the completely restored Abbot's House. Our Chief, Lord Elgin, is patron of the Abbot's House.

In so far as I have been able to determine, no Bruce's have ever achieved the exalted status of canonized saint, a fact which I must admit, does not surprise me. Despite his excommunication, King Robert did have a large number of supporters among the most distinguished of Scottish clergy, including Bishop William Lamberton of St. Andrews (primate of the church in Scotland), Bishop Robert Wishart of Glasgow, and Abbot Bernard deLinton of Arbroath, but none of these were or later became saints. Not a few Bruce's have become clergy, including James Bruce (Bishop of Dunkeld and later Glasgow – also Chancellor of Scotland d. 1447), Andrew Bruce (Bishop of Dunkeld d. 1700) and the renowned Scottish Bible scholar and theologian F.F. Bruce (d. 1990). Indeed, I have had both a Bruce uncle and brother who were ordained clergy during their lifetimes – but not saints.

We Bruce's venerate our name, our family and, of course, our Scottish heritage. We are people who, for the most part, are persons of dignity, integrity, intelligence, ability, personal discipline, accomplishment and ethical behavior – but we are not saints. Our family history in this regard is instructive, and cannot help but influence us as we seek to expand our understanding and participation in the Family of Bruce.

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