

# Saints of the High Road

By

*Malcolm Lobban*

Having been raised close to Loch Lomond, I have long been fascinated by the legendary tales that surround this beautiful district of Scotland. My childhood imagination thrilled with stories of fish without fins, waves without wind, a floating island and a submerged church.

‘The Loch’ ~ as it is known locally ~ is the largest area of fresh water in Great Britain (27 square miles, and over 600 feet at its deepest point) and was at one time an arm of the sea, becoming land-locked at the end of the last Ice Age.

Loch Lomond environs show signs of man’s presence dating back to Neolithic times (4000 BC). Early Celtic activity in the district is reflected in various place-names, in particular those with ecclesiastical connections. It could be said that the ancient clerics were among the first to ‘take the high road’, as it were! Thus, it is with these religious sites that my interest lies, whilst inviting the reader to come with me, in theory at least, on my pilgrimage into olden times around *The Bonnie Banks*.

Our place of departure is Balloch, at the southernmost point, where the River Leven provides the loch’s only outlet to the River Clyde. Loch Lomond stretches into five parishes, some having more shoreline than others. In its entirety it formed an integral part of the old earldom of *Leamhanaich* (becoming Levenach, Levenax and finally Lennox), which also embraced parts of the later counties of Dunbarton, Renfrew, Stirling and Perth. Until 1996, all of the western side of Loch Lomond was contained in Dunbartonshire. Now, for no apparent reason beyond political expediency, all but two miles of western shoreline has been handed over to Argyll and Bute authority.

Nevertheless, we begin our tour (which will take us anti-clockwise around The Loch) at Balloch, in the parish of Bonhill, Dunbartonshire, where the main sites of Celtic antiquity are located along the parish’s short section of the loch’s southwestern shore. Here we find the farmlands of Auchenheglis, being a corruption of the Gaelic *Ach na eaglais* (field of the church: 364842). During my childhood I listened to fanciful tales concerning a sunken church below the waters of the loch near this site. However, it appears that the church in question (no longer evident) may have had early association with nearby Auchendennan (field of Eunan or Adamnan: 366835). Saint Adamnan (pronounced Yownan or Yonan) was the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Abbot of Iona and biographer of Saint Columba. Whether or not he actually visited Loch Lomond is not clear, but it is more likely that the church here was simply dedicated to his memory.

Other obvious church connections in Bonhill parish are at Dalmonach (monks’ field: 394803) beside the River Leven, which had ancient association with an order of monks connected to Paisley Abbey, Renfrewshire. Apparently the brotherhood held fishing rights in this section of the river.

Moving now in a northerly direction along the eastern shores of Loch Lomond, we enter the parish of Kilmarnock. Here we find several place-names of religious significance. The parish name is said to have associations with Saint Ronan (died 737). One translation is given as ‘church of my dear little Ronan’. About one mile from Balloch is a farm named Old Kirk, and another close by named Shanacles (Gaelic, *sean eaglais* = old church: 409842). In this area local farmers have in the past unearthed evidence of an ancient burial ground.

This parish also includes Loch Lomond’s largest island, Inchmurrin, on which is a ruined church, said to be dedicated to Saint Mirran, patron saint of Paisley Abbey. However, the late Joseph Irving, in his *Dunbartonshire Place Names* states that the island’s name could equally come from the Gaelic *innis na muirn* (island of hospitality).

Also in this parish, located beside the loch, we find the small estate of Ross Priory (414876). Its origin is obscure, but it is likely to have been associated with one or other of the pre-Reformation churches in the district. These lands were once the property of a branch of Clan Buchanan, and occupied by Hector MacDonald Buchanan, a great friend of Sir Walter Scott. It is claimed that Scott was a frequent visitor to Ross Priory, where he may have found the inspiration for his epic poems *The Lady of the Lake* and *Rob Roy*.

The actual parish church of Kilmarnock is located near the River Endrick, which also forms the boundary with Buchanan parish. To the east of the church is the farmland named Ibert. This curious name might be a corruption of the Gaelic word *iobert* (sacrifice or offering: 469883), and would seem to have religious significance, possibly even pre-dating Christianity.

Moving into Buchanan parish, which by acreage is probably the largest in the district, we again find numerous names of ecclesiastical origin. The name comes from the Gaelic *both chanain* (canon’s seat), but to which canon the name refers is not clear. However, Clan Buchanan (originally MacAuslans) take its name from the lands of Buchanan ~ and not the other way round, as is sometimes suggested. Incidentally, it is my own contention that the surname, commonly pronounced ‘BEW-canan’, should be ‘BUCH-canan’ (the ‘u’ as in buck and the ‘ch’ as in loch). The parish has strong connections with the elusive lady cleric Saint Kentigerna, who spent much of her later life on the Loch’s island of Inchcailleach, which translates in Gaelic as *innis nan cailleach* (island of the old woman, or nun’s isle).

Caintigern (Latin, Kentigerna) was the daughter of an Irish king of Leinster (possibly Cellach Cualann, died circa 714). She came to Scotland with her brother Saint Congan (Cowan), and her son Saint Fillan. All three preached in the Lochalsh district, Ross-shire, until she decided to become a recluse on Loch Lomond. I suppose she might justifiably be called the original ‘Lady of the Lake’! For a while she was regarded as the patron saint of Loch Lomond ~ certainly along the eastern shoreline ~ since the parish of Buchanan was until 1630 called Inchcailleach, and the locals rowed over from the mainland to worship. The island was originally called Kildarie, but most people from my own locality know it as The Burying Island.

In 1903, excavation work was carried out on the island that revealed the ruins of an ancient church and burial ground. Architectural features on some of the stonework identified it with the 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Below the building an older grave was discovered, including human remains, which may have been those of the old lady herself.

Other graves of more recent vintage are mostly of MacGregors, MacFarlanes and MacLarens, these being prominent clans of the district. Indeed, one slab is inscribed with the name of Gregor MacGregor of that Ilk and dated 1693 (the true date may however be 1623, since it appears to have been tampered with). It is obviously the grave of a prominent member of the Clan Dougal Cier branch of the MacGregors, whose most famous son was the notorious Rob Roy MacGregor, who was born in the parish.

The story is told of one funeral that left the village of Drymen en route to Inchcailleach during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It seems the cortege, mostly Highlanders, got so full of whisky that they nearly forgot to bury the corpse! The last interment on the island took place in 1947.

The lady saint is not the only ecclesiastic associated with Buchanan parish. Only a few hundred yards from Inchcailleach, on the mainland, lies the small village of Balmaha (421909), sited close to a natural land feature forming a gateway to the more highland district of the parish. Marauding clansmen frequently used this pass during their many cattle-lifting sojourns to the fertile lowland country.

Balmaha is from the Gaelic *Bealach-Maha* meaning Pass of Maha, relating to Saint Mahew (sometimes styled Saint Tua or Thatha), who is said to have been a companion to Saint Patrick, and that he 'laboured' in Lennox. Other place-names connected with him are Kilmahew (Gaelic *Cill-Mahew*), in Cardross parish on the Clyde, and Saint Maha's Well, located about three miles northeast of Balmaha. The well was for many years considered as having healing properties, and lies adjacent to a stream called Auchlais Burn (Gaelic, *eaglais*, church). Also near the burn is a site named Ballinjour (not shown in modern maps). This relates to the Gaelic *baile an deoir* (place of the keeper or custodian) which refers to the guardian of some relic or holy artefact ~ thus providing just one more source of the surname Dewar. Further along the same hillside we come across more archaic evidence at Shandon (Gaelic, *sean dun*, old fort: 479895), and Druimakill (Gaelic *druim na cille*, ridge of the cell or graveyard: 481889).

Much of the area around the village of Drymen (from which the surname Drummond evolved) we can find references to ancient church sites dedicated to Saint Michael and Saint Mary, near where the 'Church Burn' meets the River Endrick on its course to Loch Lomond.

Moving on northwards from Balmaha, into the highland region, we come across even more religious sites. One of the oldest is at a piece of land jutting out into the loch known as Strathcashell Point. The Gaelic meaning is given as *srath a'chaislighe*, (the place with a ford across water: 394932). This might refer to an earlier causeway that led to the Iron Age crannog (man-made island dwelling place) evidence of which can still be seen a short distance from the shore. However, archaeologists also

discovered evidence of a small ~ possibly fortified ~ outpost attributed to the old Celtic Church period.

Moving yet further north, we reach another headland at a place called Ross Point. Near this site is a recognised *desertum* which was once known as *Leac a' Mhinisteir* (the minister's stone slab: 366955). About two miles further on is Rowardennan, from the Gaelic *rhudha aird Eanain* (point of the height of Saint Adamnan: 358982). This, again, probably relates to the saint referred to earlier (*Eanain* is given as a diminutive of Adamnan i.e. 'little Adam'). Also near this area is a small inlet of Loch Lomond which bears the name *Lochan Maoil Dhuinne* (lochan of the brown tonsured one [priest or monk] 364974).

Rowardennan marks the southern extent of the old Craig Rostan estate, once held by the notorious Rob Roy MacGregor, and it is thought that it was due to his influence the lands were for a while known as Craigroyston. However, it is generally accepted that the name is associated with Saint Drostan. The territory embraces a narrow strip of rocky shoreline as far north as Inversnaid, lying in the shadow of Ben Lomond (3129 feet). A further three miles beyond Inversnaid, the Rostan Burn falls steeply into the loch, also marking the parish boundary with Arrochar, traditional lands of the MacFarlanes of that Ilk. Again, Rostan may be a corruption of Drostan.

As we round the head of Loch Lomond, and begin to move south again through Arrochar parish, the next site of ecclesiastical interest is known as the Pulpit Rock. In Gaelic it is known as *Clach nan Tairbh* (the rock of the bulls: 326137). This is not an ancient site of worship, but was carved out on the instructions of a 19<sup>th</sup> century parish minister the Rev. Peter Proudfoot, where he then conducted open-air sermons. However, until 1648, the lands of Arrochar and Luss (both part of the earldom of Lennox) formed a single parish. Thus, we find several MacFarlane chiefs buried in the kirkyard at Luss village.

Luss parish, which we now visit, abounds in religious place-names. Long before the noble House of Lennox and later Colquhouns became dominant along the entire western shores of Loch Lomond, the Celtic missionary Saint Kessog (circa 6<sup>th</sup> century) brought Christianity to the district.

Born at Cashel, capital of Munster, Ireland, and said to be of royal parentage, a curious legend surrounds his alleged martyrdom. It is told that his body was embalmed with various herbs and brought to Loch Lomond for burial. Some of the herb seeds are said to have germinated, giving the district its name, Luss (Gaelic, *lus*, herb ~ plural *luis*).

Information on his martyrdom is lacking. One account claims he was slain by person(s) unknown at Bandry (358905), near Luss village. Certainly a cairn named *Carn ma-Ceasoig* is said to have marked the spot where he died. The nearby Island of Inchtavannach (Gaelic, *Innis tigh a' mhannich*, Island of the monk's house) is given as his retreat.

Archaeological exploration on the island revealed evidence of early habitation. A hilltop was named *Tom na clag* (Hill of the bell: 367917), from which the district was summoned to worship. The bell of Saint Kessog was held in reverence down to the

17<sup>th</sup> century, but its later whereabouts remains a mystery. Another site on the island was called *Clach a Mhinisteir*, believed to be the cell or clachan (stone dwelling) where the great man and his disciples lived: possibly a small monastery and burial ground. There is also a cave known as Saint Kessog's Cave.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, road works were carried out and a cairn at Bandry was disturbed to reveal several carved stone items. These included a holy water stoup and sarcophagus. But the greatest find of all was a life-size effigy of a Celtic priest, believed to be none other than Saint Kessog. This effigy now lies in state within the present kirk at Luss.

In old Gaelic, the saint's name appears as *Cessoc*, *Cessag* and sometimes *Cessan*. As a gesture of endearment the prefix *mo* (my) is sometimes added, resulting in such variations as *Mechesseoc* (1200) and *Mahessoc* (1211), all of which were later misunderstood as *mac* (son), as in MacKessoc or MacKessack. But Dr. Black (*The Surnames of Scotland*) holds that the latter surnames are from the Gaelic *MacIosaig* (son of Isaac).

Saint Kessog is first acknowledged as patron saint of Luss in a charter by Malcolm, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Lennox (1292-1333) to John, 4<sup>th</sup> Laird of Luss, *for reverence and honour of our patron and most holy man the blessed Kessog*.

King Robert the Bruce, who counted Malcolm, Earl of Lennox, among his most loyal supporters, appears to have visited Luss, either before or just after his famous victory at Bannockburn (1314). He granted to the Church of Luss *Deo et beato Kessogo* a sanctuary girth of three miles. This meant that within a radius of three Scots miles of the church, criminals or outlaws could not be arrested.

It will be recalled that Bruce appears to have been plagued by a disfiguring ailment (leprosy?) which inspired his unyielding belief in spiritual healing, and his patronage of Luss church was one of several such gestures directed to various religious sites throughout Scotland. Nevertheless, the hero of Bannockburn seems to have had a particular regard for the Lennox land, since he chose to retire there, finally dying near Dumbarton, only nine miles from Luss.

There are other place-names with ecclesiastical connections near the picturesque village of Luss. A small hillock to the south was known as *Tom na paidir* (hill of prayer: not now shown in modern maps), which may have been a place where pilgrims visited. About a mile up the narrow Glen Luss lie the ruins of a pre-Reformation church dedicated to Saint Michael (338941) and a mile further on, we find Edintaggart (the priest's hillside: 324941).

Clan Colquhoun, which originally came from the barony of that name, near Dumbarton, inherited the lands of Luss by marriage with an heiress of the House of Lennox (The Fair Maid of Luss!). The Colquhouns seem to have had a preference for Saint Mary, since they built a small chapel in her honour near their ancient stronghold at Rossdhu, beside Loch Lomond. Both buildings are now only ruins (363895).

The current road leading from Loch Lomond westward to Glenfruin (a place that everyone of the name Colquhoun should recall with sadness) marks the southern

boundary of Luss parish. It was in this glen that the MacGregors sorely defeated the Colquhouns and other local gentry in 1603 ~ a conflict which further saw the very name MacGregor outlawed by act of parliament. The area of the battle is at 268898.

We are now back in Bonhill parish and at the end of our ecclesiastical tour of *The Bonnie Banks*, from which it becomes clear that Christian worship was introduced to this district from a very early period. Just what the effects were on the morality of the local tribes of the period is not clear, but if the subsequent warring that prevailed among the later clans is anything to go by, there might be cause to speculate over the effectiveness of Christianity in general. Theologians pontificate over their role in shining the light of truth on the darkness of ignorance. However, just how brightly shone the lamps of the ancient Celtic saints is questionable, yet the embers of their fires still glow and are reflected in the many place-names about Loch Lomond. One non-believer was heard to remark, on having Christianity for over 2000 years, mankind is none the better for it! To which a wily man of the kirk replied: ‘Aye! ~ an’ we’ve had soap an’ watter even longer, yet see the number o’ dirty folk about!’

Lastly, for the benefit of those readers who may yet ponder over my earlier reference to ‘fish without fins, waves without wind, and an island that floats’, let me explain. The first refers to an abundance of lampreys found in the Loch Lomond (*lampetra fluviatilis*), they being eel-like creatures. The second is often attributed to the shape of the surrounding hills that occasionally deflect air currents (mainly crosswinds) thereby giving rise to unusual water movement. The third? After many, many years searching, I have yet to discover. Nevertheless, I think it is only right that some things in life should remain a mystery.

End.

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