

CELTIC CHURCHES

FROM Irish and Scottish books on architecture and Irish and Scottish archæological writings in general, one is apt to take a very erroneous impression concerning the ancient ecclesiastical buildings of these two countries. This impression is not, of course, deliberately produced by the writers responsible for the literature spoken of; but it is apt to form in the 'average reader's' mind, nevertheless, and to tincture all his thoughts and comments that have to do with this subject. The matter turns on the employment of the word 'primitive' to describe the type of stone building associated with the planters of Christianity in Ireland and Scotland. The use of this word in connection with these structures is quite correct, but the circumstances under which it has become so ought to be explained to the lay reader, who, without any such explanation, and so far as my observation extends none gives it, is apt to draw very erroneous conclusions touching these same 'primitive' ecclesiastical erections.

The ancient Celts had two ways of building. The use of stone for this purpose was known to them in very early times, but undoubtedly their favourite material was wood. They also used osiers to construct such temporary edifices as they needed; but I repeat that for the most part they used wood, oak by preference, for all 'serious' building, and, equally by preference, yew to finish off interiors. There were, of course, no parochial churches under the Celtic polity, which, on its religious side, was monastic; but there is no doubt that the ordinary rectangular Irish and Scots parish kirk (built of stone) of feudal and modern times is a lineal descendant of the wooden places of worship erected by the monks in Celtic times.

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The strong Celtic preference for wood, and especially oak, as building material long survived the general adoption of stone elsewhere. Indeed, so much was this the case that latterly building with wood came to be known as building 'Scots (that is Irish, as well as Caledonian) fashion'; and even those who exclaimed against the more perishable material because it was gone out of fashion generally, and was not fire-proof like stone, were constrained to allow, by the specimens they saw around them, that 'Scots fashion' could be, and often was, very beautiful. In the more considerable examples the Celtic wooden churches did not run to any great size, the largest probably not being greater than the biggest of the rectangular stone structures that marked the parish in feudal times, only, in the choicest specimens, they were, both within and without, beautifully decorated: there was much carving and gilding and paint-work to them; and the colours of them shone like the rainbow. The Gaelic name for Falkirk in Scotland is *An Eaglais Bhreac*, which is commonly translated 'The Spotted Church,' so that, originally, Falkirk must have had to itself one of the churches of many colours spoken of above.

Indeed, when all the facts relevant to this matter are duly weighed and considered, we may take it for sure that the Celts stuck to wood (long after other nations had laid it aside) for aesthetic, and not for utilitarian, reasons. They loved it as building material, and their souls revelled in the rich artistic effects they could work in it, especially as regards their more important sacred buildings. But equally characteristic of them was their attitude towards stone as building material. They thought it cold, severe, stiff, and unadaptable; and for these reasons they long preferred wood for their churches, though, in course of time, the example of other nations, and

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more especially bitter experience in the shape of the invading Norse, who burned the wooden churches by the score, led them to modify their attitude, and even at long last to build with stone in room of the more congenial, and if I may so express myself, 'religious' material.

Celtic monasticism is susceptible of a two-fold division so far as its temper or 'psychology' is concerned. Severe in spirit and tolerant of many forms of asceticism, yet there was a side to it that was warm, imaginative, impulsive, and sensuous; and this divided nature which Celtic monasticism had is symbolised forth to us by, on one hand, the carved and painted wooden churches, and, on the other, the simple stone-built oratories and cells. How severe, how self-denying, self-repressive, and austere Celtic monasticism was in spirit and aim is proved by the rule of St. Columbanus, whose communities in France were latterly superseded by Benedictine foundations, because it was found that the rules and pious observances enjoined by the saint were too severe. It is natural, then, that this strong tendency to austerity that marked the early Celtic Church should have been reflected in the architectural style of the cells and oratories to which, in obedience to rule, the monks were often obliged to retire for prayer and meditation. It was natural, too, in view of the choice there was as between stone on the one hand and wood on the other, that the former should have been used in preference to the latter in order to build these places of religious retreat, whose rudeness and stylistic primitiveness were planned deliberately, in pious imitation of the desert-caves which gave shelter to the first practisers of Christian monasticism.

Of the many wooden churches built by the Celts no trace, of course, remains: all perished utterly centuries ago; and slender written allusion, here and

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there, is all that now remains to enable us to imagine them, to set ourselves mentally in the place of those who with their own eyes saw them, and have left us word that they were beautiful. On the other hand, of Celtic religious buildings in stone many very interesting examples survive; and these all, without exception, are 'primitives' and austere of type, not because our Celtic ancestors knew not how to plan and build differently, but because, for the reasons glanced at above, they purposely kept these structures rude and plain.

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