The Book of the Deer

This is a vellum MS. of eighty-six folios, about six inches long by three broad, discovered in the University Library of Cambridge, by Mr Bradshaw, the librarian of the University. It had belonged to a distinguished collector of books, Bishop Moore of Norwich, and afterwards of Ely, whose library was presented to the University more than a century ago. The chief portion of the book is in Latin, and is said to be as old as the 9th century. This portion contains the Gospel of St John, and portions of the other three Gospels. The MS. also contains part of an Office for the visitation of the sick, and the Apostles' Creed. There is much interest in this portion of the book as indicative of the state of learning in the Celtic Church at the time. It shows that the ecclesiastics of that Church kept pace with the age in which they lived, that they knew their Bible, and could both write and read in Latin. The MS. belonged to a Culdee establishment, and is therefore a memorial of the ancient Celtic Church. It is a pity that we possess so few memorials of that Church, convinced as we are that, did we know the truth, many of the statements made regarding it by men of a different age, and belonging to a differently constituted ecclesiastical system, would be found to be unsupported by the evidence. It is strange that if the Culdee establishments were what many modern writers make them to have been, they should have had so many tokens of their popularity as this volume exhibits; and we know well that that Church did not fall before the assaults of a hostile population, but before those of a hostile king.

But the more interesting portion of the *Book of Deer*, in connection with our inquiry, will be found in the Gaelic entries on the margin and in the vacant spaces of the volume. These have all been given to the world in the recent publication of portions of the book by the Spalding Club, under the editorship of Dr John Stuart. Celtic scholars are deeply indebted to the Spalding Club for this admirable publication, and although many of them will differ from the editor in some of the views which he gives in his accompanying disquisitions, and even in some of the readings of the Gaelic, they cannot but feel indebted to him for the style in which he has furnished them with the original, for it is really so, in the plates which the volume contains. On these every man can comment for himself and from his own inferences. We have given us in this MS.

THE LEGEND OF DEER

Columcille acusdrostán mac cosgreg adálta tangator áhi marroalseg día doíb goníc abbordobóir acusbéde cruthnec robomormær bûchan aragínn acusessé rothídnaíg dóib ingathráig sáin insaere gobraíth ómormaer acusóthósec.tangator asááthle sen incathráig ele acusdoráten ricolumcille sì iàfallán dórath dé acusdorodloeg arinmormær .i.bédé gondas tabrád dó acusníthárat acusrogab mac dó galár iarnéré naglerêc acusrobomaréb act mádbec iarsén dochuíd inmormaer dattác naglerec gondendæs ernacde les inmac gondisád slánté dó acusdórat inedbaírt doíb uácloic intiprat goníce chlóic petti mic garnáit doronsat innernacde acustanic slante dó; Iarsén dorat collumcille dódrostán inchadráig sén acusrosbenact acusforacaib imbrether gebe tisaid ris nabad blienec buadacc tangator deara drostán arscartháin fri collumcille rolaboir columcille bedeár ánim ó húnn ímác_.

THE LEGEND OF DEER

(English translation)

Columcille and Drostan, son of Cosgreg, his pupil, came from I as God revealed to them to Aberdour, and Bede the Pict was Mormaor of Buchan before them, and it was he who gifted to them that town in freedom for ever from mormaor and toiseach. After that they came to another town, and it pleased Columcille, for it was full of the grace of God, and he asked it of the Mormaor, that is Bede,

that he would give it to him, and he would not give it,and a son of his took a sickness after refusing the clerics, and he was dead but a little. After that the Mormaor went to entreat of the clerics that they would make prayer for the son that health might come to him, and he gave as an offering to them from Cloch an tiprat (the stone of the well) as far as Cloch Pit mac garnad (the stone of Pitmacgarnad). They made the prayer, and health came to him. After that Collumcille gave that town to Drostan and he blessed it, and left the word, Whosoever comes against it, let him not be long-lived or successful. Drostan's tears came (Deara) on separtaing from Collumcille. Columcille said, Let Deer(tear) be its name from hence forward.

Such is the legend of the foundation of the old monastery of Deer, as preserved in this book, and written probably in the twelfth century. It was in all probability handed down from the close of the sixth or from a later period, but it must not be forgotten that a period of six hundred years had elapsed between the events here recorded and the record itself as it appears. It is hard to say whether Columba ever made this expedition to Buchan, or whether Drostan, whose name is in all likelihood British, lived in the time of Columba. The Aberdeen Breviary makes him nephew of the saint, but there is no mention of him in this or any other connection by early ecclesiastical writers, and there is every reason to believe that he belonged to a later period. It was of some consequence at this time to connect any such establishment as that at Deer with the name of Columba. There is nothing improbable in its having been founded by Drostan.

It is interesting to observe several things which are brought to light by this legend of the twelfth century. It teaches us what the men of the period believed regarding the sixth. The ecclesiastics of Deer believed that their own institution had been founded so early as the sixth century, and clearly that they were the successors of the founders. If this be true, gospel light shone among the Picts of Buchan almost as soon as among the people of Iona. It has been maintained that previous to Columba's coming to Scotland the country had felt powerfully the influence of Christianity and the legend of Deer would seem to corroborate the statement. From the palace of Brude the king, in the neighbourhood of Inverness, on to the dwelling of the Mormaor, or Governor of Buchan, Christianity occupied the country so early as the age of Columba. But this is a legend, and must not be made more of than it is worth. Then this legend gives us some more view of the civil policy of the sixth century, as the men of the twelfth viewed it. The chief governor of Buchan was Bede, the same name with that of the venerable Northumbrian historian of the eighth century. He is simply designated as Cruthnec (Cruithneach) or the Pict. Was this because there were other inhabitants in the country besides Picts at the time, or because they were Picts in contrast with the people of that day? The probability is, that these writers of the twelfth century designated Bede as a Pict, in contradistinction to themselves, who were probably of Scotic origin. Then the names in this document are of interest. Besides that of Bede, we have Drostan, and Cosgreg, his father, and Garnaid. Bede, Drostan, Cosgreg, and Garnaid are names not known in the Gaelic nomenclature of Scotland or Ireland. And there are names of places, Aberdobhoir, known as Aberdour to this day, Buchan also in daily use, Cloch in tiprat not known now, and Pit mac garnaid also become obsolete. Aberdobhoir (Aberdwfr) is purely a British name; Buchan, derived from the British *Bwch*, a cow, is also British; Pit mac garnaid, with the exception of the Mac, is not Gaelic, so that the only Gaelic name in the legend is Cloch in tiprat, a merely descriptive term. This goes far to show what the character of the early topography of Scotland really is.

Then there is light thrown upon the civil arrangements of the Celtic state. We read nothing of chiefs and clans, but we have Mormaors (great officers), and Toiseachs (leaders), the next officer in point of rank, understood to be connected with the military arrangements of the country, the one being head of the civil and the other of the military organisation. At this time there was a Celtic kingdom in Scotland, with a well established and well organised government, entirely different from what appears afterwards under the feudal system of the Anglo-Saxons, when the people became divided into clans, each under their separate chiefs, waging perpetual war with each other. Of all this the Book of Deer cannot and does not speak authoritatively, but it indicates the belief of the twelfth century with regard to the state of the sixth.

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Check out the The Book of Deer Project Web site.

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Bede is described as Cruthnec
(Cruithneach - that is correct. But it doesn't necessarily mean Pict. It was used as a general word for foreigner by the Gael,much as Walles was by the Anglo Saxons. Thereby,Bede is no more Pictish than William Wallas was Welsh!

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