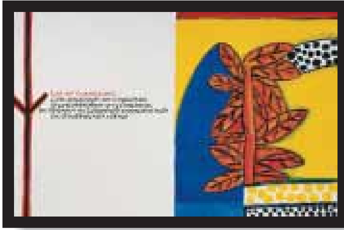

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Introduction

The connections between Scotland and Ireland are particularly close – geographically, historically, linguistically and culturally. So close that the channel between Ballycastle and Kintyre – traditionally known as the Sea of Moyle – has been described as "a river running through the middle of a land" rather than an ocean between two countries.

Any study of Scots and Irish connections must begin with our common ancestors: the ancient Celts. The Celtic languages which have survived to the present day are

a) the closely-related **Q-Celtic** languages: Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic and Manx Gaelic (which all but died out but is now being revived)

b) the closely-related **P-Celtic** languages: Welsh, Cornish (which died out as a native language in the late 19th century but which is also now being revived) and Breton.

(For more details of the relationships between these languages, cf. *The Celtic Languages.)*

We are not sure how the Celtic languages and culture reached the British Isles, but it seems likely that there were several migrations over hundreds of years.

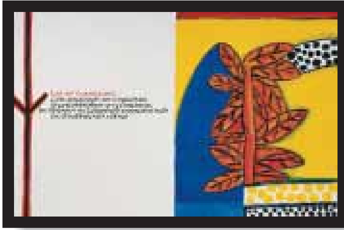
The Iron Age Celts (c. 700 BC - 100 AD)

By about 600 BC most of Europe from Austria northwards was inhabited by the Celts – the great iron-workers who advanced technology and gave the final phase of pre-history its name: the **Iron Age**. Our understanding of these early people has been built up from some rich archaeological finds. The Celts believed in the after-life. And so when they died their possessions were buried along with them, the extent and quality of the hoard depending upon how wealthy they were. Everything they might possibly need in the next life was buried – from wine and cups, pots and bowls, food and drink, to jewellery, weapons, funeral carts and even chariots.

And so we have ample evidence of a rich society, highly developed in the arts and craftsmanship. Agriculture was the basis of Celtic economy, but there is also evidence of widespread trade - export and and import across Europe and beyond. There are hundreds of fascinating books and internet sources for further research into the ancient Celts and their artefacts. What follows is a quick skim of the surface.

Iron Age settlements and strongholds

The Iron Age Celts lived in circular farmsteads or forts (*dùn*) with a cluster of houses surrounded by defensive ramparts – an earthen bank or stone wall, which may sometimes have been further reinforced by a wooden fence round its perimeter.



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The dwelling houses within the forts were round or rectangular, with conical roofs and simple wooden or drystane walls, sometimes reinforced with internal timber lacing and clay daub. They had unsophisticated interiors – a fire in the centre, with a hole in the thatch for a chimney, and, typically, a cauldron suspended from a cross-beam. Privacy was achieved by compartments or cubicles which could be screened off. The nobleman or king would have had a larger fort – with a larger dwelling house and more enclosed land.

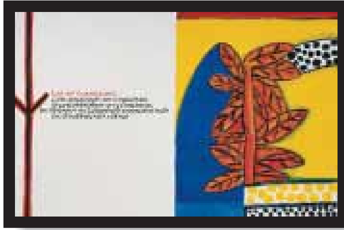
The *hill-forts* of Scotland and Ireland (e.g. Tap o' Noth, Rhynie and Navan) reflect the extent to which the Celts felt threatened by outside invasion. Their sites were chosen for their strong natural defence which was supplemented with concentric rings of ramparts, ditches and / or steep stone walls. Within these walls were permanent settlements – almost towns – which could house hundreds of people in wooden huts. The *crannòg,* or lake-dwelling, was another form of defensive construction common to both Ireland and Scotland: artificial man-made islands were formed in the middle of lakes or bogs, built with layers of peat and brushwood, logs, stones, etc. The island was then entirely fenced in with timbers. Access paths might be built across to the land, but more usually access was by boat – made from hollowed tree trunks. Most of the necessities of life were produced within the homestead: corn harvested and milled, clothing made, carpentry, pottery, and other artefacts manufactured. These crannògs can still be seen throughout Scotland and Ireland (e.g. Lough Neagh, Loch Lomond).

Physical characteristics

The Celts were described as tall, well-built, with fair skin, blue eyes, oval faces and reddish or fair hair. They were very concerned with their appearance – especially their hair, worn long by the warriors and bleached with lime-wash to make it thick and spiky as part of their battle array. Some Celtic men wore short beards, others shaved their faces. They were fond of jewellery and ornaments. They wore torques around their necks, bracelets, and their clothing was fastened with elaborate clasps (*fibulae*, or brooches). The men wore belts with highly decorated buckles, while the women usually wore girdles made of bronze chain. The women also seem to have used make-up, dyeing their eye-brows and reddening their cheeks and finger-nails. Some Celts wore cloaks, tunics, thonged sandals and trousers (*bracae*), while others wore a knee-length linen tunic (*lèine*) often elaborately fringed and decorated - with a belt or girdle and a long woollen cloak over this. Their brightly coloured cloth may be the fore-runner of clan tartans.

Celtic food

The ancient Celtic diet seems to have been rich and varied: meat (cattle, goats, pigs, wild boar), dairy products, fish and seaweed, wheat, barley, beans, herbs, wine, barley ale and mead. Cooking was carried out on open fires - meat roasted on the spit or stewed in a cauldron, braised on hot stones or boiled in large cooking troughs filled with water to which hot stones were added at intervals. Feasting was an integral part of Celtic society, as we shall see later.



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Celtic religion

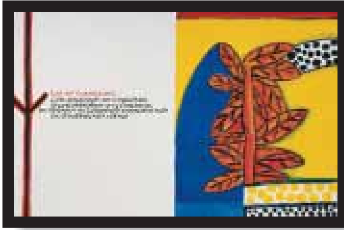
Celtic religion was inextricably bound up with nature. The Celts worshipped the earth as the primary source of fertility – the great universal mother. Their objects of devotion include wells, sacred trees, rivers. Indeed rivers may even have been seen as divine – e.g. the River Boyne: Boann was the name of a goddess and mother of the god Oengus. Belief in the sacredness of wells is still to be found to this day in both Scotland and Ireland. The ancient Celts also worshipped animal gods: the bull (Tauros), and the mare (Epona). They took care to conciliate with the sun and the moon; with thunder, lightning and rain; with fertility, birth, death, health and sickness.

The Celts thought the soul to be immortal, which rendered the warriors completely fearless in battle. The belief was also reflected in their burial chambers: the concept of taking your goods and chattels with you for the next incarnation. ***Tìr nan Òg*** (the Land of Youth) was the next world, situated somewhere on the islands beyond or under the sea. According to hero-tales, common to both Ireland and Scotland, men were sometimes allowed to visit it during their life – and sometimes never returned. (cf. *Stories from Irish-Scottish tradition / Ossian and Niamh*)

Some of our own superstitions can be traced back to ancient Celtic beliefs and rituals – for example our long-held belief in the mystical powers of the Rowan tree. Still planted near houses, and believed to protect the home from witches or fairies, many modern Scots will still tell you that you mustn't cut one down under any circumstances!

The Druids were the upholders of Celtic cults and beliefs. They conducted religious rituals, usually in sacred groves (nemetons), and were also legislators and healers, learned in astronomy and natural history. The Druids foretold the future in a number of ways. For example the "tarbh-fèis" or *bull feast* – a ritual used to choose a king – involved killing a white bull and eating "of its flesh and of its broth": in the sleep that followed "the form of the man to be made king will be revealed in a dream – his shape and his description and the manner of work that he was doing." Traces of such beliefs can still be found in modern folk-customs such as dreaming on a piece of wedding cake to find out about the man you are going to marry. The tarbh-fèis ritual was still carried out in the Gaelic tribe of which St Columba was a member, and in Iona the hill where St Columba is supposed to have met the angels is remembered locally as An Sìthean (*The Fairy Knoll*).

Standing stone circles are also deeply bound up with religious ritual - and we have not shaken off our superstition about stones: the **Stone of Destiny** still has mystical importance for the Scots. This famous icon came to Scotland from ancient Ireland. Called the Lia Fàil, it is believed to have been brought from Europe by a people called Tuatha Dè Danann (The People of the Goddess Dana) who inhabited Ireland before the Gaels supplanted them and sent them "underground" (much as the Scots supplanted the Picts…) The Lia Fàil was brought first to Dunadd in Argyll, then removed to Scone, before being purloined by King Edward 1st and taken to Westminster Abbey. The story is told in greater detail in *Stories from Irish-Scottish tradition*.



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These are all good examples of a Christian tradition growing up beside, and never quite replacing, pagan beliefs. Indeed, the same could be said of Christmas, which began as a mid-winter pagan festival. However it was not the most important festival to the Celts.

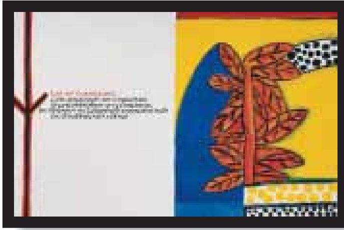
The main Celtic religious festivals were **Imbolc** (February 1st) **Beltane** (May 1st) **Lughnasa** (August 1st) and **Samhain** (November 1st). These festivals are all connected intimately with fertility and the rhythms of work – from seed sowing to harvest – and reflect the agrarian way of life of the Celts. At Samhain – the beginning of winter – it was believed that the barrier between this world and the otherworld was removed, and so bonfires were lit to ward off the evil spirits. Conversely at the beginning of summer, Beltane (May 1st) bonfires were lit once again and the cattle driven between them to cleanse them of evil winter influences. Beltane fires also symbolised close communal spirit: people would light their own hearth-fires with an ember from the communal fire, and people of neighbouring communities would be linked by fires burning on hilltops. Samhain is reflected in today's Hallowe'en (Oidhche Shamhna), Lughnasa (harvest time) is linked with the Scots festival Lammas, and on May 1st people have been known to go out to their gardens and wash their faces in the morning dew!

The Romans in Britain

The Romans invaded the British Isles from 43 AD onwards. However they never infiltrated Ireland or most of "Scotland" (as it was to become later). The north and west of Scotland was almost entirely untouched by the legions, and in the south of the country their influence was only sporadic. There are no secular Roman buildings in Scotland, no sign of Roman literacy, little evidence of trade between Romans and the north British tribes. This lack of Roman influence holds true also in Wales, Cornwall and, of course, Ireland. Three great Celtic warriors who resisted the Romans are remembered to this day: **Caratacus** (who fought the Romans from the mountains of what we nowadays call Wales), **Boudicaa** (or Boadicea – Queen of the Iceni tribe, in today's Norfolk) and the Caledonian warrior **Calgacus** (*the swordsman*) who fought against the Roman leader Agricola at the Battle of Mons Graupius – around what is now the Hill of Bennachie in Huntly. The Caledonians seem to have been the ancestors of the Picts – or at least of one of the Pictish tribes.

The peoples of Ancient Scotland

In Roman times the Celtic people known as the **Picts** dominated the lands north of the Forth-Clyde line, while the **Britons** occupied the lands south of the Forth-Clyde line. The Picts and the Britons seem to have spoken different forms of P-Celtic (akin to today's Welsh) (cf *The Celtic languages*). From about the 4th century these peoples were invaded and/or colonised in the West by another Celtic people – the Gaelic, or Q-Celtic, speaking **Scots** from Ireland – and in the South-east by the non-Celtic **Angles** from north-west Europe.



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Out of these groups – the Celtic Picts, Britons and Scots, and the Germanic Angles – the nation now known as Scotland emerged. (The Vikings also invaded Scotland, and had a considerable influence on the North and West, but their main activities took place at a later date.)

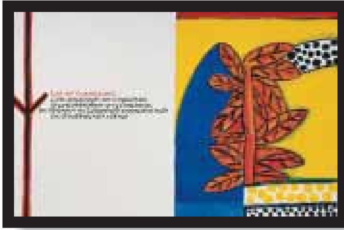
'Pict' may simply have been a Roman nickname ('painted people') for all the tribes of North Britain. Painting or tattooing seems to have been carried out (a) for 'magical' reasons (e.g. to ward off sickness and wounds); (b) to indicate rank; and (c) simply to decorate. We know very little about the Picts until they come up against other peoples, as, for example, when St Columba visited Bridei, or Brude, King of the Picts, at his stronghold in Nairn in 565 AD. Adomnàn's *Life of St Columba* describes Bridei's court: its council, priesthood, slaves, messengers, royal treasury, custom of fosterage, stable family units, burial ceremonies etc. Adomnàn's descriptions contrast sharply with the Roman picture of a "strange, barbaric people".

Their art is the most lasting and extraordinary legacy of the Picts – suggesting that their lost oral culture would also have been extremely rich and original. Their carvings demonstrate very fine craftsmanship – a development from linear drawing on stone to deeper incision and eventually relief carving. These carvings provide us with a picture of the Pict as huntsman, fisherman, soldier, rider – with long flowing hair and a long cloak over tunic or leggings. One Pictish hoard of highly-decorated silver was discovered in St Ninian Isle in Shetland – suggesting that they were not a poverty-stricken people. What is perhaps most interesting about the Picts is their apparent retention of so much of their native culture even after they espoused Christianity.

Of the "Welsh"-speaking **Britons** in southern Scotland, three kingdoms survived the departure of the Romans: Rheged (around the south-west), Gododdin (around Lothian) and Strathclyde (around the River Clyde). Of these the most successful was **Strathclyde**, whose headquarters were at Dunbarton (*Dùn Bhreatainn* – fort of the Britons). It stretched from Loch Long to the upper part of the Forth, and southwards towards the Solway. It defended its frontiers in the north against the Picts and the Scots; in the south-east it fought off Anglian invasion from Northumbria. The proliferation of hillforts across this region suggests a society which was always on the alert for attack.

The **Angles** were a Germanic people. They began raiding north-east Britain during the Roman occupation. By the 6th century they had established a settlement called Bernicia (in today's Northumbria) which gradually extended its influence across Tweeddale and, eventually, further north and west. In 685 the Picts drove them from all lands north of the Forth – which remained the frontier until the 9th century when Pict and Angle alike faced the threat of the Vikings. Lothian was the only place in Scotland to retain discernible Anglian influence alongside native British culture.

The **Scots** The Roman writers called Ireland 'Scotia' and its inhabitants 'Scotti'. The Scots were the Gaelic-speaking people who came from Antrim in Ireland to colonise the West of



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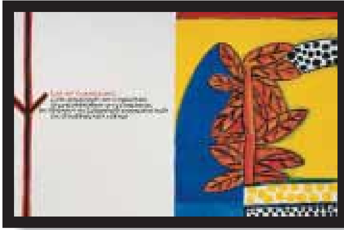
Scotland in the 5th and 6th centuries. In about 500 AD Fergus Mac Eirc left his fort in Dunseverick, Dal Riata – the northern region of what is nowadays called County Antrim – with his brothers Loarn and Angus and other members of his 'Scottish' tribe. They took up permanent residence in the area nowadays called Argyll. Fergus's new homeland also became known as Dal Riata – or Dalriada – and later "the territory of the Gaels": *Earra-Ghaidheal* (Argyll). The influence of Scots Gaelic culture was very much strengthened by the fact that it was also the vehicle for the spread of Christianity.

The Introduction of Christianity

Christianity was first introduced into the south of present-day Scotland at the end of the 4th century by **Ninian**, a P-Celtic or Welsh-speaking Briton who had trained in Rome before becoming Bishop of Whithorn and converting the southern Picts. In the 5th century another Welsh-speaking Briton – **Patrick** – crossed the sea to Ireland, where he had to learn the Gaelic tongue in order to carry out his highly successful mission. In 563 AD **Columba** (in Gaelic *Colm Cille,* or 'Dove of the Church') came to Scotland from Ireland, founded his monastery in the island of Iona off the west coast of Mull, and converted the northern Picts. He is remembered as a priest, a pilgrim, a poet, a scholar, an artist, a man of action, an explorer, a warrior, a peace-maker, and a great missionary.

Columba was born in 521 AD, in what is now called Gartan, County Donegal. His first name was Criomthann ("Fox") which suggests that he may have had red hair. His family was of the Gaelic aristocracy – indeed Columba might have grown up to be a king if he had not answered his calling and become a Christian monk. He was highly educated, both in the skills and teachings of the Christian Church and in the ancient Gaelic traditions of his own family. It is said that while he was studying to be a monk he fell in love with a beautiful psalter which belonged to his superior, St Finnian (or Fintan). He coveted the manuscript so much that he sat up copying it secretly every night for a year. When his copy was discovered he found himself in deep trouble with the law. He was brought before King Diarmad, who denounced him as a criminal for infringing copyright. "To every cow her calf, to every book its copy", the King decreed. Mortified by this disgrace, Columba is said to have led a battle against King Diarmad, before setting sail for Scotland in his *curach* or coracle – a little boat of wicker and hide – with a number of companions, determined never to set foot in Ireland again.

According to tradition, Columba landed first in the Island of Oronsay, but could still see Ireland on the horizon so journeyed onwards. Next, we are told, he saw the Island of Lismore and wanted to settle there, but found himself in competition with his companion Molua who was also looking for a retreat. The two friends decided to race their curachs: whoever reached Lismore first should make it his home. Molua won, but only by resorting to a rather extreme ruse – cutting off his finger and throwing it ashore!



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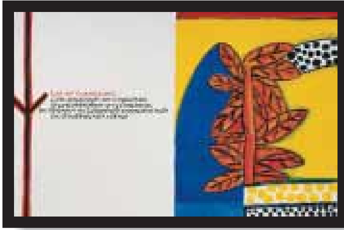
And so Columba left his friend Molua in Lismore and sailed on until he reached the Island of Iona, and there he determined to stay. It suited his purpose, being well-situated off the coast of Argyll yet hidden from Ireland. A hill in Iona is still called *Cùl ri Eireann – "my back to Ireland"*.

Iona was formally granted to Columba by King Conall of Dalriada, who was a kinsman of Columba's. He and his followers began at once to erect their monastic dwellings – a church, refectory, and cells – using wattles and wood. Two years after his arrival in Iona Columba took to his curach once more, accompanied again by a small escort of monks: this time he sailed to Mull, crossed the island, then sailed to the mainland of Scotland. From there he travelled all the way to Nairn in the North-east to fulfil his ambition of spreading Christianity to the powerful northern Picts. The journey to the Castle of King Bridei was an arduous one – 150 miles across woods, bogs and moors, mountains, rivers and lochs.

When he arrived at King Bridei's stronghold the castle gates were firmly closed and bolted. But according to Adomnàn, Columba's biographer, the saint raised his cross and the bolts flew back, allowing the monks to enter the castle. Amazed at such a miracle, the king listened reverently to Columba and then allowed the saint to baptise him. His men followed his example and Christianity soon spread to the rest of the Pictish nation: Columba had accomplished his mission. Churches and monasteries were erected in the saint's name all over Scotland – though their presence does not necessarily mean that he himself visited all these places or even that they were established in his time. However we know that he did journey far and wide to spread his beliefs – from Buchan in the north-east to Glasgow, where he met St. Mungo, the apostle of Strathclyde. But he always returned to his monastery in Iona.

Columba went back to Ireland at least once, but he is said to have put soil from Iona in his shoes so that he could argue that he had never actually left Scotland! His reason for returning to his native land was to speak at a great legislative assembly of nobles and clergy, known as the Convention of Drumcett. Here he pled successfully that Dalriada should be granted independence from the jurisdiction (and taxes!) of the High Kings of Ireland at Tara. He also argued eloquently against Church suppression of the work of the bards, which – though it reflected an older, pagan tradition – was an essential part of Gaelic culture. As a result of Columba's intercession a precedent was set which proved to be of immense importance for Gaelic culture. Over the centuries which followed, the monastic scribes wrote down and preserved not only the Gospels but also the great heroic stories, in addition to praise-poetry for the chiefs and nature poetry – a fragment of which (4. *Scél lem duib*) is contained in *Leabhar Mòr na Gàidhlig*.

Columba himself was both a poet and a scribe, who worked tirelessly transcribing books. It's said that he wrote three hundred books with his own hand, two of which, the Book of Durrow and a psalter, have been preserved to the present day. He died in 597 AD and was buried within the monastic enclosure in Iona.



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But when the **Vikings** began invading the island the relics of St. Columba were taken to Ireland, to the church of Downpatrick, for safekeeping. It is also said that the *Book of Kells* – a brilliantly illustrated manuscript with highly ornamented motifs depicting the four Gospels – was created in Iona, but removed to Ireland to save it from the Viking raiders. Some illustrations from this book – upon which the concept of *Leabhar Mòr na Gàidhlig* is based – are included in the E-book: 5 *Book of Kells (Images and explanatory text).*

Stories about St Columba

Many legends and stories have been handed down about the life of St Columba. One of my favourites is about Columba's friend **Molua**, who raced Columba to Lismore, now living in his hermitage with no companions at all except a cock, a mouse and a fly.

He wrote a letter to Columba to tell him all about his little "flock" or "congregation": how the cock used to wake him up for Matins at midnight every day, the mouse would nibble his ear to make sure that he slept no longer than five hours, and the fly would walk along the psalter as he read to keep his place until he returned to the book the next time. But time passed, and Molua wrote again to Columba, this time telling him that his flock had all died, leaving him alone in the world. Columba wrote back as follows:

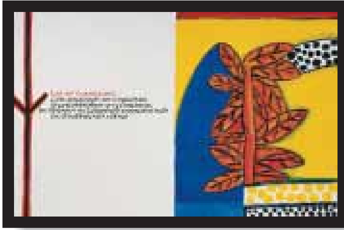
"Dear Brother Molua, you must not be dismayed at the death of your flock. For verily I say unto you that misfortune only exists where there is wealth."

This may have offered poor Molua small comfort at the time, but it actually expresses the philosophy of the ancient Irish hermits very well. For they lived utterly unworldly lives, seeking refuges far and wide – from the Faroe Islands to North Africa – in which to pursue lives wholly dedicated to prayer and solitude. The Scottish town Dysart is supposed to derive from the word "desert": a place of utter isolation.

Another – less serious – story tells us how the plaice came to be a flat fish! Columba was walking on the seashore in the Island of Tiree when his foot slipped on a plaice. Without hesitation he decreed that the fish should have both its eyes on one side from then on so that it could see better and avoid any more nasty accidents!

But the best story of all is about St Columba and the Loch Ness Monster. Here is my version of it:-

When Columba was journeying through the land of the Picts towards King Bridei's castle, he found it necessary to cross Loch Ness. Upon reaching its banks he noticed some local people burying a dead man. They explained that the man had been swimming when a great beast reared up out of the water and mauled him savagely. Although they had sailed out to rescue him, they could do nothing but haul in his lifeless corpse with their boat hooks.



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Columba listened with interest to this tale of woe, but replied that he and his monks had to cross the Loch, monster or no. He then astonished them all by calmly sending one of his companions off to swim across the loch and bring back a curach that was moored on the faraway bank. Without hesitation the monk took off his clothes and dived into the icy loch. Sensing the presence of a tasty stranger the monster surged up to the surface, and swam open-mouthed towards the monk. As the Picts and monks, watched, horror-struck, Columba calmly raised his hand and halted the monster in its tracks, saying: "Stop! God does not wish His creatures to eat one another but to love one another!" The Monster was so overcome with remorse that she assisted the monk to bring the curach over the loch, and then helped convey Columba and his companions across to the far side.

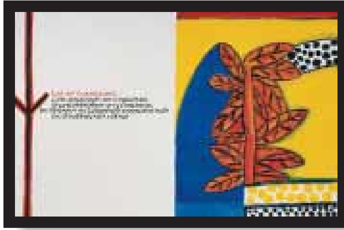
Vikings

From about the end of the 8th century raiders from Scandinavia began harrying the coasts of Scotland and Ireland in high-prowed wooden long-boats, often decorated by a carved animal head, with a single mast and one square sail. The boats had a row of shields along each side, just above the oars.

The Christian monastaries, so often situated on remote coastal or island positions, were highly vulnerable to the marauding Norsemen. The raiders found rich pickings among the monastic treasures: beautifully patterned manuscripts with jewel-encrusted metal covers; staffs decorated with gold and jewels; intricately designed caskets for holding sacred bells; brooches and other relics – like Columba's beautiful Brecbennach, which became known as the Monymusk Reliquary after it was removed from Iona.

The Vikings first sacked Iona in the year 795, then again in 802, when they burnt the monastery down. Four years later they returned and massacred sixty-eight monks. The monastery was rebuilt, but was burned down once again in 825, and all the monks were once again killed. St Columba's relics – including the saint's bones – were hidden, but it was obvious by now that they would never be safe in Iona. And so they were sent away forever – some to Kells in Ireland and some to Dunkeld in Pethshire. This effectively transferred the spiritual centre of Scotland from the islands of Argyll to the mainland Highlands, and removed it further away from Irish influence.

Meanwhile the Norse raiders continued to plunder and gradually began to settle among the indigenous people. About 990 King Harald of Norway annexed Orkney and Shetland and handed them over to Earl Sigurd, then enforced his authority in the Western Isles and the mainland of Caithness, Sutherland Ross and Cromarty. To the south the Norse captured Dumbarton, capital of the British kingdom of Strathclyde. But the most lasting influence of the Norsemen was in the Northern Isles and in the Hebrides – where the placenames are largely Norse.



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A United Scotland

The peoples of "Scotland" (Scots, Picts and Britons) continued to ward off not only the Vikings in the north and west but also the Angles from Northumbria in the south east. In these early struggles against "English" aggression the most famous battle was Nechtansmere (in Dunnichen, Angus) in 685 AD – a Pictish victory which deflected the Northumbrian threat to the Scots and Britons as well.

Power struggles recurred among the three rival peoples themselves between the 6th and 9th centuries. The Scots' attempts to expand eastwards were stoutly resisted by the Picts, and by 741 AD the Pictish Oengus (Angus) Mac Fergus had taken control of Dalriada once again.

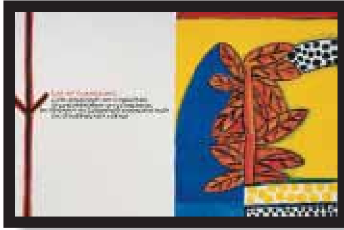
These on-going struggles were finally resolved with the union of Scots and Picts in **843** AD, when the Scots king, **Kenneth MacAlpin**, was crowned at Scone. The new kingdom became known as Alba in Gaelic, Scotia in Latin.

Kenneth initiated a succession of invasions of the lands to the south: Lothian, still part of Northumbria, was eventually won by Malcolm II in 1018 at the Battle of Carham. Malcolm also befriended Sigurd, Earl of Orkney, who had converted to Christianity. Strathclyde eventually came into the Union peacefully in 1034 on the accession of Duncan of Strathclyde (Malcolm II's grandson) to the Scottish throne. Macbeth famously killed Duncan six years later and usurped the throne, but Duncan's son Malcolm escaped to England, returning with the help of the Northumbrians to overthrow Macbeth. In **1058** this Malcolm (III) known as **Malcolm Canmore** (*Ceann Mòr / Big Head*) became the first king of a truly united Scotland.

Gaelic was then the language of the whole of Scotland. But its influence began to decline from then on. Malcolm Canmore married an Anglo-Saxon princess who spoke no Gaelic: Margaret, the sister of Prince Edgar Atheling, who had fled to Scotland to escape the Norman Conquest. Margaret was a saintly and pious woman, but had an iron will and a determination to change the things that did not please her about the Church and Court of Scotland. She imported English fashions and customs into Scotland, and encouraged English nobles to make their home here. This was the beginning of a long and gradual decline which – combined with other factors (notably legislation against the language, urbanisation and the growth of trade) led to the replacement of Gaelic with English in large areas of Scotland.

Tighearnas nan Eilean - the Lordship of the Isles

The structure of society in early Dalriada was almost identical to that of Ireland at the time, and owed its identity to a great extent to an even earlier society – that of the Iron Age Celts.



Irish-Scottish connections

1- IRISH-SCOTTISH CONNECTIONS

But where the Celtic heroes of old were horse-riding, chariot-driving hunters and warriors, their religion, art and literature firmly rooted in the natural world about them, a new independent-spirited Gaelic aristocracy emerged in the Hebrides, whose power was based on their mastery of the sea.

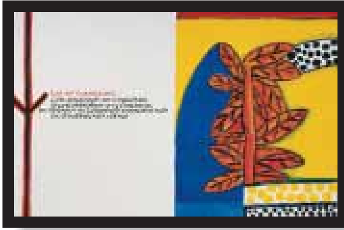
In the 11th century the Isles were ruled by the Norse. But at the beginning of the 12th century there began a struggle to regain the island territories for the Scots: the leader was Somerled, the Gaelic Lord of Argyll. After a naval battle in 1156 Somerled gained control of the southern Isles (including the Isle of Man) and became known as *Righ Innse Gall* – the King of the Hebrides. Somerled had two sons, Dugall and Ranald. Dugall's descendants became known as the MacDougalls (or Clan Dougall). Ranald, had two sons, one of whom was Donald, from whom was descended the great family known as Clan Donald (the MacDonalds) while the other was Ruairidh from whom was descended Clan Ruairidh (the MacRuries).

Clan Donald supported the struggle for Scottish independence against the English and fought with Bruce at Bannockburn, but Clan Dougall opposed Bruce and lost most of their lands after the Wars of Independence. Clan Donald took over the lands of Clan Ruairidh when John of Islay married the heiress of Clan Ruairidh. Later he strengthened his position further by divorcing his wife and marrying the daughter of King Robert II. He became known as **The Lord of the Isles** and, by the time he died in 1387, he controlled the whole of the Hebrides, except Skye, and large areas of the mainland.

The Lords of the Isles, with their powerful fleet of fast galleys and impregnable castles strategically placed along the coast looking out over the sea, ruled their own territories more or less independently of the Kings of Scotland, and are often portrayed by historians as barbaric threats to national security. However the Lordship while it lasted was a stable society with its own strictly upheld laws (the "brehon" laws) and jurisdiction. The Lords of the Isles were patrons of the arts and learning: literature, music, medicine, genealogy, poetry, crafts (metal, wood and stone). They maintained professional, trained, aristocratic poets, musicians and story-tellers, paying highly for their services. A constant cultural exchange took place between Ireland and Scotland. The learned Gaelic orders in both countries used the same written (literary) language long after the spoken (vernacular) languages of Ireland and Scotland began to diverge. Poets and musicians attended the bardic schools in Ireland to train. This has been described as "The Golden Age of Gaelic". As late as the 17th century a Lewis poet / musician went to Ireland to complete his training: Roderick Morison, *An Clàrsair Dall* (c.1646 - 1713).

Celtic hospitality

Recognition of the importance of open-handedness to visitors (whoever they be, friend or foe) underpins Gaelic custom to this day. Legendary Highland hospitality, legendary Irish "craic", legendary Irish and Scots generosity to charity, the tendency towards socialism – arguably they all emanate from the same source, the ancient Celts.



Irish-Scottish connections

1- IRISH-SCOTTISH CONNECTIONS

Hospitality was the corner-stone of Celtic life. Anyone who failed to extend hospitality to a stranger would be disgraced and dishonoured. The noblest chief who failed in his duty to patronise the professional bards could lose his good name and reputation by having a biting satire composed about him.

Feasting was surrounded by elaborate etiquette procedures: the seating-plan was decided by rank and heroic stature and to get it wrong could cause fighting and even death. Also jealously fought-over was the "Hero's Portion" – the best piece of meat which was reserved (like "Man of the Match") as a prize for prowess in hunt or battle.

During and after the feast, entertainment was provided in the big hall by bards, musicians and story-tellers (*seanchaidhean*). Such entertainment was still enjoyed among ordinary Gaelic-speaking people right into the 20th century. People would congregate in someone's house, in what became known as a **cèilidh**. This was rather different from today's *cèilidh* – a concert or cabaret-dance. Language was its *raison d'etre* rather than music – which was merely one vehicle for the words, as is clear from this account from the late 19th century:-

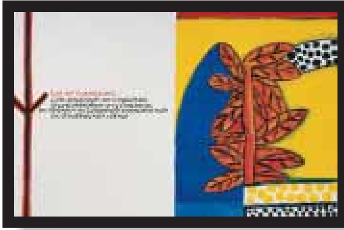
> "The cèilidh is a literary entertainment where stories and tales, poems and ballads, are rehearsed and recited, songs are sung, conundrums are put, proverbs are quoted, and many other literary matters are related and discussed."

The writer (**Alexander Carmichael**) goes on to tell how people would decide whose house to go to – the house of this story-teller or that – depending on the skills of the seanchaidh. Sometimes the stories could go on in "serial" form, night after night. The ancient Celtic tales and sagas were remembered throughout Gaelic-speaking Scotland and told right up into the 20th century:-

> "In a crofting townland there are several story-tellers who recite the oral literature of their predecessors. The story-tellers of the Highlands are as varied in their subjects as are literary men and women elsewhere. One is a historian narrating events simply and concisely; another is a historian with a bias, colouring his narrative according to his leanings. One is an inventor, building fiction upon fact, mingling his materials, and investing the whole with the charm of novelty and the halo of romance. Another is a reciter of heroic poems and ballads, bringing the different characters before the mind as clearly as the sculptor brings the figure before the eye. One gives the songs of the of the chief poets, with interesting accounts of their authors, while another, generally a woman, sings, to weird airs, beautiful old songs, some of them Arthurian."

The ancient Irish sagas from which these Scottish folk-versions (both recited and sung) grew and developed can be divided into two main groups: the Ulster Cycle and the Fenian Cycle.

The **Ulster** (or **Ultonian**) **Cycle** is in every way a reflection of a "Heroic Age". Its heroes are larger than life – even god-like in their powers.



Irish-Scottish connections

1- IRISH-SCOTTISH CONNECTIONS

Historically the Ultonian stories reflect the aristocratic warrior society of Iron Age culture, still flourishing in Ireland long after it had died on the Continent: tribal warfare, weapons, chariots, head-hunting, feasts, assemblies, social order, religious beliefs, rituals etc. It tells the story of King Conchobhar (Conor) and his royal court (ràth) at Emhain Mhacha (Navan, near present-day Armagh). The principal hero is Cù Chulainn ("The Hound of Coolin") and the main story (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*) tells of a conflict between the Ulstermen and the people of Connaught, led by Queen Maeve. The rest of the saga describes events in the lives of the Ulstermen: e.g. *The Exile of the Sons of Uisne* – the story of the tragic *"Deirdre of the sorrows"* and *The Boyhood Deeds of Cù Chulainn*: the initiation into heroic life of the man destined to become the greatest warrior of all (cf. *Stories from Irish-Scottish tradition*).

The **Fenian Cycle** tells of the adventures of the warrior leader **Fionn MacCumhaill** (Finn McCool or, in some Scottish versions, Fingal) and his followers – a band of warriors and hunters known as the Fianna – and very reminiscent of the great Brythonic hero, **Arthur** and his Knights of the Round Table (claimed by the Welsh, the Cornish and the Scots of the Eastern Lowlands). The Fianna are represented as the defenders of Ireland against external invaders – which may echo the troubled times of the Viking and / or other, earlier, invasions. Membership of the warrior class required proof of exceptional prowess and dexterity. Their number included Diarmad (who eloped with Finn's wife Gràinne), and the poet Oisín (or Ossian – Fionn's son).

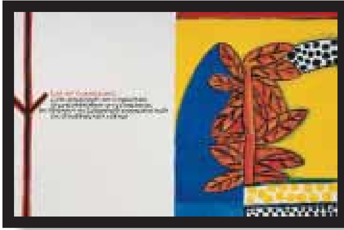
Ossian's elopement with the beautiful goddess Niamh to *Tìr nan Òg* (*The Land of the Ever-young*) and his subsequent return (like Rip Van Winkle, after all his contemporaries were long dead) is told in the 12th century cycle *Agallamh na nSeanórach* (*The Old Men's Colloquy*). Ossian retraces his steps across Ireland recalling the deeds of the Fianna centuries earlier: but now he is an old man, condemned never to return to Tìr nan Òg…(cf. *Stories from Irish-Scottish tradition*).

Scotland (Alba) features in many of these ancient Irish tales: Deirdre and her lover flee to Alba; Cù Chulainn's induction as a warrior included training by a fierce female warrior who lived in Skye across a terrible unpassable bridge! And we in Scotland have evolved our own versions of the stories which vary – sometimes considerably – from their Irish counterparts.

My own versions of some of these stories are retold for you in *Stories from Irish - Scottish tradition*, and many of the poems in the *Leabhar Mòr* Pack reflect them too: e.g. *Christy Ring*, about a great hurley player whose prowess is likened to Cù Chulainn.

Modern Irish / Scottish connections

Perhaps the foregoing will have sparked off your own thoughts as to present day connections between our two countries.



Irish-Scottish connections

1- IRISH-SCOTTISH CONNECTIONS

Pupils may be encouraged to offer these for themselves – from Celtic football team, Shinty / Hurling, and the epic Celtic struggles of the Five Nations Championships, to place-names (Lough / Loch etc), poetry, music and dance-styles, physical characteristics, conviviality, literary styles and – of course – art.

Not just the common “literary” themes that crop up in, say, Henry and Hornel’s “*The Druids bringing home mistletoe*” or John Duncan’s “*St Bride*” but the deep underlying influence of decorative Celtic art (with its interlacing patterns based on organic nature themes) upon Scottish arts and crafts, jewellery, etc. and which, arguably, underlies the whole Art Nouveau movement.