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# The FURROW

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Catherine Swift

## European Pilgrimage Walks – a personal perspective

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*Sét no tiag, téiti Crist; crích i mbéo, bíth cen tríst  
Tréodae rom-ain airm i n-an; Athair, Macc, Spirit Glán  
Tiagait liumm – láthair ndil; ar cech caingen, aingil gil  
Ar cech caingin, ata-teoch; narom-tairre, ním o neoch*

The path I walk – Christ walks it. May the land in which I am be without sorrow.

May the Trinity protect me wherever I stay, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Bright angels walk with me in every matter – dear presence !

In every matter I pray to them that no one's venom may reach me.

This is the first verse of an Old Irish poem surviving in a fifteenth-century manuscript in the British Museum. It is followed by a note: *Coimgi Coluim Cille ann sin i a gabail ac loigi ocus hic ergi ocus ag dul for sed ocus is adamra*: 'There is the protection of Colum Cille. And it is to be said at lying and on rising, and when going on a journey, and it is a wonder'.<sup>1</sup>

Colum Cille famously left Ireland and founded the monastery of Iona on a small island in the middle of the Hebridean sea-lanes. Our scanty evidence suggests he left Ireland in 563; that Iona was founded relatively quickly and that he died there in 597 after a career which, at various stages, involved journeys ranging from the Irish midlands to the north of the Great Glen in Scotland. His obit in the *Annals of Inisfallen* describes his life abroad as a pilgrimage: 'Repose of Colum Cille on Sunday night on the 9th June in the 35th year of his *peregrinatio*' a word translated by the editor as exile.

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1 Carney, James. "Three Old Irish accentual poems". *Ériu* 22, (1971): 23-29. I have reworded Carney's translation slightly.

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In early Irish penitentials, exile is evoked relatively rarely as a form of redemption and is reserved for the most serious of sins such as homicide by clerics. A short text entitled *Tres canones hibernici* has more references than most; they expand the possible occasions for exile as penance to include theft from a saint's shrine, theft from a church housing a Gospel book and wounding of a bishop or a member of his household.<sup>2</sup> On the whole, however, exile and pilgrimage are not found often in the Irish penitentials and the frequent reference to *peregrinatio perennis* or perpetual pilgrimage among the few examples seems close to the thinking of John Cassian. He argued that true monks should abandon their kinsfolk and live amongst strangers so as to focus the desires of their heart entirely on Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In the *Annals of Ulster*, there are various references to *peregrinatio* or *peregrini* (those who undertook *peregrinatio*). These include travellers killed by Munstermen (714); a king of Connacht who gave up his sword for a clerical staff and travelled to Iona (787); the leader of the community of Bangor who travelled to Rome and died there as an *apostolicus doctor* (929); the leader of Aghaboe who died on pilgrimage in Armagh (1004) and two aristocratic women who did likewise, including the daughter of Brian Boru (1063 and 1073 respectively). Since Brian was in his early seventies when he died at Clontarf in 1014, it seems probable that his daughter was living in retirement in Armagh for some time before she died. These examples can be supplemented by entries referring to those going on their *ailithre*. This is the Irish word for pilgrimage, created from a compound of *aile* and *tír*: 'another territory'. Those on *ailithre* could include a royal married couple such as Laidgnén mac Maelain, king of the Gailenga and his queen who died in Rome in 1051. Pilgrimage in early Ireland, therefore, often meant a life spent apart from one's kin in a church settlement rather than referring to the journey itself in the way that it is commonly used today.

A gloss in a vernacular law tract on the pledging of goods links the lay population explicitly with pilgrimage. *Bretha im Fuillemna Gell* states that a man who has pledged perpetual chastity is not entitled to pledge the weapons which he once used. This individual is then further specified as belonging to the category of *áthlaích frist-tongat dia pecthaib .i. dul in n-ailithre* – 'ex-laymen who renounce their sins, that is, those who go on pilgrimage'. Furthermore, it was not appropriate that such a person should live in a fortified settlement or *dún*: instead, he should live in a simple

2 See Bieler, Ludwig. *The Irish penitentials*. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1966), 86, 98, 114, 120, 182, 228, 267.

3 Ramsey, Boniface, ed. *John Cassian: The Conferences*. (New Jersey : Paulist Press, 1997) 826-827 (XXIV 2).

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house constructed by churchmen.<sup>4</sup> Again, the focus is on a static lifestyle of renunciation and prayer rather than on the particular experience of a journey.

## THE CAMINO

The understanding of pilgrimage in *modern* Europe is very different, shaped in part by the phenomenal popularity of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. First referenced in the mid tenth century, this was initially developed through the provision of local hospices during the reign of Sancho the Great of Navarre. By 1120, the vast number of travellers involved astonished Islamic ambassadors travelling to the court at Léon.<sup>5</sup> By the later nineteenth century, the pilgrimage had fallen in popularity but in 1879, Cardinal Payá announced the discovery of the apostle's bones behind the cathedral's main altar and the festivities around the 25th July (the festival of St James), once again began to attract national and indeed international crowds. In the 1930s and 40s, the Falangists formally re-established the symbolic association between the cult of St James and the institutions of the Spanish state and in the Holy Year of 1948, over half a million pilgrims visited the shrine. These mainly arrived by bus and truck but included over a hundred members of the Spanish University Union (SEU) who undertook a thirty-three-day march carrying tents from Roncesvalles.

This symbolically began a new focus on the traverse of northern Spain as one of the great routes of western Europe rather than simply concentrating on celebrations in Santiago itself. In 1962, the government declared the entire route to be a national patronate under the auspices of the Directorate-General of Fine Arts and in 1965, certificates for those who had travelled at least three hundred kilometres on foot began to be issued. By the 1980s, travellers were numbered in millions and in 1988, the intergovernmental Council of Europe designated it the first European Cultural Itinerary.<sup>6</sup>

Though initially the majority had travelled frugally, seeking shelter either in religious-run hostels or in refuges built by local government, a whole infrastructure of hotels, luggage-bearers and guides has now grown up so that the journey can be undertaken with whatever degree of comfort is deemed preferable. At the same

4 Etchingam, Colmán *Church organisation AD 650-1000*. (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999), 388 quoting Daniel Binchy, ed, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 570:10-12.

5 Sumption, Jonathan *The Age of Pilgrimage: the medieval journey to God* (New Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2003), 162-4.

6 Pack, Sasha D., "Revival of the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: The Politics of Religious, National, and European Patrimony, 1879-1988", *Journal of Modern History* 82.2 (2010), 335-367.

time, it is clear that there is still a strongly Catholic ethos among many of those who undertake it and group pilgrimages are often organised by Catholic youth groups, parishes, monastic leaders and others. It is difficult to quantify whether a high percentage of pilgrims are undertaking it for religious reasons. In 2014 a study disseminated 470 questionnaires in an attempt to answer this question. Interestingly, in terms of the study's methodology, the questionnaires were only distributed to those staying in the cheaper hostels and among Catholic priests attending to the spiritual needs of participants. The sample included people of over forty different nationalities with an average age of 32 (an age which may well reflect the decision to focus on less comfortable facilities). The conclusions derived from this study were that the majority of pilgrims were not particularly interested in 'traditional religiosity' but that the strongest discernible motivation was a more secular, more individualistic and less defined interest in spiritual growth. Another strong factor was the seeking of what was seen as a valuable experience which tested personal limits and allowed for adventures.<sup>7</sup>

#### OTHER ROUTES

Motivations for the creation and promotion of long-distance modern pilgrimage routes elsewhere can also be identified. The route to Santiago as a European Cultural Itinerary has now been supplemented by a growing list of *other* European cultural routeways which are designed to illustrate the values of human rights, cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and mutual exchanges across borders. At the time of writing, these number forty-five of which at least ten are designed around Christian themes. A tenth-century account of a trip across France, Switzerland and Italy to Rome was adopted by the Council in 1994 under the title *Via Francigena* while in Scandinavia, the St Olavsleden includes, amongst others, the route taken by the early eleventh-century saint from Selånger on the Swedish coast to Nidaros Cathedral in Norway. The Cyril and Methodius routes are a similar grouping running through Slavonic Europe which celebrate the travels of the ninth-century Byzantine churchmen whose missions were endorsed by Rome. There are also routes celebrating Cluniac and Cistercian monasteries, Romanesque architecture, St Martin of Tours and the Reformation.

The tourist and recreational potential of such routes means that additional routes are being created and endorsed by regional

7 Lluís Oviedo, Scarlett de Courcier and Miguel Farlas, "Rise of Pilgrims on the "Camino" to Santiago: Sign of Change or Religious Revival?" *Review of Religious Research* 56, No. 3 (September 2014), 433-442.

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authorities. The modern *Via Domitia*, for example, which traverses Provence from Arles across the Alpine pass of Susa to Vercelli was created as a result of a modern twinning between the two towns, despite the adopted name of an ancient Roman road. Still others are the result of research by individual scholars as in the routeway between Dunkeld and Iona in Scotland, which was identified and walked by a group led by Dr Simon Taylor of Glasgow and Dr Pamela O'Neill of Sydney in 2017.<sup>8</sup>

## MY EXPERIENCE

I myself have walked a number of these routes, both those identified as 'pilgrimage' routes and those with purely secular descriptions such as the two-week Coast to Coast walk across Britain, designed by the Cumbrian hill-walker Geoffrey Wainwright. With the exception of the Dunkeld-Iona route, I have walked them on my own, which in itself provides a rather different experience from that involved in walking with a pilgrim group. I carry a tent while at the same time enjoying an income which allows me to use other forms of accommodation when camping grounds are not available. On many routes, I have used the Lightfoot Guides produced by Pilgrimage Publications and these provide detailed maps of route ways arranged day by day, together with a short list of available accommodations ranked in price order including those which are offered by religious or local authority institutions. Intermittently, these guides include short paragraphs on cultural sights and the history of a specific locality.

The *formative* experience which turned me into a long-term pilgrim walker, was a two-month walk along the Via Francigena from Canterbury through France and Switzerland to the Italian border in 2010. My motivations when I began undoubtedly belonged to a nexus of inchoate thoughts which could be included under the rubric of adventure-seeking and testing of physical abilities. At the same time, it was also an escape from pressures and personal disappointments and as I travelled, I met others with similar experiences. There were relatively few of us on the road and, perhaps because of that, my memories now are still filled with their stories and I wonder what happened subsequently in their lives. At the end of two months, I decided retrospectively that I had, in fact, experienced a religious pilgrimage. Since then, my experience has been mixed, with some walks proving inspirational and others less so.

8 O'Neill, Pamela, "A possible early medieval route across Scotland" in *Germano-Celtica: A Festschrift for Brian Taylor eds Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill* (Sydney: the Celtic Studies Foundation, University of Sydney, 2017), 211-225.

Key to my sense of having become a pilgrim enroute are my recollections of those offering hospitality. Authority for the Via Francigena is largely devolved but the archbishopric of Reims plays an over-arching role and, in many areas, accommodation is offered by a variety of religious institutions. It is important to note there are also municipal hostels and camping sites as well as family households who offer rooms to passing pilgrims from explicitly humanist motives. Religious-run shelters included Benedictine and other monasteries, Catholic schools, guest rooms of parish priests, lofts of parish centres, ex-seminaries, convents and retirement homes for priests. In most cases, they offered a bed in what was often a communal dormitory, although in some cases it was simple mattresses on the floor and on one occasion, where I begged shelter from an institution which had not advertised availability, it was bare floorboards and a sink.

It was my first time meeting so many people who had vowed themselves to religious life in such a wide variety of ways and in an environment where our conversation was largely confined to shared life experiences and attitudes. For the most part, they were rather older than I and the encounters were inspiring and, occasionally, very sad. In one instance, women from three separate congregations had come together in their old age to live in community and Mass was said by a priest suffering from Parkinsons disease who had to be assisted in holding the chalice. In another, I met the sisters of the Confraternité de St Bernard who run a hostel for the partners of those held in the high-security prison which is part of the Clairvaux complex today. It was they who first explained to me that St Malachy is not only important in an Irish context but is revered throughout the Cistercian world as the embodiment of St Bernard's ideal bishop and they brought me to a holy well just outside Clairvaux which still bears his name. There was also a monastic guest master whose experience of meeting pilgrims had given him a new sense of energy and self-worth; a parish priest who wanted to be a missionary in South America; an abbot who was defending the ancient independence of his house from local diocesan rule and a local cleric, in a high mountain village in Switzerland, who was deeply frustrated with the rules governing the shooting of wolves.

The end of that particular walk for me was the summit of the Col du Grand St Bernard in a pilgrim hostel where only those who had walked or skied to the pass might stay. The hostel had been first established by the tenth-century St Bernard de Menthon as a house of canons who provided a warm refuge for travellers traversing the Alps. Today, it has links with Catholic communities in Tibet and, in addition to providing accommodation for pilgrims, it offers

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summer retreats to French teenagers and provides personnel to run some of the local churches in the valleys below. Visitors can watch old films of the younger canons being buried in snow to provide avalanche training for the Great St. Bernard dogs which are still bred locally. In another film, the canons are depicted emerging in a long line from under a low doorway while wearing cassocks and on skis. In the little museum beside the hostel there are Roman plaques discovered through excavation of the site which commemorate the prayers of much earlier travellers as well as dedicatory pillars to the Roman god Jupiter. In addition, on the northern side of the pass, there is an enormous bronze statue of a cow which was apparently worshipped locally when Julius Caesar brought his armies north. In the immediate vicinity of the large lake marking the pass, one comes across worn steps cut into the living rock. Although these cannot be dated archaeologically, walking across them gives one an awesome sense of treading in the paths of vast numbers of unknown ancestors.

*Ireland*, too, has ancient pilgrim paths which are currently being developed for new recreational and cultural purposes. In July 2021, Sport Ireland launched a 115 km pilgrim walking route entitled *St Declan's Way*, linking Cashel in County Tipperary with Ardmore in County Waterford. This was officially launched by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, on September 29th 2021. It was greeted in one tweet by the statement "After almost a decade of struggle... we finally have a pilgrim path in Ireland to rival the Camino. Congratulations to all involved."

I walked the Way in August 2021 and I would like to add my congratulations to those who have so imaginatively built on the early work of Canon Power, Professor of Archaeology in UCC, who also recorded local memories of the way in 1905. It is now an extremely well-marked and beautiful route and there is great enthusiasm locally for its potential to generate increased tourism in the region. At this very early stage, it has, as yet, to acquire the type of supportive infrastructure of hostels and shelters characterising European routes such as the Camino. In an Irish environment, my own hope would be that these would also include places to dry clothes and access to hot evening meals. Even without these, I have no doubt that, like me, those who walk *St Declan's Way* will return to their normal lives with a sense of increased contentment and wellbeing as well, on occasion, with an enhanced sense of faith. In the final words of the Old Irish poem cited above:

*Fírmaith fecht – fó don fét / fiado find foraim sét*

A truly good journey! Well does the fair Lord show us a course,  
a path.