



Holy Island of Lindisfarne and the modern relevance of Celtic ‘Nature Saints’.

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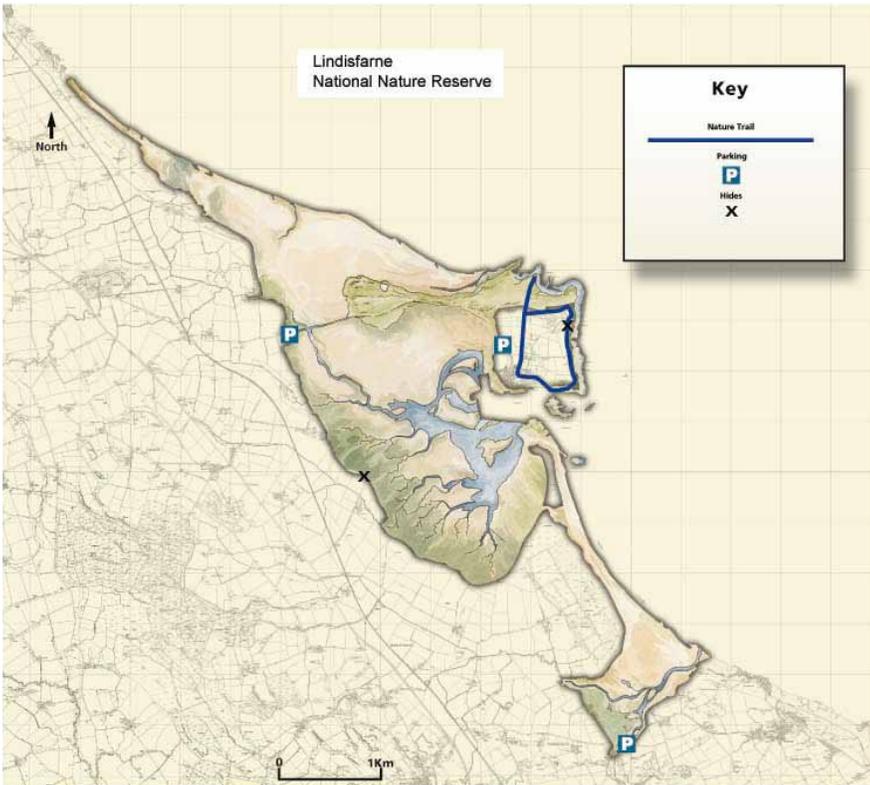
‘All places and all people are sacred. We have to recapture that, and respect even the smallest wood as well as the largest rainforest’ Rev. Canon David Adam, Vicar of Holy Island 1995-2003 (personal communication, 2009).

‘... has shown how much liveliness there is on the island, how much willingness to accommodate new ventures, but also how much determination there is for the future to be shaped by and for the island people. We are not ready to become anyone’s theme park, now or ever!’ (Tristram, 2009).

Introduction

The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is located on the north east coast of England, on the border with Scotland. It is accessible at low tide, across sand and mud flats, which carry an ancient pilgrim’s way and a modern road causeway. It is surrounded by the 3541 ha Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve which protects the island’s sand dunes and the adjacent inter-tidal habitats (Natural England, 2005), that support a wide variety of plant life and attract vast numbers of birds. Almost 300 bird species have been recorded and the wintering wild-fowl population is estimated at 60 000.

< The Parish Church of St Mary’s thought to be on the site of St Aiden’s monastery, and the ruins of the Lindisfarne Benedictine Priory.



Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve with Holy Island at its centre.

Holy Island, Lindisfarne was founded in AD 635 as the first monastic community in England and for 240 years it was a centre of Christian learning. It is associated with several Saints including St. Cuthbert. Desecrated by the first Viking raid on England in AD 793, the Abbey removed St Cuthbert's relics in 875 and they were located at Durham where a medieval Cathedral was built in his honour.

The main settlement on Holy Island is a traditional Northumbrian village of about 150 residents once reliant on fishing and

farming but increasingly engaged in tourism. The island receives in excess of half a million visitors per year, many of whom are attracted by nature and the island's religious and secular history.

This paper builds on the modern conservation situation of Holy Island as described by Wild (2010). It outlines the life of St Cuthbert and expands on the nature spirituality of a group of 'nature saints' of which St Cuthbert is an important exemplar. It examines elements of a revival in 'Celtic spirituality'. It then discusses some of the challeng-

es facing Holy Island Lindisfarne. It asks the question; is it legitimate to invoke the lives of long dead, and largely forgotten saints in the name of contemporary environmental concerns?

Mammals extant in Northern Britain during St. Cuthbert's time.

Species	Date extirpated in Britain
European Wolf (<i>Canis lupus</i>)	c. AD 1740
Eurasian Beaver (<i>Castor fiber</i>)	16 th century
Wild Boar (<i>Sus scrofa</i>),	13 th century
European Brown Bear (<i>Ursus arctos arctos</i>)	10 th century

St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne

Two hagiographies of St Cuthbert survive, one was written anonymously (c. 700), the other by St. (the Venerable) Bede between AD 716 and 726 (Bede, 731; Magnusson, 1984; Farmer, 1998). St Cuthbert lived from 634 to 687, when the Britons (ancestors of the modern Welsh), English, Picts and Dalriada (Irish) were vying for territory and power in northern Britain. We first hear of him at 16 years old, upon the hills of what is now southern Scotland. On that night in AD 651 Cuthbert was defending a flock of sheep, at a time when northern Britain was under larger areas of natural forest and with existing populations of wolf, bear and other large mammals. During his watch he saw a bright stream of light descending from

heaven to the south. This signalled the death and ascension of St Aidan, the remarkable founder of the monastery on Lindisfarne, whose generosity and humility is considered to have established the spiritual pattern of Holy Island. On witnessing this event Cuthbert was moved to become a monk.

St Cuthbert's legacy and influence

Cuthbert excelled as a student and gained a reputation as a preacher and healer.

'A hermit, prior and then bishop to the monastic community of Lindisfarne, Cuthbert became on his death in 687 one of the most important medieval saints in Europe and one of the foremost saints of Medieval England.' (Marner, 2000).

Cuthbert, when alive, was visited by Egfrith, King of Northumbria (670-685), he miraculously 'appeared' to King Alfred at Glastonbury, and his shrine was visited by three English kings (Aethelstan 934, Edmund 945 and Cnut 1027). By the late eleventh century his feast days were celebrated in many monasteries in Europe, and many copies of his hagiographies were produced. Forty-five copies are in existence indicating their popularity (Farmer, 1998). Many churches in England were dedicated to him, as was Durham Cathedral, where his relics were entombed. (Marner, 2000). The Cathedral is now a World Heritage Site and is considered 'the largest and most perfect monument of 'Norman' style architecture in England', (UNESCO, 2011).

somehow helps sanctify a geographical region and affirms and strengthens its boundaries (Marner, 2000).

Cuthbert and nature

St Cuthbert had a close relationship and affinity with nature (McManners, 2008). For Christian preachers of the time this was not unusual. Cuthbert was an ascetic and would spend all night in the sea. Once he was observed emerging at daybreak he knelt on the sand to pray.

'And immediately there followed in his footsteps two little sea-animals (four-footed creatures, which are called otters – Bede) humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and licking his feet, they rolled upon them wiping them with their skins (fur-Bede) and warming them with their breath. After this service and ministry had been fulfilled and his blessing had been received they departed into their haunts in the waves of the sea.' The Anonymous Life (annotated by Bede's Life) in Magnusson, 1984.

Cuthbert spend several years (676-684) on the island of Inner Farne, close to Lindisfarne. He was particularly fond of the seabirds and is attributed with establishing England's first ever bird protection rules relating to the killing of wildfowl. The Eider Duck (*Somateria mollissima*) is associated with him, and locally nicknamed 'Cuddy Ducks'. He was said to allow them to nest on the steps of his altar on Farne. (National Trust, 2011).

'Tales about St Cuthbert's love for all

creatures, furred or feathered, great or small, are legion. One gets the impression from the Lives (hagiographies) that he virtually declared Lindisfarne a Nature Reserve 1300 years before the Nature Conservancy Council. (Magnusson, 1984).

Sources of St. Cuthbert's nature spirituality

St Cuthbert' nature spirituality can be attributed to a Christian nature tradition and to a pre-Christian Celtic nature spirituality described in the following sections.

A tradition of Christian 'nature saints'

St. Cuthbert was one of a dispersed line of spiritual transmission from the fourth century 'Desert Fathers' of Middle East and North Africa, starting with the eremitic St. Anthony. This group is termed here as 'nature saints' and defined here as saints whose lives demonstrate a particular affinity or love of nature. Nature saints are found in many Christian traditions and the early Church abounds with their stories. The Orthodox Church is an especially rich branch from the same Middle Eastern desert root, and the three named here spanning some 1300 years, are St Yared (505–571) of the Ethiopian Orthodox, St Ivan of Rila (876 to c. 946) Bulgarian Orthodox, St Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) Russian Orthodox. The most well-known 'nature saint' in the Catholic tradition is St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), the patron saint of ecology and some consider that he may have been influ-

c. 251–356	St Anthony of the Desert	One of the early desert monks/fathers.
316–397	St Martin	Gaul of Tours (modern Brittany) developed his spiritual practice based on a hagiography of St. Anthony, he meditated in the 'dessert' and rejected urban ways.
c. 360–432	St Ninian	Briton (Old Welsh), Kingdom of Strathclyde. Inspired by St. Martin founded Casa Candida, AD 397 the first Christian centre in what was then Britain and is now Scotland.
c. 490–d.543	St Serf	Pict, trained at Casa Candida.
521–597	St Columba	Irish/Dal Riada (563 founds Iona)
528–612	St Kentigern (St Mungo)	Briton/Pict. Old Welsh Kingdom of Strathclyde, founder of Glasgow.
d. 651	St Aidan	Irish/Dal Riada, St. Columba's pupil, founder of Lindisfarne Abbey in 635
635–687	St Cuthbert	English Abbot of Lindisfarne

(Note: Derived from Leatham, 1948 and other sources, there are many other saints that could be included in this table).

enced by the missionary saints from Britain that established Christian centres in Europe (Simpson, 1995: 172; Brown, 2003).

Many of the Celtic saints are connected with nature related miracles, locating their centres based on signs from nature, or the appearance of specific animals. To take just one other, of many examples, St Kentigern was led to the site of his religious community or 'muintir' in North Wales by a miraculous white boar. Before it departed the saint blessed the animal. 'Then the saint, scratching the head of the brute, and stroking his mouth and teeth, said: God Almighty, in Whose power are all the beasts of the forests, the oxen, the birds or the air and the fishes of the

sea, grant for thy conduct such rewards as He knoweth is best for thee'. (Leatham, 1948: 121). St Kentigern founded a community - Glesgu (Happy Family), now city of Glasgow. His daily routine, and his habit of living in separate huts were seen a direct line from St Anthony, St Martin and St Ninian' (Leatham, 1948). His Pictish muintir (attendants) founded missionaries in Orkney, Iceland and Norway.

Celtic nature spirituality

The other source of Celtic nature spirituality is the Celtic pre-Christian religion. Pre-Christian Celts believed that all aspects of the natural world contained spirits. Three areas of evidence for an adoption of Celtic nature spiritu-

ality into early Christian forms are identified as follows.

Pictish Sculptured Stones

A seeming transition of Celtic nature spirituality to a Christian form is evidenced in the art of the Pictish standing stones found through central Scotland. Leatham attributes the carvings to St. Kentigerns *muinntir*, where carving was amongst the skills practiced. The wild animals depicted in the carvings include wolf, snake, salmon, eagle, stag, bear and boar (as illustrated in Fraser, 2008). Figure on the right shows the Drosten Stone which shows an intricately woven cross and the enigmatic Pictish symbols, wild animals including bear and boar, the latter being aimed at by a hunter, a domestic goat, an osprey with a salmon and a beautiful carved fawn suckling a doe.

Lindisfarne Gospels

Beautifully illustrated, the Lindisfarne Gospels also exhibit a rich nature imagery. 'The initial letters are filled with a throng of interlacing birds and beasts partaking of the word of God, and with a vortex of swirling Celtic spiral work recalling water, air and fire. For centuries Celtic and Germanic peoples had signalled status and power by the metalwork that they wore... These ornaments and symbols were now applied to the ultimate authority of the Word of God... This is not direct observation perhaps from the natural world...but this is totally at one with creation and building upon that in the way that we know that certainly the Celtic tradition was very inclined to do' (Brown, 2000). Thus the



The Drosten Stone (839-42), front and back. Historic Scotland Museum, Abroath, Scotland.

art of the Lindisfarne Gospels included elements of Celtic, Anglo Saxon, and Coptic art (Blackhouse, 1981; Brown, 2003).

Folk Christianity

Further examples of the melding of the traditions derive from the Celtic folk Christianity of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For example the Scottish collection of poems, prayers and incantations of the *Carmina Gadelica* (Carmichael, 1900) is an extended collection, and includes much related to nature. This is of more recent origin and is not necessarily directly linked to the era of the early saints. It mostly consists of what is sometimes pejoratively called 'folk' religion but can be considered 'cultural variants' of mainstream faiths.

An example of a prayer follows.

*It were as easy for Jesu
To renew the withered tree
As to wither the new
Were it His will so to do
Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!
Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.*

*There is no plant in the ground
But is full of His virtue.
There is no form in the strand
But it is full of His blessing.
Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!
Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.*

*There is no life in the sea,
There is not creature in the river,
There is naught in the firmament
But proclaims His goodness
Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!
Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.*

*There is no bird on the wing
There is no star in the sky,
There is nothing beneath the sun
But proclaims His goodness
Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!*

*Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.
(Carmichael, 1900)*

These cultural or folk variants often contain valuable elements of the previous indigenous faith, and can be an important source of reviving a nature spirituality.

Celtic Christianity - a caution

The Celtic Christianity revival, however, has its critics, and Donald Meek, in particular, a Celtic Scholar and Gaelic-speaking Hebridean Islander, questions the existence of a unique 'Celtic

Christianity', and suggests much of it is a modern creation. He considers it not well rooted in scholarship that it reinvents and embellishes the facts, and it is separated from the original Gaelic and Welsh sources. He considers many of the promoters of Celtic Christianity are 'constructing and alternative Celtic tradition'. One of the claims he counters is that Celtic Christianity is unique in the Christian world. 'The ideals of the Egyptian desert father lasted long in the insular Celtic context as elsewhere in the West...it is quite unacceptable to see them as purely indigenous or unique to the Celtic areas' (Meek, 2000:147).

Meek also challenges the portrayal of 'Celtic Christianity' as friendly to nature and to the environment, in contrast to modern environmental degradation. He considers that they had little choice other than living close to nature, but does concede that 'Celtic literature across the centuries show a 'lively response to nature' (p. 85), he does not see this a unique to Celtic Christianity, and modern writers, 'weave the body of 'hermit nature verse' into an interpretive pastiche which covers it with a subjective, highly romantic, eco-friendly, and frequently pagan-friendly glow (p. 86)'.

He warns; 'As a result the quest for the saints may be motivated by factors ranging from general curiosity to a special concern for the local economy or the environment. It is important to recognise the diversity of approaches within contemporary 'saint seeking', since it is the preconceived expectation will almost inevitably lead to a de-

gree of reconstruction of the (rediscovered) saints'. Meek admits that, 'the saints, however, are not strangers to reconstruction' (Meek, 2000:162). 'Most people who invoke the saints nowadays will not be concerned so much with the profile of the saint in the past; their main concern will be with the power and efficacy of the saints in the present' (Meek, 2000:163). Meek is particularly dismissive of the collection of Carmichael. '...the Carmina may represent essentially 'folk religion,' blending folklore with saint-lore, pagan and Christian, in ways that ought not to be confused with the formal teaching of any 'Celtic Church'...This popular demotic [i.e. colloquial] Christianity which has come down through the centuries with inevitable reshaping and admixture... It shows the type of syncretism, which can be found readily across the globe in similar contexts (p. 70). Despite his criticisms he states 'Even so no amount of warning will prevent people from believing what they wish to believe especially since 'Celtic Christianity' seems to be in tune with the moods of the age' (Meek, 2000:22).

Modern Lindisfarne, Holy Island and commercial success

As mentioned the contemporary situation of Holy Island is discussed more fully in *Sacred Natural Sites: Conserving Nature and Culture* (Wild 2010), and readers are referred there for more information. The Island is surrounded by coastal and marine habitats, and supports internationally important wildfowl

species and an outstanding assemblage of plants. Due to these wildlife values the coastal area that surrounds Holy Island has been legally declared a National Nature Reserve and is also a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. It is registered as an IUCN category IV protected area in the World Database of Protected Areas, considered a 'habitat/species management area'.

Spiritual values, churches and retreats

The Anglican or Episcopalian Church is the oldest church on the Island and is the Parish Church. The Church is one of the key visitor sites, and often hosts large groups of several thousand people. Due to declining parishioners the United Reformed Church was converted to St. Cuthbert's Centre open to visitors and hosts a variety of religious, spiritual and cultural events, some related to nature. These mostly include bird watching weekends titled, for example, 'Faith and Feathers' and 'Bible and Birds', as well as exhibitions of sacred art. There is a Catholic Church on the island and a resident Catholic Sister (Daughter of the Cross) who welcomes pilgrims. Two retreat centres are on the island, Marygate and The Open Gate. The former is an independent charitable trust, while the Open Gate focuses on Celtic Christianity and runs retreats including one called 'God in Nature' and another 'Saints and Seabirds'. These explore nature beauty and spirituality of Holy Island and other areas such as the Farne Isles and St Abbs Head (<http://www.aidanandhilda.org>). Holy Island has a strong ecumenical movement.

Holy Island has, along with Iona in Scotland, been the node of the revival of 'Celtic spirituality' discussed above. David Adam, a native of the Northumbrian coast and vicar of Lindisfarne from 1995 to 2003, is one of the foremost proponents and closely associated with the Island. He has written numerous books and prayers in the Celtic style (e.g. Adam, 1989, 1991). While Celtic Christianity has its sceptics (see section 2.4), it is clear from its remarkable popularity, that it is filling a need for a form of Christianity with a clear concern for the Earth and its ecological community.

Community, tourism and ownership

Lindisfarne is also a Northumbrian village typical of the area, with a small fishing harbour and traditional buildings. The traditional village community consists of a number of long-established families that have deep-rooted cultural ties to the island and unique traditions. Unfortunately the local population has been declining over recent years.

While no official statistics are kept, it is estimated that more than half a million visitors a year visit Holy Island, and increasingly much of the island's economy is built on tourism, now estimated at 70-80% of the island's income (Tristram, 2009). The main heritage sites depend largely on entrance fees to maintain their properties. Other businesses on the island include hotels, cafes, shops and kiosks. The Island runs a website recording web-hits up from 1.5 million in 2001 to 11 million in 2008 (<http://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/webmaster/statistics1.htm>).

The government owns about 30% of land within National Nature Reserve, and the remainder falls within 17 private holdings of the inter-tidal area. Within the village properties are privately owned by many people. Much of the personal wealth of Britons is dependent on property values, a critical element in understanding Holy Island. Rapid increases in house prices during the decade to 2008 have meant that low-income households have been priced out of their own communities. This situation is not unique to Lindisfarne and affects many villages in Britain. When no long-standing community members remain in a village it might be said to have lost its heart.

Discussion and Recommendations

Conservation management

The National Nature Reserve staff engage in management, including live-stock grazing, visitor management and interpretation. The construction of a causeway (1954-64) has perhaps caused the biggest changes to the National Nature Reserve, reducing the area of habitats important for wildfowl (English Nature, 2005).

Community trust fund

It is increasingly considered that a strengthening of community action is a key element in tackling some of the key social and environmental issues that face us today (McIntosh, 2008). In response to the lack of affordable

housing the islanders established The Holy Island of Lindisfarne Community Development Trust in 1996. The Trust established a Visitor Centre using the revenue to build 11 community houses. This indicates the way in which the island community is countering the challenges of high property values.

Managing tourism

While tourism is the mainstay of the island's economy, hosting over half a million visitors per year puts a strain on the 150 island residents. Peak visitors occur during the summer school and public holidays and at weekends. The tidal nature and limited accommodation does mean regular quieter times and quieter places once one is away from the village centre. The National Nature Reserve is under less pressure than other areas of the island although parking is a problem at peak times.

Seeking balance between nature, religion, community and commerce

The Holy Island is managed by a number of institutions. Agreeing to a common course of action is challenging, because the key players, while sharing common interests, have their own remits. Over the past two years a 'Lindisfarne Partnership' has been put in place and is becoming increasingly important in implementing a collective and holistic vision for the management the Island (Andrew Craggs, Natural England, personal communication, June 2011).

Conclusion and discussion

The concept of 'nature saints' is not very well known within the Christian Church, yet the stories of these saints contain strong associations with local places, native animals and nature in general. Many of the miracle stories, while touching, are not factual but do tell of a close relationship with wildlife and wild places. Rather than being unique to the British Isles 'nature saints' are part of a wider Christian tradition that deserves further research.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has perhaps best maintained this 'nature' ethic as living tradition and it may be no accident that it has in fact shown the greatest level of Christian leadership in the face of the current environmental crisis. The British Isles and especially the Celtic fringe seems particularly rich in these saints from the early Christian era. While not unique these, and the folk component of British Christianity, roots religion in a national setting and provide strong connection to local places, local wildlife and local culture. A greater tolerance and embracing of the cultural and folk variants by religious orthodoxies is advocated, especially when it comes to the care of nature, which seem better developed locally than centrally.

Contemporary Britain has a predominantly secular, multi-cultural urban population largely separated from nature. The growing interest on Celtic (or Insular Christianity as some prefer) indicates that these saints do reach across the centuries and hold meaning for

modern peoples in Britain, the Anglo-Celtic diaspora and beyond. It does seem important, while remaining true to what we know of their lives, that these saints are interpreted and revitalised to new generations, as their vigour, frugality and closeness to nature are values needed by modern society. 'The tales are ancient but the underlying sentiments speak directly to us today. We have much to learn from a spirituality that works with the grain and rhythm of the natural world and rejoices in the whole of creation' (McManners, 2008).

The Holy island of Lindisfarne is one of Britain's foremost Christian Sacred

Natural Sites and one where national ecological values overlap with national religious and historical values. The revival of interest in 'Celtic' as an indigenous branch of Christianity may infuse the conservation movement with a spiritual dimension and has contributed to the Island's tourism economy. Conversely, it may have added to the risk to local community values and put the Island's fabric under strain. It is encouraging therefore that the key institutions are increasingly working together to ensure that the island maintains its integrity, community and multiple values into the future.

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