



The Poetry of Pilgrimage

Reflections on Celtic pilgrimage sites in Ireland and Britain

Michael Mitton
Foreword by Russ Parker

‘Michael’s poems bring us fresh but timeless riches for our spiritual journeys, wherever they may be. Drink deeply from this holy well of divine grace.’

Graham Booth, former Guardian of the Community of Aidan and Hilda.

‘Michael Mitton has left an indelible mark on my life; he was a voice of courage as I embarked on my own missionary journey to Cornwall. His book brings to life the characters whose faith shaped the British Isles; they are much needed companions for the church, to rekindle faith and stir courage.’

The Revd Anna Mason-Hyde, church leader of St Gregory’s in Cornwall

‘As one of many on pilgrimage with Michael, who is both bard and spiritual director, I have beheld the wild Spirit of God ignite our pilgrim band at these sites and birth fresh encounters with the Presence of the living God. May you find such portals leading deep into God’s heart through Michael’s visionary poetry and your own reflections.’

The Revd Dr Sandi Kerner, canon for prayer and healing, Cathedral Church of St Luke and St Paul and for the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina

‘This is a book whose simple and heartfelt words will gather you – you with your fear and failings, joys and dreams – and lift you to fly with the Wild Goose who seeks you.’

Penny Warren, members’ Guardian of the Community of Aidan and Hilda

‘[The poems] are beautifully crafted... they are soulful, spiritual and carry a depth and a yearning. They bring to life in a wonderful way the lives of Celtic saints and their mystical longings. They reverberate like prayers. I am drawn back to them again and again.’

Jonny Baker, Britain hub mission director for Church Mission Society

‘Michael Mitton brings us face to face with spiritual yet human Celtic characters and transports us to places made holy by their lives. He relates recent spiritual encounters in these thin places and gives us poems and thought-provoking questions to extend our dwelling there. It’s a book to treasure and read slowly – a saint at a time.’

George Lings retired researcher and author of *Seven Sacred Spaces and Reproducing Churches*

‘I have admired Michael Mitton’s poetry ever since I first heard him read one of his works during a pilgrimage in Ireland. His words resonated with us, capturing and amplifying the encounters with the Holy Spirit that we were experiencing. Reading *The Poetry of Pilgrimage* reignites that same sense of wonder and abandon, inspiring me to follow Jesus more fervently. These poems offer readers encouragement and strength to persevere through the wild and unknown of their own spiritual journeys.’

The Rt Revd Ron Dent Kuykendall PhD, rector of St Andrew’s Gainesville, Florida, and executive chaplain to the national director and chaplain to the board for the International Order of St Luke the Physician

‘The poetry and prose that you will find in these pages will transport you into the lives of many Celtic saints in their places, and you will be drawn into the Divine Spirit that they each embodied through Michael’s directed reflection and scripture readings. The pictures and stories he adds to the poems complete this beautiful piece of literature which adds to the centuries old Celtic tradition of sharing poem and story and song.’

David Cassian Cole, author of *Celtic Saints*, *The Celtic Year* and *The Art of Peace: Life lessons from Christian mystics*

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Ministres



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To all those who have been on pilgrimage with me.
My life has been so deeply enriched by your companionship.

Foreword

I was there when Michael's poems were born. They came out of our days hosting pilgrimages together. They were written in the moment and read out either at the end of the day or on the next day. They captured something of what we had all experienced and gave us a touching place to appreciate and be held by the holy rhythms we had moved through. These poems were moments of ignition when the not-yet of seeking godly encounter became the now of renewal.

Pilgrimage is more than a chance to get away from it all, a way to appreciate the beauty of our planet or a time to learn about saints we consider better than ourselves. Pilgrimages are the hunger journeys of our longing to encounter the living presence of God, and this is best done on holy ground. Holy ground are those locations where God has rubbed something of himself off on soil and rock. Where holy men and women, carried by the wild Spirit of God, gave others glimpses and encounters of the eternal. Such sites are places where the narrative of what was done there lives on to invite us into living in the fresh purposes of God.

It is this reality which Michael and I have sought to weave into all our pilgrimages. Consequently, stilling our hearts on holy ground to listen to what the Spirit was saying often led to meaningful meetings with the God who had been waiting there for us. It is these encounter moments that Michael's poems so powerfully capture. So read them and join us on the journey.

Russ Parker

Introduction

Russ Parker and I have known each other since the early 1980s. We met when we were both tutors on a pastoral counselling course at St John's College, Nottingham. If I had known the expression 'Wild Celt' then, I would certainly have used it for Russ! It was not just his long hair and fulsome beard; it was his adventurous spirit which I found to be wonderfully infectious. It wasn't long before we started enthusing together about the early Celtic church in Britain and Ireland and the relevance of the stories of faith for the present times. We travelled together to places like Lindisfarne and became two of the co-founders of the Community of Aidan and Hilda. I was then invited to join the staff of the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation, of which Russ was the director. Part of my task was to help set up a Christian listening project in Ireland. Thus began several years of frequent visits to Ireland, often with Russ (who had ancestry in Ireland), whose love for the land soon rubbed off on me.

After I left Acorn, I worked for the diocese of Derby, working in the mission department encouraging fresh expressions of church and developing pioneer ministries. I missed my visits to Ireland greatly, but then in 2012 Russ invited me to assist him in leading a pilgrimage to Wales and Ireland. Thus began a yearly pattern of pilgrimages which continues to this day. Russ and I have led pilgrimages in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, the north of England, Cornwall and more recently to Assisi. I have had the privilege of witnessing the remarkable works of grace that take place in our pilgrims on these travels. We take them off the beaten track,

and whether it be along overgrown footpaths and muddy lanes or over waters to windswept islands, we discover sites where saints of old lived and witnessed, inhaling into their souls the same Spirit of God who delights to visit us today.

My role on these pilgrimages has been to act as a co-leader, which has involved a range of duties, including driver, navigator, baggage-handler, late pilgrim-hustler, toilet-finder and other vital tasks. But in addition, I have also acted as the pilgrimage spiritual director, which has allowed me to offer focused listening to each pilgrim, which has been one of the ways I have discovered the beautiful workings of God that take place on these journeys. I have never ceased to be amazed and delighted to see the transformation and healing that happens in the hearts of our pilgrims when we usher our broken humanity to these blessed places. Here our wounded stories are held in the context of the memory of these ancient stories of faith, and we meet the Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Frequently I have found healing in my own soul in such places.

Early on in these pilgrimages, I tried to find a way of expressing something of this experience, and I found the only way I could do this was through poetry. I'll be the first to agree that I am no expert in poetry, but I am part of that large group of people who have found it easier to express emotional and spiritual truth in poetry rather than prose. For me, poetry catches something of that thermal air current that lifts the soul in these sacred places. Most of my pilgrimage poems end in prayer because our experience of visiting these sites and recounting the ancient stories of faith have created this updraft of prayer and praise. It was the obvious response to the encounters that we experienced. So, on these pilgrimages, when occasion allowed, I would scribble some lines together and rather bashfully share them with the pilgrim groups. I was pleased to discover that what I had written resonated with the pilgrims' experiences.

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Almost always someone in the group would ask if I would publish the poems, but somehow this never seemed right, for I assumed that the poem would only really have life for those who actually experienced the location of the poem. However, over time, I have come to recognise that these poems can have meaning for those who have not been able to visit the sites. I have discovered that, by some mysterious working of grace, the poem has enabled the reader to be transported in heart and mind to the pilgrimage site and the story connected with it, where they can also share in this enlivening encounter with the Spirit of God.

I had to battle with the very evident fact that these are by no means great poems. I lack the literary skills of professional poets. But then I came to see that it is those who dare share with us their far-from-perfect creations that so often embolden us to use our creative gifts that we can so easily disparage. It is a kind of, 'Well, if he can do that, then so can I...' If my attempts at poetry can encourage others to write their own, then I will be truly delighted.

I have called the book *The Poetry of Pilgrimage* because there most definitely is a poetry in pilgrimage. As with poetry, a pilgrimage can move you, puzzle you, inspire you, get you thinking, take you by surprise. Words come differently somehow on pilgrimage, and this is reflected in the conversations among the pilgrims and the prayers we offer in these hallowed places. Creative gifts start to emerge, and pilgrims find the confidence to express them. Many pilgrims sense a creative awakening, and they start to write, paint, sing, dance or create whatever form of expression is right for them. This is one of the charisms of pilgrimage.

This book does not cover all the sites we have visited over the years, but it covers many of them. It is a very uneven collection, in that there are more poems from Ireland than from any other location. This simply reflects the fact that we have

done more pilgrimages in Ireland, and, though I have genuinely loved all the places we have visited, Ireland remains my favourite, and it is there that my soul has felt most stirred. It is also uneven in that there are so few female saints represented. Despite the fact that women's ministry was affirmed in the early Celtic church, fewer of their stories have survived to this day. I fear this may be due to the editing process of the male-dominated church that followed the Celtic era.

How to use this book

In this collection I have written an introduction to each poem giving some information about the saint and the location associated with them. The poems are gathered by region and are in no particular order, and the reader may simply want to pick whatever one catches their eye.

The book is particularly suitable for those who are not able to join an organised group. However, some readers may wish to plan their own pilgrimages, and these pages may get them started. The sites can be visited, and the information I have supplied can be supplemented by further research. For other readers such travel will be impractical, and a journey of heart and mind will be needed. I would encourage you to read the poems prayerfully, to allow the Holy Spirit of Christ to take you on a journey of the imagination to a place which, though it may be in a far-off land with a story from a distant time, nonetheless, through the workings of the Spirit, can bring life to your soul in the here and now. After each poem I have also added a couple of reflective questions, which you may find helpful in exploring the themes further. I have also provided a passage of scripture connected with the theme, which may aid further reflection and devotion.

IRELAND

Ciarán of Clonmacnoise

Story

Clonmacnoise was founded by Ciarán (c. 516–49). He was one of the twelve apostles of Ireland (which included the likes of Brendan and Columba). Columba said of him that he was ‘a lamp, blazing with the light of wisdom’. He spent some time on the island of Inish Moir, which is one of the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland. He studied under Enda, who sensed in the young Ciarán a call to build a monastery in the middle of Ireland. Thus this young pioneer founded Clonmacnoise with a small team of ten others. Sadly, after only seven months, he died of the plague and never lived to see the remarkable centre that his monastery became. Though he died young, he nonetheless made a wonderful contribution to the mission and ministry of the church during his lifetime and also, through his inspiring witness, to subsequent generations.

Location

Clonmacnoise is one of the most famous ancient monastic settlements in Ireland. It is situated in County Offaly in the Irish Midlands, just south of the town of Athlone. The settlement is built by the River Shannon, which is the major river of Ireland and in ancient times a key waterway. But not only was the settlement situated on this major river, it was also on the main east–west land route. This ease of access was one of the factors in causing Clonmacnoise to be a significant

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monastery in its time. It soon became a centre for worship, learning, craftsmanship and trade, and was visited by scholars from all over Europe. Many of the high kings of Tara and Connacht are buried here. The location also meant that mission teams could easily travel from this base. However, the downside of this location was that it was an easy target for invading Vikings and it suffered much from hostile hands. It was eventually abandoned in the 13th century.

Today Clonmacnoise is served by an excellent Interpretive Centre, which includes a fascinating museum and an excellent display of the original crosses, brought under cover for their protection. The images on these crosses are still clear to see and admire. The Cross of the Scriptures is a four-metre high sandstone cross and is beautifully crafted. The surface of the cross is divided into panels showing scenes including the crucifixion, the last judgement and Christ in the tomb. Such crosses would have been a brilliant means of communicating the gospel to a non-literate society. Underneath one of the crossbeams of this cross you can see an image of the hand of God, and we have often encouraged our pilgrims to gather under this powerful image of the gracious, protecting hand of God reaching out from the cross.

Making your way through the centre, you can stroll around the extensive grounds and explore the nine ruined churches and the two impressive round towers. We have usually gathered our pilgrims in the *Temple Ciarán* (see photo), which is a tiny chapel and is supposed to be the site of the grave of Ciarán. We have found this little chapel to be a particularly blessed place, though in my experience all of this wonderful site is full of the sense of the presence of God.

Ciarán

*Thus Ciarán died,
while dusky smoke from the peaty fire caressed his face,
and swans swooped over Shannon reeds
through the glistening morning mist.
What did he see in those dying moments
beyond the teary faces of faithful friends?
Did he see the future for which he strove:
the busy scenes of gospel-hearted scholars,
bearers of a brilliant fire,
borne on the vibrant breeze of the Spirit?
Or did his sight reach to a greater distance,
to the glowing fire of his heavenly hearth?*

*Whatever that seer saw in those fading moments,
there were those present, who were so brightened
by Ciarán's fiery vision,
that they travelled to the ends of the earth with that flame,
and a darkened world blazed up in luminous glory.*

*O God,
let my heart be lit by such unquenchable fire
that the valleys and furrows of this troubled world
will be enflamed with tender Christ-light.*

FOR REFLECTION

If you have been close to someone who was dying, did you have any sense of what they were experiencing? How did it feel to you?

How might you learn to see more clearly with what Paul calls ‘the eyes of the heart’?

BIBLE READING

THE EYES OF THE HEART

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

EPHESIANS 1:15–19

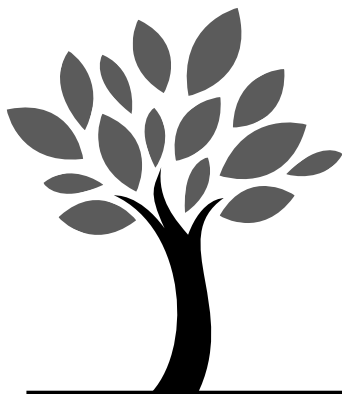


Ciarán of Clonmacnoise



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Drawing from his experience of co-leading pilgrimages in Britain and Ireland, **Michael Mitton** captures the essence of 23 significant pilgrimage sites for anyone from experienced pilgrims to armchair pilgrims.

Each chapter outlines the story of the Celtic saint who founded the site, together with information about the location, a poem inspired by the author's experience of that place, a reflective question, a suggested Bible reading and a photo of the site.



Michael Mitton is an Anglican priest and canon emeritus of Derby Cathedral. He currently works freelance as a spiritual director, speaker and writer, and is the author of nine non-fiction books and five novels, including *Restoring the Woven Cord* (BRF Ministries, 2019 third edition).

