

World of Missions.

Ninian: The First Scottish Missionary.

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Ninian is commonly spoken of as the earliest Scottish missionary; and this designation is quite correct, if we understand by the phrase the first whose name and story have come down to us. But it must be remembered that during a period of at least two hundred years previous to his appearing there were very considerable numbers of Christian converts among the inhabitants of Scotland between the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus. How the gospel was first introduced among these people is altogether unknown. It is, however, highly probable that the residents in that region, extending from the Firths of Forth and Clyde on the north to the Tyne and Solway on the south, had early come under the influence of Roman civilization, and that Roman soldiers and officials had, with some measure of success, preached the glad tidings of great joy among the native races subject to their sway. We may reasonably suppose that the form of Christian worship and the type of doctrine prevailing in those early times among the primitive people would be simple and undeveloped. There was no outstanding man in those communities, and most probably there never had been any such among them, and so we can quite well understand that many irregularities had crept into their practice, and that much crudeness of expression had appeared in their presentation of Christian truth.

Ninian was born somewhere about A. D. 334. Our primary authority with regard to Ninian is the Venerable Bede, who wrote his Ecclesiastical History exactly three hundred years after the death of the early Scottish missionary. His notice of Ninian is very brief, introduced parenthetically in his account of the mission of Columba, more than a hundred and fifty years later. While Columba went to preach to the Northern Picts, Ninian had evangelized the Southern Picts. Bede rather inaccurately ascribes to Ninian the conversion of these Southern Picts, affirming that under his preaching they forsook idolatry and embraced the truth. He describes Ninian as a most reverend bishop and holy man of the British nation, who had been instructed in Rome, and who founded an episcopal see, dedicating his church to St. Martin of Tours. This church was called the White House, Whittemore or Candida Casa, because built of stone, and not of wattles, as was customary among the Britons. Alfred, writing in the twelfth century, considerably amplifies this statement, but in all probability had no authorities except Bede and his own somewhat exuberant imagination.

It would seem that Ninian was by descent a Briton, his parents being natives of North Wales, though he himself was born in the valley of the Solway. He is represented by tradition as of noble birth, his father being an officer in the Roman army. It is evident that his parents were Christians, and that from his earliest childhood he was trained up in the Christian faith. We have no report as to his early years, but it would seem that as a youth he resolved to devote himself to the work of the Church as a missionary in the immediate neighborhood of his native district. With the intention of qualifying himself for this task, and obtaining the rank and authority necessary for its successful prosecution, he went to Rome. This visit was made in all probability during the period when Siricius was Pope—that is to say, not earlier than A. D. 385. If he went as early as this, it would seem that he must have spent ten or twelve years in the holy city. We can quite understand that, brought up as he had been among a simple race, in a region so isolated as to be little influenced by the educational and ecclesiastical institutions of the age, the young Briton stood in need of instruction in the very elements of Church doctrine, government, and worship. Siricius was a powerful ruler, and his ecclesiastical policy was pronouncedly high, and there can be no doubt that Ninian would be taught to yield absolute submission to the teach-

ing of the Holy See, and would be required to pledge himself to bring the doctrine and practice of the British Christians into strict conformity with that which he had learned in Rome. Before leaving to return to his native land to engage in his life-work, he received from the Pope episcopal ordination. He does not seem to have been consecrated as bishop of any strictly-defined district or diocese, but to have had conferred upon him episcopal authority in any part of the country where he might be led to carry on his missionary labors. On his homeward journey he went out of his way to visit St. Martin of Tours. This great bishop was undoubtedly the most celebrated ecclesiastic of the West, his fame resting mainly on the reputation he had obtained as a worker of miracles. His personal piety was everywhere acknowledged, and the devoutness and reverence which characterized his conduct all through life gave him the first place among the counsellors of the more ardent youths who were consecrating themselves to God's service.

Ninian's visit to St. Martin of Tours supplies us with one of the few dates by which we can fix the period of this great missionary's ministry. It would seem that immediately after this visit, which was evidently of brief duration, Ninian proceeded to Galloway, to begin there his regular evangelistic labors. One of his first works was the building of the Church at Whithorn, with which his name has ever since been so closely associated. Before this building was completed, Ninian received the news of the death of St. Martin, and he accordingly dedicated the Church in memory of the great miracle-working saint. The death of St. Martin took place on the eleventh of November, A. D. 397, a day which, under the name of Martinmas, has been fixed as one of the quarterly terms in Scotland. The missionary labors of Ninian in Galloway are thus made to begin in the closing years of the fourth century. He was thus the younger contemporary of his fellow Briton, Pelagius, while his life almost exactly synchronizes with that of the great Augustine.

The people among whom Ninian began to labor were a branch of the Pictish nation which had settled on the northern bank of the Solway. They had proved violent and troublesome neighbors to the British tribes inhabiting the north of England. To distinguish them from the Pictish tribes of the north, they were called by early Roman writers Novantes, and by later writers Nidarii, as occupying the district round about the Nith. That these Picts were spread over all the parts of Scotland south of the Forth appears from the presence of their name in that of the Pentland Hills. But the tribes with which Ninian, at least primarily, had to do dwelt between the Nith on the east and the Irish Channel on the west, the district being, generally speaking, coextensive with the present counties of Kirkcubright and Wigton.

Ninian, we may believe, had a very useful and pleasant ministry among his people round about the Church which he had built; and not only his careful teaching of Scripture, but also in his gentle and godly life, must have powerfully influenced the community favored with his presence. But besides this, his labors as a teacher were very fruitful. He gathered around him a company of monks, some of them trained under Martin of Tours, who, under his direction, devoted themselves to the education of young men; and his monastery long maintained its fame as a seminary for training in the knowledge of the holy scriptures, and of theological studies, as we understood and pursued in those days. He made good use of his leisure, especially in the later years of his life, in writing commentaries on several books of the Bible, and in compiling books of extracts from the writings of the Fathers for the use of his students.

The labors of Ninian were by no means confined to the district with which his name has been more immediately associated. As we have seen, Pictish tribes were at this period to be found scattered over all the region which stretched from the one Roman wall to the other, and we have traces all through this extensive country of Ninian's presence and evangelistic activity. Notwithstand-

ing the building of the northern wall by Antoninus, on the assumption that the barbarians who refused to be subject to the Romans were all outside of it, there is no doubt that, in the later years of the fourth century, either by incursions from the north, or by revolt among those who had previously given in their submission, there were large numbers of barbarians, in the Roman sense, violently hostile to the Romans, and determined to resist and reject all Roman institutions and usages, within the district bounded on the north by that wall. At the period of Ninian's mission too, the Roman authority in Britain was already far down toward its decline. By A. D. 410 all the Roman legionaries had been withdrawn from Britain. The whole country was in a state of confusion, and this must account for the obliteration of almost all definite traces of localities and churches in which Ninian did the work of a pioneer. During his missionary travels in Strathclyde, Ninian consecrated a cemetery on the site now occupied by Glasgow Cathedral. When Kentigern came to that district, about a century and a half later, he found the name of Ninian still associated with the burying-ground, and held in highest reverence.

From these missionary tours Ninian returned to his own quiet monastery. Here he continued the work with which he had begun his noble apostolic career. From his seminary he sent out young preachers, who carried on the work of evangelization in their master's spirit, and inspired by his example. And there at last, full of years and worn out by his self-denying labors, he passed away to enter on a better and a higher life. His death took place on the sixteenth of September, A. D. 432.

For somewhere about thirty-five years this great missionary was enabled to continue his work among the people to whose conversion and up-building in the faith he had consecrated his life. On the foundations laid by him, later workers—Palladius, Ternan, Soran, Kentigern, Columba, carried on the work which has now grown into the church of God in Scotland as we see it at this day. Although the incidents of Ninian's life have completely passed from view, yet surely he deserves to be held in remembrance, who shed light as he did on his own generation, and sowed seeds the harvest of which labourers who followed him were allowed to reap.—Vout.



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S. C. WOOD,
Managing Director.

Toronto, Dec. 4, 1899.