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COLUMBA'S CHILDREN

Life and Community on a Holy Island

The Inner Hebrides stretch along the west coast of Scotland as a cluster of islands whose native families, retaining remnants of their Gaelic tongue and Celtic identity, are trying hard to hold to their traditions. This past summer *Road to Emmaus* asked Jana McLellan, a resident guide on Saint Columba's island of Iona, to tell us what it is like to live on a holy island.

RTE: Jana, what brought you to Iona?

JANA: I was studying theology in Germany when friends told me about the Iona Community. I came to work for them for three months, then returned for another three years, when I met my husband. We now have two children and I'm still here after fourteen years.

RTE: What can you tell us about the island?

JANA: Physically, the island is about one mile wide and four miles long, with beautiful sandy beaches, each with its own unique features, for example, unusual kinds of shells. There is also a beach called the Machair made up entirely of fertile shell-sand which the Iona monks used to grow their barley, wheat, oats, and later potatoes. You can still see the beds because they cultivated the land in strips, piling on seaweed to increase the fertility of the soil. (This is still a common practice, and at the end of the growing season one of the islanders comes around with a tractor of seaweed so that you can fertilize your garden over the winter). The Machair also has an eighteen-hole

Opposite: Houses at the Iona port.

golf course. In a few days time we will have our annual golf tournament, and people come from far away to play. The last one in the golf tournament gets a bar of chocolate!

The highest point on Iona is Dùn Ì, from which you can see several Hebridean islands, and on good days you can even see Skye, seventy miles away. On the south side of Iona is the pebble beach of Columba's Bay. According to a medieval legend, when St. Columba was exiled to Iona for his part in a battle, he cried bitter tears over what he had done, which turned into this beautiful translucent green stone found at Columba's Bay. "Columba's tears" were

believed to hold his blessing and to have healing qualities. Even today local sailors often have a piece of Iona green stone to protect them from drowning.

We also have an old marble quarry from which was taken a beautiful white marble with green veins that both the abbey altar and foot of the baptismal fount is made from. And you have probably noticed the local red building stones everywhere. This is a durable, but porous stone and the only way to stop water from leeching through it is to plaster or waterproof it. This is why a rare and environmentally-protected maritime fern grows from the altar wall in the Iona Abbey church.

Much of the island is very boggy, and if you get at all off the beaten track it's very

easy to slip into a bog. I know of one woman who was on her way to the Marble Quarry and sank up to her hips. She just couldn't get out. She shouted and shouted for help and a seventy year-old mountaineer finally found her. He managed to get her out, but her Wellies [Wellington Boots] were stuck and never seen again!

We also have a good variety of wildlife here, especially birds, including different kinds of geese, eagles, falcons, owls, and cormorants, as well as seals, dolphins and porpoises and an occasional whale (Orcas) or shark. Of course, Staffa and neighboring islands are famous for the colorful (and very cute) puffins.



Jana McLellan.

As for plants, the wild fuschia here are particularly wonderful because, unlike in other parts of northern Europe, they grow here like weeds. Two particularly beautiful gardens which even grow artichokes belongs to Iona's St. Columba Hotel and the Argyll Hotels and you can sample the produce in their restaurants.

Because of the Gulf Stream we hardly ever get snow, but we do have plenty of wind. The hardest gale-force wind since I've been here was over 100 miles an hour. You couldn't stand upright, and caravans and chicken coops went flying, but fortunately the houses are built very solidly. To live here you do have to learn to cope—for example, our fresh water comes from Mull through two pipes on the bottom of the sea. The last time that supply was interrupted, we had to depend on the few people who still have wells in their yards for drinking water. It makes you realize how dependent you are on one another.

Daily Life on the Island

RTE: What other challenges do you face living on the island?

JANA: Electric power cuts also occur regularly so almost everyone also has a gas cooker, and sometimes a stove that heats with wood or coal. There are no electric street lights, and yet Iona is so safe that you feel very secure, even walking in the dark.

We do have a doctor's surgery, but the doctors only visit from Mull once a week, so in emergencies you are flown out by the National Health Service helicopter. If you are pregnant it's suggested that you leave a fortnight in advance for a city with a hospital, which is not a bad idea, as a friend of mine ended up giving birth on a life-boat on the way to Oban.

Until very recently, every few weeks we had to take a ferry and drive six hours round trip to Oban on the mainland to do our shopping and for other appointments. Now we can order on internet which means that someone in Oban does the shopping for us and brings it to the front door, which is a saving of twelve hours. You pay for delivery, but it's worth it.

Also, more people would like to live on Iona than there are houses available. The last small house that was sold went for £450,000 and they had to invest another £200,000 in repairs, so it is impossible for young families, even natives of the island, to remain here unless they inherit. Also, because

the island belongs to the National Trust of Scotland, which is focused on preserving the island's nature and historical heritage, it is very hard to get permission to build. There is, however, a dedicated group which has been working for years to develop affordable housing for some young resident families.

RTE: Thirteen hundred years ago, Iona was a great center of learning. Do you have a school?

JANA: A few years ago there was only one child left and our one-room grammar school was in danger of being closed, but now we have twenty-one children in the Iona school. There is a very good head teacher here who does most of the instruction, plus visiting Gaelic language, art, and singing teachers. The first few years are focused on play and creativity, and the children have been certified as junior guides by Historic Scotland, so they dress up as Columba's monks and show visiting children around and tell them about the abbey.

After grammar school the children go to a boarding school in Oban on the Scottish mainland and return on weekends. This means that they have to quickly learn to be responsible for themselves, and as parents we have to be able to let go quite early. Generally these children cope well in later life. In earlier times the children only managed to get home for special occasions: Christmas, Easter, harvest time, so we are grateful.

There is also a small library on the island, built by the Scottish philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who made his fortune in America and then did so many good things for Scotland and America with his money. We also use it for meetings and concerts.

RTE: Has Gaelic survived in the Inner Hebrides, or is this a reintroduction?

JANA: The language survived to some extent. The last native Gaelic speaker on Iona died a few years ago, but across the sound on Mull some families still speak it at home. Until twenty years ago Gaelic was discouraged, but now it is definitely encouraged: you see signposts in both languages and all of the children learn it although it's a difficult language and you have to be very committed.

RTE: Do you retain any of the older Gaelic cultural customs?

Opposite: Fingal's Cave, Isle of Staffa near Iona.



JANA: There are many local Hebridean island traditions that we still observe on Iona, including some about marriage. For instance, the bride and groom don't see each other the day before their marriage, and on the wedding day the groom arrives first at church and then the bride. At my wedding, we were escorted out of the abbey church with bagpipes, and then we all went down to the community hall for a wonderful meal and a joyful *cèilidh* (pronounced "khaylee"). The *cèilidh* gatherings originated in the Scottish Highlands and islands, when people used to get together to exchange the latest news, recite poetry, tell stories, sing Gaelic songs and dance together. There are local ones for the islanders year round, and also public ones during the season. In July the "Mull and Iona Piping Society" come across the Sound of Iona playing their pipes on the way up to the hall. There is usually dancing until midnight, then they sail back across the water under the moonlight, still playing the pipes.

RTE: How do you interact as a community on a day-to-day basis?

JANA: Official visitor numbers are about 150,000 from the end of March to the end of October, and people tend to work hard in the summer just to get through the winter, so it is really important to have the winter to recharge as a community. We have a population of about 180 on the island year round, and we invite one another for visits, or attend village events like a Whist Drive—an old fashioned tournament card game where you go from table to table—or for New Year (Hogmanay), which is celebrated in a big way here.

One of the Hogmanay traditions is First Footing, where you take a piece of coal, some shortbread and a bottle of whiskey to symbolize warmth, food, and good cheer, and visit houses to wish one another a happy New Year.

Nowadays, people still do help each other, which is the advantage of a small community. For example, if one of the ships is pulled off of the anchor, local people will get together to try and save it.

St. Columba, Iona Monastery, and Local Piety

RTE: Many Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican pilgrims come here because of St. Columba and the historical associations with the monastery. If I am right in thinking that most of Iona's residents are Church of Scotland or of other Protestant denominations, how do they relate to the history of the island and its saints?

JANA: It's different for each person, of course, but the reality of Iona Abbey is alive for everyone. Some people attend the services at the abbey, although we also have our own parish church that is part of the Church of Scotland. There is also a Catholic house of prayer (not a parish) mostly for visiting Catholics.

There are also many local people who have some form of faith, but don't attend services every week. I think they just accept all of this as part of the history of this beautiful island. It is a small place with a very long history.

RTE: Do you observe holidays that reflect the island history, such as St. Columba's feast day on June 9th, or the day on which sixty-three Iona monks were martyred by Vikings?

JANA: The Catholic house of prayer on the island probably remembers those anniversaries. The local Church of Scotland parish church and the Bishop's House where my husband works also keeps up some of these traditions, while the Abbey church, overseen by the Iona Community, has more ecumenical Christian services. Many Protestants would remember these events not as specific days, but as part of the long island tradition. What is really nice is when the different traditions work together. In winter, services are held in different places and they take it in turns. I know less about the Orthodox practices.



Orthodox pilgrims on Iona, August, 2014.

RTE: Orthodox Christians would celebrate the annual feastday of the saint's death and other anniversaries such as the arrival of St. Columba, the martyrdom of the monks, and so on. Although the Orthodox don't have a permanent presence on the island, individual pilgrims and Orthodox groups do come, including the Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona, who, under the chairmanship of Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia have been coming to Iona and other British and Irish sites associated with St. Columba, his disciples, and various Celtic-tradition saints since 1997.



JANA: Everyone who lives here is fully aware that the island's economy is dependent on the interest in its history as well as the beauty of local nature. For instance, 2013 marked the 1450th anniversary of St. Columba's landing at Pentecost in 563, and there was a great deal of interest and investment in celebrating this.

The program included official visits by politicians and special church services; one of the nicest things was a group from Ireland who built a *currach* like the one Columba came to the island in, which they rowed from Ireland to Iona. They recreated his journey and afterwards worked with the children in the school to create a "Book of Iona". The children made their own paper and wrote stories about island life. The book was beautifully illustrated and bound with leather and jewels. When it was finished, there was a lovely music and theatre presentation and the book was blessed before they took it back to Derry, whose patron saint is also Columba. It was wonderful to reestablish the connections between Iona and Ireland.

RTE: This wasn't the first attempt to reconstruct Columba's boat. Wallace Clark, the father of Bruce Clark, who has been the secretary of Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona for many years, was also involved in building such a replica in 1963, which was also rowed from Ireland to Iona.

St. Columba's Monastery and the Restored Abbey

RTE: What can you tell us about the restored abbey complex?

JANA: The restored twentieth-century abbey, of course, is central to the history of Iona and a major draw for pilgrims, and it is worth telling that story briefly. St. Columba arrived with his monks in 563, and the community had about two hundred years of peace. We know of six Viking raids since the first in 794, and the following centuries saw cycles of rebuilding and ruin until the Benedictine monks and nuns and later Augustinian nuns came in the 1200s.

After the Reformation the Benedictine abbey and Benedictine and Augustinian nunneries fell into ruin. In 1899, the 8th Duke of Argyle gave the abbey and the graveyard to the Iona Cathedral Trust under the condition that the church should be rebuilt and available for ecumenical worship. The church was rebuilt in 1910 but the other buildings were still in ruins

Opposite: Ruins of twelfth-century Augustinian convent, Iona.

until George MacLeod, a Church of Scotland minister from a poor area of Glasgow, stepped in. He felt that if unemployed men could do some practical work together they would come closer to God and to each other, and that their faith would be more relevant. He brought a group of these Glasgow workers and some divinity students to Iona in the 1930s and stone by stone, they rebuilt the abbey buildings. There were amazing stories, such as once when the community had run out of building supplies until a passing ship from Norway laden with wood ran aground. The wood was washed up on the shores of Mull, and when the Iona Community told the captain about what terrible things the Norwegian Vikings had done here, he gave them the wood they needed to continue. The roof of the refectory was built with that wood.



Met. Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia and pilgrims serving at St. Oran's Chapel.

RTE: What can you tell us about the Iona Community, and are many of the island's residents members?

JANA: The Iona Community was founded in 1938 and was originally only for men, but later women wanted to join as well, and now it is an ecumenical community of both men and women. There are about 270 full members, a few of whom actually live on the island, and many more associate members who live all over the UK and abroad. It's not the grass-root movement it used to be and that brings its own challenges, but the members are all people who try to live out their faith for a better world, including projects including faith issues, environment, and peace and justice.

Only a small number of Iona's residents are members. I am not a member of the Iona Community, although like many people here, I've worked for them. The abbey is still a major part of island life, and I was married there.

RTE: What parts of the restored abbey and the ruins mean the most to you personally, and how do they interface with the life of people on the island?

JANA: One of the places I particularly love is the ruins of the Augustinian nunnery, one of only two Augustinian nunneries in Scotland. I find it very

peaceful to come here and just sit in the ruins, as do my children. This is also a great place for hiding Easter eggs (which is not part of the Scottish tradition, so we introduced it). Some parents come together on Easter afternoon to hide eggs and then the children scurry around to find them. You're still finding them weeks later.

Another place I love is St. Oran's chapel and graveyard. St. Oran's chapel is the oldest building on the island, and was the burial chapel for the Clan MacDonald of Isla, who were responsible for inviting the monks and nuns to the island. It's a beautiful building with marvelous acoustics, and I stopped to listen to you all singing this morning.

There were marvelous grave slabs in the churchyard which have been removed to the abbey for protection from weather. They are often inscribed with figures of abbots or bishops and even the smallest details have meaning. For example, on a bishop's grave slab, his crozier or Episcopal staff points outwards to symbolize his authority over a greater area, while an abbot's staff points inward to denote his local authority. Only saints and abbots were buried in the church itself. Other grave slabs now in the cloister portray Viking long ships, perhaps from a Norwegian noble.

In medieval times three roads came together near the abbey, and the fork leading to St. Oran's was the "Road of the Dead." Tradition says that forty-eight Scottish kings, eight Norwegian kings, and four Irish kings have been buried here, as close as possible to the shrine of St. Columba, which was the holiest place on the island.

Speaking of the community interface with this history, last year an Iona man died on the island and there was a traditional funeral where the men of the island all came together to dig the grave, for two minutes each. The funeral procession started from the house and the men took it in turns to carry the coffin to the graveyard and again took turns filling in the grave. This is a very lovely custom. Argyll Bute Council has wanted to take this tradition away, but there was a huge outcry, so I'm hoping it will remain.

Another thing that we live with and see daily as we walk about the island is the monastic art and particularly the stone sculpture. We are very proud that the *Book of Kells* with its beautiful illuminations of the Gospel was produced here. That early Columban monks living in wood and reed huts were able to turn out such an exquisite treasure is astonishing.

The monks were equally talented at carving and in the fourteenth century a school of stone carving was established here from which came some inter-

esting Celtic motifs. For instance, the snake was often used by the Celtic Christians as a symbol for baptism and renewal of life, because when curled up it had no beginning and no end. Also the symbol for the Holy Ghost in later Celtic tradition is not the dove, but the wild goose.

The oldest high cross carved on the island still in its original place is the eighth-century cross of St. Martin of Tours. The large cross in front of the abbey is a beautiful copy of the St. John's cross that once stood here (the original is now in the museum). It was so tall and had such wide arms that in stormy weather it kept collapsing, so the monks added the distinctive Celtic ring to the center to support the arms, which also symbolizes eternity and the halo. When the sun shines in the afternoon, the shadow of this wonderful cross falls across the entrance to St. Columba's shrine.

RTE: What can you say about the original Columban abbey?

JANA: In Columba's time the abbey would have been very different – a much smaller church built of wood and covered with reed, as were the monks' cells. The restored abbey that we have now was first built by the Benedictines in the 1200's. Although the Benedictines built their abbey on the foundations of Columba's original monastery, the only part of the original Columban site that we are sure of is the line of buried earthworks that you can see in the field to the left as you face the abbey, an earthen ditch that surrounded the monastery that would have separated the holy from the secular.

The abbey church was originally built in the shape of a simple cross, but after Columba's death more and more pilgrims came to the island, mostly to pray before the relics of St. Columba for forgiveness, healing, and heavenly aid. Later, the church was rebuilt and extended to the east and south. The north chapel is the earliest remaining part of the church and contains some Romanesque-type archways. You can also see later pillar carvings such as Adam and Eve with the Tree of Life and Christ's Resurrection, but you can also see scenes from daily life, such as a currach like the boat St. Columba sailed in, a cat, and even a monkey. In medieval times the abbey would have been frescoed and very colorful, but when it was restored they decided to leave the natural stone.

The later Benedictine windows would have been of lead glass, but now we have several colorful stained glass windows of Sts. Columba, Brigid, Patrick

Opposite: Iona Beach, ferry landing.



and Margaret of Scotland, who is believed to have had a hand in building St. Oran's Chapel. The Irish saints are remembered at each Sunday service.

The abbey is a living building, and many church groups come here. The Iona Community can accommodate fifty guests at a time at the abbey and fifty guests at the MacLeod Center behind the hill, so we might have up to one hundred guests worshipping together at 9:00 in the morning and 9:00 in the evening. There is a pilgrimage offered around the island each Tuesday—a walk with a reflection and a prayer at different sites such as Columba's Bay and at the site of the hermit's cell where St. Columba prayed.

There isn't any heating in the abbey church and much fewer people come to the winter services, so in the fall, the Bible, cross, and other movable church goods are carried in procession to the smaller St. Michael's Chapel behind the abbey. At Christmas, services are held again in the big church for ten days, but because the midwinter wind is biting cold, everyone wears layers of clothes and many people bring hot water bottles. The communion bread for the Iona Community service is baked in the abbey kitchen, as are oat cakes that are given out after the service.

As you stand in front of the abbey looking towards the entrance, there is a rocky outcropping that is called the Abbot's Hill. We know much about Columba's life from Adomnán, an Iona monk writing a century after Columba's death in 587, who perhaps knew monks who had known him. He describes how Columba used to sit on a hill overlooking the Iona Sound to do his writing. During excavations of this hill, archeologists found the foot of a high cross, which would have marked a place of importance, so it does seem probable that Columba had his writing hut up there. Another interesting element of this hill is that the stony outcropping is Lewisian Gneiss, one of the oldest rocks in the world.

Saint Columba's Shrine

The center of the abbey and the focus of medieval pilgrimage would have been Columba's shrine, which held the relics of the saint and which we know of only from historical writings. Today the site of the shrine is connected to the abbey church, but the foundations underneath are from St. Columba's time. We also know that at the time of the Benedictines, Columba's hand was still enshrined here in a reliquary, as was his cloak, staff and hand bell, all of which are now in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

RTE: Thank you. Perhaps we can end with some beautiful lines about the repose of St. Columba from Adomnan's *Life* of the saint, and the hope of Christians everywhere:

The venerable body of our holy patron was wrapped in pure linen and was buried in the chosen grave with all due reverence from where he will arise in bright everlasting light. ✦

Jana McLellan is available to guide Iona's English- and German-speaking visitors and pilgrims around the island, whether your interest be nature, history, spirituality, or daily life on the island. You may contact her at: janamclellan@btinternet.com, or by telephone: +44 1681 700558.