

God  
Under  
My  
Roof



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CELTIC SONGS AND  
BLESSINGS

ESTHER DE WAAL



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# THE GREAT GOD OF LIFE





THOMAS MERTON tells the story of the Zen master who asked a postulant presenting himself at the monastery gate, “Why do you seek such a thing [i.e. the truth about Zen Buddhism] here? Why do you wander about neglecting your own precious treasure at home?” (*Thomas Merton on Zen*, Introduction by Irmgard Schloegl, 1976, p. 54). It is a parable that we would do well to take to heart, for it suggests the relevance of our interest in these treasures of the Celtic tradition. Why do we wander about neglecting our own precious treasure at home [in the United Kingdom]? Recent years have seen the enormous growth in exploration of other religious traditions, particularly those of the East; yet have we not failed to recognize

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the wealth of a tradition much nearer to us, a tradition “at home” in our own native islands? Why do we not seek our “precious treasure” very literally “at home”? Every form of spiritual exercise or new therapy derived from the East, or even from the West, is seized on with excitement, but the possibility of finding God in our everyday lives, in the prosaic and the mundane, has not caught the popular imagination with any excitement.

These Celtic prayers and poems (the two are inseparable since to ask God for his blessing is already to have acknowledged his gift), the legacy of the simple farming and fishing people in the Hebrides, are shot through with an awareness of God’s presence that can speak to men and women of today. Their sense of God’s immediacy in daily living is precisely what so many people are urgently searching for today, as they struggle to acquire techniques of “mindfulness” or to practice the contemplative approach in daily living. The selfconscious approach of our contemporaries would, of course, have been totally alien to a

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people who found it entirely natural to see God in every moment and at every level of their ordinary life. They walked with God, with Mary and the saints, addressing them tenderly and familiarly, and involving them in whatever they were doing. The material things of daily life almost inevitably became a way to God for a people who always speak of soul and body with equal respect and for whom the borderline of secular and sacred seems irrelevant. Their prayers were songs, and as they crooned or intoned them, they seem close to the continuous prayer the Orthodox describe as a murmur in the heart.

It is always easy to pursue parallels between religious traditions, and it would not be difficult to find much in common not only with Orthodoxy but also with the Hebrew attitude to man or with Eastern teaching on “awareness.” But it is a more creative exercise to let these poems speak for themselves. They come from a people with their own particular genius, and it will be sufficient if they explain themselves to us as

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a gift of grace, if they can touch our hearts and enrich our vision. It is not my intention here to enter into any academic, historical or theological discussion of the Celtic tradition which these poems reflect. Anyone who wishes to pursue the subject further may enjoy the anthology which I published with A.M. Allchin, *Daily Readings for Prayers & Praises in the Celtic Tradition*, Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois, and also selections from the *Carmina Gadelica* which I edited in *Celtic Vision*, St Bede's Publications, Petersham, Mass. For an overall discussion of Celtic Christianity see *Every Earthly Blessing, Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan and *The Celtic Way of Prayer, the Recovery of the Religious Imagination*, Doubleday, New York, 1997.

The poems we will be considering, the *Carmina Gadelica*,<sup>1</sup> come from the outer Hebrides, the rocky, remote and far-flung islands off the northwest coast of Scotland which were the home of a hardy pastoral and sea-going people.

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They were collected by an amazing scholar, Alexander Carmichael, who for the last forty years of the nineteenth century lived amongst these people, collecting and transcribing what had belonged hitherto to an entirely oral tradition. Like many of the greatest translators, Carmichael himself was a poet. His English renderings from the Gaelic are not only faithful, but “their grandeur and power show him as one of the translators through whom a masterpiece can be reborn in a new language” (Adam Bittleston, *The Sun Dances, Prayers and Blessings from the Gaelic*, 1960, xi). Since many of those to whom he listened were already welladvanced in years, much of the material in the *Carmina Gadelica* would now be almost certainly two hundred years old, though Carmichael would claim that much went back to the seventeenth century, and also contained even older elements.

The pattern of life in the outer Hebrides up to the present century when evictions, emigration and education changed everything drastically,

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was simple. Here were crofting and fishing communities in which men and women worked hard by day and in the evenings gathered together to talk and to sing. Poetry was central to their life, poetry carried on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Carmichael said of these people: "Mirth and music, song and dance, tale and poem pervaded their lives as electricity pervades the air." (*Carmina Gadelica*, I, xxxiii.) He found simple old men and women in lowly homes addressing "the great God of life, the Father of all living" in words which were at once homely and eloquent, presenting to him their needs and desires, fully and familiarly, and yet also with awe and deference.

There was little in their poetry of what is popularly assumed to characterize something Celtic, something typically misty or mystical, or vaguely pantheistic. Rather these Gaelic people found it quite natural to bring into their prayers and poems the vigour, honesty and incisive humour of their daily lives. What also in particular

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makes these poems unique is that, unlike the much better known bardic poetry, “these poems are private; they reveal what is not usually revealed to strangers and outsiders.” (G.R.D. McLean, *Poems of the Western Highlanders*, SPCK 1961, xxvii.) Carmichael tells of an episode in which one old man, having allowed him to take down a “going to sleep” rune, traveled twenty-six miles the following morning to see him again and to exact a pledge that his “little prayer” should never be allowed to appear in print. “I should not like cold eyes to read it in a book.” (Op. cit., IV, xxxi.) Carmichael therefore destroyed it (and it is lost to us, as is so much of this rich treasury—stamped out, destroyed, dispersed).

Although certain of these songs or prayers—and it is significant that it is impossible to draw any distinction between the two—were designed for communal gatherings and rituals, most were meant to be sung privately, intoned softly or crooned secretly. Catherine Macphee, a cottar, after giving Carmichael a night-shielding poem,

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described how the women sang these verses at the time of going to sleep, then she added: “the people of that day were full of hymns and prayers, full of music and songs, full of joy and innocent merriment. By the Book itself, you would not ask but to be hearing them, however long the night, however wild the weather, however miry the road, however dark the night going homeward.” (Op. cit., III, 350-1.)

Perceiving a world in which the divisions of sacred and secular seemed irrelevant, these Gaelic people found God lovingly concerned with all aspects of their lives and felt themselves walking not only in his presence but close to the saints and angels too. Almost as a matter of course they assumed that they were surrounded by a multitude of spiritual beings, near throughout the day and nearer still in the hours of sleep. The involvement of the saints, and above all, the involvement of Mary and Michael, Columba and Brigit, was taken for granted and forms a constant subject of great numbers of poems.

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The holy apostles' guarding,  
The gentle martyrs' guarding,  
The nine angels' guarding,  
    Be cherishing, be aiding me.

The quiet Brigit's guarding,  
The gentle Mary's guarding,  
The warrior Michael's guarding,  
    Be shielding, be aiding me.

The God of the elements guarding,  
The loving Christ's guarding,  
The Holy Spirit's guarding,  
    Be cherishing, be aiding me.

(III, 106-7)

1. *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations with Illustrative Notes of Words, Rites and Customs Dying and Obsolete*: Orally collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland by Alexander Carmichael, see acknowledgement. References given in this study are to volume and page number.