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## **St Maelrhuba** *by Patsy Dyer*

There's been a settlement at a place called Kilmory Oib in Knapdale since at least the medieval times but there is a great deal of mystery about this place. Some of the history is hidden in its name, Kilmory Oib. Oib refers to the land. It means an inlet in the sea. Kil is Gaelic for a monk's cell or a chapel but mysteriously neither of these have been found yet. And 'mory', that is the derivation of the name of a very early Celtic monk, St Maelrhuba.

We know that Maelrhuba was born in Derry 642. The date is very precise because it was recorded in the Annals of Ulster. They also tell us that he came from an illustrious line of ancestors. He was descended from Niall of the Nine Hostages, a near mythical king of Ulster. His mother Subtan was the neice of the great Saint Comgal. Comgal lived in Dalriada, Ulster and founded the great monastery in Bangor.

Maelrhuba also studied at the monastery and at round about the age of 30, he decided he was to take the teachings of his Christian faith over to Scotland as did Columba 40 years previous to that.

So with a group of devout monks, Maelrhuba set sail over the rough seas of Ireland in a small leather-bound boat. He travelled for about two years in Argyll. Knapdale has itself three sites dedicated to the saint. There's more than half a dozen in Argyll and in Scotland over a hundred and

thirty. He was a very popular saint and was known as a great missionary saint and his holy days are celebrated annually with fairs and celebrations.

But did this saint really come to Kilmory? We may never know. It is a mystery.

Did he come and set up a community site of worship? Did he just come here for its serenity? A place of prayer. Or perhaps he came here as he'd heard of a group of pagans who were worshipping and holding rituals over a well. A well dedicated to a pagan god of water. For Kilmory Oib possesses a holy well and a standing stone carved on either side with a cross. It's well known that holy wells were once considered portals to magic other worlds, that early Celtic monks tried very hard to stop the pagans from worshipping such sites. This was incredibly difficult, in fact, it very rarely succeeded and most pagan worships of wells had to be incorporated into the Christian faith.

Maelrhuba became well associated with wells all over Scotland and there were two points of which he was very highly revered. One was that you could be cured of insanity. The other, you could be made incredibly fertile. The well at Kilmory Oib is lined by stone and this might represent the fact that people once stood in it or sat in it to be blessed or cured. We may never know. But also another mystery about the saint is that he was associated with a very early pagan god, Mourie. Mourie was a pagan god of the moon. Early agrarian people in Scotland would worship this god and certain things would be performed at certain times of the moon being in certain phases, for example, cattle would be slaughtered and the willow would be cut for making baskets at full moon. It may be thought a little far fetched for Saint Maelrhuba and this god to be associated with Kilmory Oib but maybe not. If

you look at the carving at one side of the stone, there is a cross, several birds, some undistinguished animals and two round spheres. Perhaps these spheres are meant to be the sun and the moon. Nobody knows. Another one of those mysteries. But it is known that in a record in the late 1600s in one part of Scotland, people were still known to sacrifice bulls on St Maelrhuba's day.

Another mystery about Saint Maelrhuba. He has two saints days. In Ireland, his saints day that commemorates his death is April the 21st. In Scotland, it's August the 27th. In Scotland, they say St Maelrhuba was martyred by invasions of the Danes and slaughtered. In Ireland, they say that he died at the age of 80 and there was no killing involved

Some people think that his life was confused with a Saint Rufus. We may never know.

So a lot of secrets, a lot of mysteries and you may think a little bit of madness about Saint Maelrhuba and Kilmory Oib. And if you feel a little bit of this madness, don't worry. As the saying goes, that person needs nothing but a drop in St Maelrhuba's well.

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