**In the Footsteps of Senan of Inis Cathaigh**

In a quiet corner of south-west Clare, in the townland of Querrin overlooking the Shannon Estuary, the tradition of devotion to the fourth century Coptic Christian Saint Martin of Tours prevails. Indeed the locals who worship at the shrine every November talk about his close relationship with their own local saint, Senan in terms of kinship as well as friendship.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although the two men could not have met as Martin was dead when Senan visited his monastery in Tours in Gaul, the belief and strength of the connection still prevails.

Saint Senan of Inis Cathaigh is not the most well known of the Irish early Chrisitan saints and the names of his contemporaries such as Kevin of Glendalough and Ciaran of Clonmacnoise are far more well known and popular names for boys throughout Ireland and beyond. Outside County Clare and more specifically west Clare, few children are given the name Senan and indeed anyone meeting someone called Senan, almost always finds they are in some way connected to the area. However, little known as he is today, in the late fifth and early sixth century Ireland, he was recognized as a leader of the emerging Christian Church and one of the twelve apostles of Ireland.

As with many of his contemporaries, the life of Senan is veiled in mythical tales of magic and mystery. Some of these stories are local folklore and tell of an almost overly sanctimonious youth who rebuked his mother, Congella for picking berries in what he considered a time of abstinence. He is also said to have cleared a pathway through the Shannon Estuary to drive cattle across the bay in a feat reminiscent of Moses himself. Other stories are similar to other Christian saints who did battle with all manner of beasts and monsters to banish evil from their midst. In Senan’s case it is said, he banished the cathaigh (serpent) from Inis Cathaigh with the help of St Michael the Arch Angel and sent him north to Doolough Lake near Miltown Malbay.

What then is known of the real Senan, the man, the seeker who travelled far in search of truth and faith and eventually returned to his native place to found a great monastery? Well for the facts, we have to rely on what was written long after his death although it is said his successor Odhran of Inis Cathaigh did write a biography of Senan, it has long vanished. Instead we rely on the 17th century writings of Father John Colgan in his work *Acta Sanctorum Hibernae.* This was put together from the ancient Irish manuscripts collected throughout Ireland and brought to Louvain where many of the banished Irish monks were then based. In 1974, Senan Hedderman, a Franciscian Friar based in Ennis, put together a short biography of Senan of Inish Cathaigh based on those writings.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Senan was born around 488AD in the townland of Moylougha near what is now the town of Kilrush. In those times, it was the territory of Corca Baiscinn and comprised of the west Clare peninsula stretching from Miltown Malbay in the north to Loop Head in the far west and extended east and south to the villages of Kildysart and Kilmihil. It is said that his parents, Congella and Ercan were Christians in a time when the old Druidic faith would still have prevailed and Christianity was by no means the dominant religion. This part of Ireland is not recorded as part of St Patrick’s mission but may have been introduced to the faith by earlier Christians from Britain or mainland Europe.

Senan’s family appear to have been well to do landowners but Senan already noted for his piety, sought further instruction in the faith. He first studied under a monk named Cassidus who came to live in the west Clare Peninsula and of whom little else is known. Once Senan had learned all he could from Cassidus, he began a journey that it is said lasted for many years and was quest for knowledge and faith. He studied first at the monastery at Kilnamanagh and there was said to have been ordained a priest. He was now ready to become a leader and in time, he left Kilnamanagh and set up a monastic cell (church) at what is now Enniscorthy. This would have been his first foray into setting up his own community but Senan ever the seeker, decided to go to the root of the Christian faith and to make a pilgrimage to Rome. Little is written in Fr Hedderman’s booklet about his time in Rome, but he does state that on his return journey he visits the monastery and shrine of St Martin at Tours and what is then Roman Gaul. Martin is considered one of the founders of monasticism in Europe and recognized as part of the Orthodox tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Although already drawn to monasticism, it seems it is here that Senan finds in Martin’s wake the ascetic ideal that he will endeavour to follow and indeed recreate in Ireland. It is not known how long he spent at Tours but the fact that his name is recognized at Tours indicates he may have stayed some time and made an impression on the place and its people. However, like many another exile, he was drawn to home and in time began his return journey. Here again the wanderer in his nature comes through and before returning to Ireland, he spends time with the abbot David of Wales and may also have spent time in Cornwall.

By the time he reached Ireland, Senan was likely to have been a late middle-aged man and one who had a great deal of life experience and religious teaching under his belt. He now set up a monastery of his own, The manuscripts states that he first set up a cell (church) in what is now Spike Island in Cork before moving on to Iniscarra also in Cork and whilst he was here, it is said that fifty monks from Europe visited. From Inis Carra, he travelled to Inisluinghe an island in the Shannon, where he is said to have received the daughters of the local chieftain into religious life. He moved from there to Mutton Island and then Bishop’s Island before finally finding the place that would be forever associated with his name, Inis Cathaigh a mere stone’s throw from Moylougha where he started his journey.

His monastery at Inis Cathaigh thrived and was known as a place of learning and devotion throughout Ireland and beyond. It is here that Senan seems to have found his destiny and the manuscripts note the high regard he was held in by other churchmen throughout the country. Indeed it is said that both Ciaran of Clonmacnoise and Brendan of Birr took spiritual direction from Senan who was said to have been a bishop as well as an abbot. Indeed one of the miracles associated with Senan is said to have taken place on the visit of these men when a bell (cloig an oir) appeared from heaven and the sound of the bell followed Senan wherever he went. Today, part of the bell is housed in the British Museum and part in the National Museum in Dublin. The monastery at Inis Cathaigh thrived in the centuries following his death although it was later invaded by Vikings and a great battle was fought there by Brian Boru. Inis Cathaigh was a diocese until the 13th century and a monastic site until Elizabethan times when the reformation finally reached the Shannon Estuary.

Little hard fact is known about Senan but from the manuscripts and the documented records of his travels, something of the man breaks through. He was a seeker and a wanderer and he does not appear to have settled until late in life and then he returned to his native place. Arguably it is here, his destiny manifests with his founding of the great monastery at Inis Cathaigh. He was known for his austerity and this may be also part of his connection with Martin who was also an ascetic whose monasticism owed much to the hermetic tradition of the Desert Fathers[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed Senan’s austerity was said to be so extreme even for its time that one contemporary noted:

In the practice of austerity he was more to be admired than imitated[[5]](#footnote-5)

The story of Senan and his travels and particularly his connection to Tours needs to be further explored. He is many ways a forgotten saint outside his own place but his significance as an early Irish monk who visited a Europe soon to enter the Dark Ages when Christianity was almost lost, deserves further research. The knowledge of Christianity and in particular the monastic tradition he brought back from Tours was returned when men such as Columbanus reignited the flame of Christianity in a time of darkness. It is also to be noted that Columbanus on his arrival in Europe made his way to Tours where he prayed at Martin’s grave. The townland of Querrin is far removed from the great cathedral and shrine at Tours, but it may be that this quiet corner of west Clare really does signify the link between Martin of Tours and Senan of Inis Cathaigh.

1. Mag Fhloinn, Billy. “Martinmas Tradition in South-West County Clare: A Case Study.” *Béaloideas*, vol. 75, 2007, pp. 79–108. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20520924. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hedderman, Senan, *Life of St. Senan, Bishop of West Clare,* (Ennis, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://oca.org/saints/lives/2019/11/11/103285-saint-martin-the-merciful-the-bishop-of-tours>, acccessed 12 April, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mag Fhloinn, Billy. “Martinmas Tradition in South-West County Clare: A Case Study.” *Béaloideas*, vol. 75, 2007, pp. 79–108. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20520924. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hedderman, Senan, *Life of St. Senan, Bishop of West Clare,* (Ennis, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)