

75 YEARS OLD AND STILL GOING STRONG.

9th June 1994, the feast day of St Columba, was the 75th anniversary of the inauguration of the Knights of St Columba. This was celebrated with Mass in London by the Supreme Knight, Tony Britten, and about 120 Knights and their wives drawn from all over the country, in a most unusual location, the Houses of Parliament.

It all started with an invitation to tea in the Members Dining Room from the M.P. for Bournemouth East, Mr David Atkinson, to the Supreme Knight. It then transpired that on the same afternoon Mass was to be celebrated in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft in the House of Commons, to ask for help and guidance to the new members of the European Parliament, for that same day was the day of the General Election. The Supreme Knight and his party were invited to attend this Mass, prior to taking tea. Mass is regularly celebrated in St Mary Undercroft for Catholic M.P.'s and staff of the Palace of Westminster, but this appeared to be the first time that an outside organisation had been given the privilege of attending Mass here perhaps, who knows, since the Reformation. St Mary Undercroft was originally the private chapel to the Palace of Westminster and forms with the Great Hall the only surviving portion of the original Palace. Tea, in the members' Dining Room follows an age-old ritual - white damask tablecloths, cucumber sandwiches, strawberries and cream - taking place in a room overlooking a spell-binding view of the Thames and Westminster Bridge.

Many of those present at the House of Commons rushed off afterwards to Scotland to take part in the Order's annual pilgrimage to Iona, the place where St Columba and 12 companions established the first community in 563 A.D.

Columba was born in 521 A.D. at Gartan in Donegal, a member of the royal clan of Niall, and was trained as a monk by Finnian of Moville and then by Finnian of Clonard, finishing up at

Glasnevin. He then spent 15 years travelling, preaching and setting up monasteries at Derry(546), Durrow(556) and probably at Kells. Ultimately a dispute arose with Finnian over a copy which Columba had made of a psalter of St Jerome belonging to Finnian. Columba refused to hand it over and Finnian appealed to Diarmuid, the high King of Ireland. Diarmuid ruled that just as a calf belongs to the owner of the cow its mother so the ownership of any copy made remained with Finnian. Columba still resisted and incited the clan Niall to fight Diarmuid's troops at the so-called Battle of the Book at Cuildeimhne(a village called Carney near Sligo). The battle was won by the clan Niall but at the cost of 3000 dead. Filled with remorse at the bloodshed for which he blamed himself, Columba left Ireland and thereafter devoted himself to the Irish in Scotland who lived mainly in the islands of the West. He visited Ireland again only for a few brief visits. He converted Brude the King of the Picts and the Irish King, Aidan of Dalriada.

Columba's monastery at Iona and the influence of his followers were important factors in the development of western Christianity. His monastic traditions persisted until superseded by the Benedictine Order and the Roman practices adopted by St Cuthbert.

Columba had an imposing personality, an austere manner and was passionate in supporting causes he believed in. He was a prolific scribe and three major Latin poems of his still survive. He was also a bard and preserved their order from extinction. He died at Iona in 597, the year St Augustine landed in Kent with the mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons. He was initially buried at Iona but in 849 his relics were transferred to Dunkeld to save them from the depredations of the Vikings. This then was the patron whom our founders adopted when in 1919 they started the Knights of St Columba in Glasgow.