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Iona: Touchstone for Reconciliation

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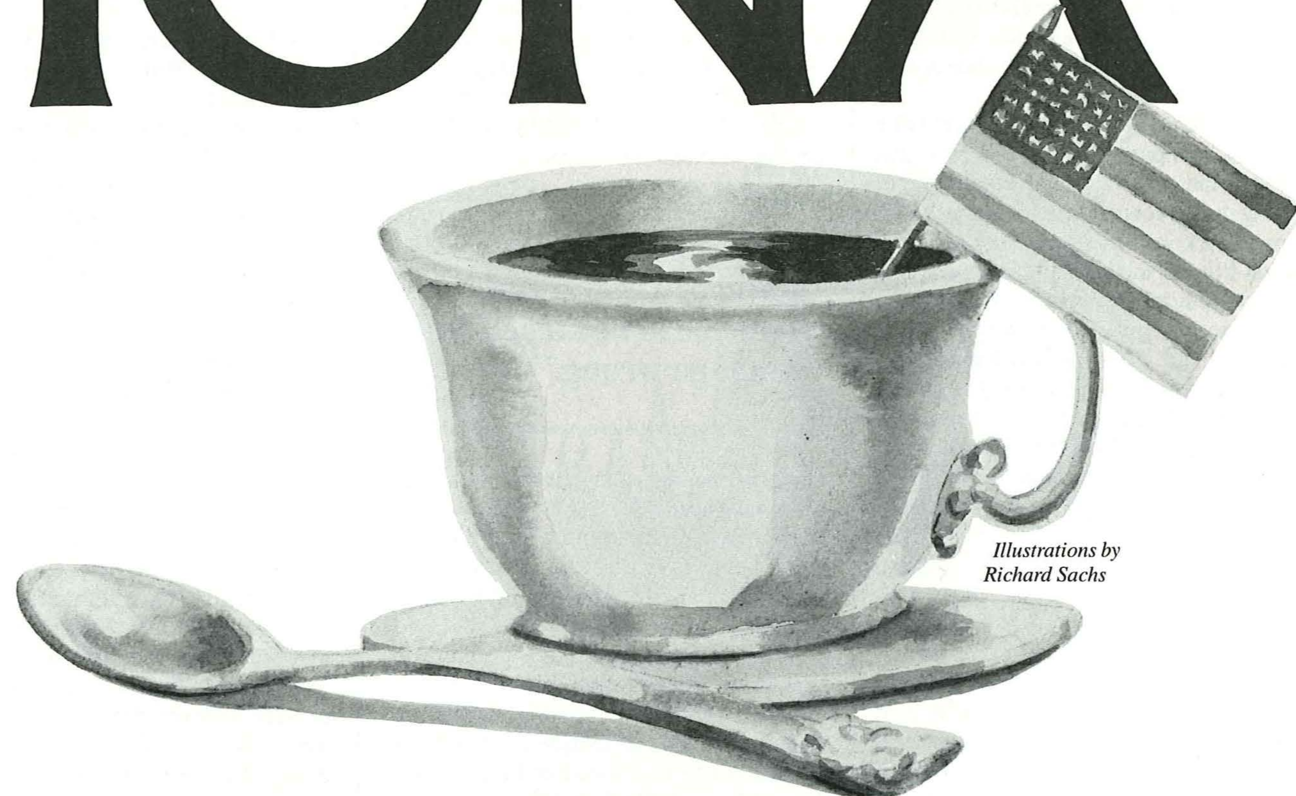
TOUCHSTONE FOR RECONCILIATION

IONA



Illustrations by Richard Sachs

REFLECTIONS OF AN AMERICAN ABROAD

By William J. Rewak, S.J.

"What do you mean, I don't know your name. Of course, I know your name. We've been doing this for over a week now."

"But you don't call me by my name."

"That's silly. Eat your roast beef."

"All we do is sit and eat and you yell at the waitress. Why couldn't we have taken the table she wanted us to take? That's the way they do it in British hotels. You have a table assigned to your room."

"Now just shut up. I'm paying the bill; that's all they're interested in. In that way, at least, they're modern."

I was sitting at the table next to them, in the Brennan Hotel in Oban, Scotland. An old Victorian structure, it was used to a more genteel clientele: jeans paraded through the dusty chandeliered dining room now, and lazy American accents echoed down nearly empty hallways. The carpet on the grand staircase was threadbare.

But the waitresses and the woman at the desk were most polite. If they were forced to live simply, and if they were often dependent on small tips dispensed by unmannered Americans, they did not seem to mind. Back in the kitchen, or in their "bed-sit" in the evening, they might grumble to a sympathetic ear, but we Americans can almost always act irresponsibly in the British Isles without fear of even an indignant eyebrow.

The conversation next to me was continuing in a more abrasive and too personal mode, so I got up and started to leave. As I pushed my chair toward the table, I sneaked a look at them. She was pretty, he was magisterial; she had her hands clutched tightly between her legs, he had his stacked like marble bookends on either side of his plate. I wanted to look at her, to acknowledge my sympathy, but I knew it was better to leave the troubles where they were. I walked out.

What could I have done? An American traveling in western Scotland has no right to educate other Americans, arrogant though they may be, on the proper protocol in British hotels. Especially when they're an unmarried man and woman.

Out behind the hotel and toward the low eastern hills that marched toward the grand symmetry of Ben Nevis, the countryside was filled with purple rhododendrons; and as I walked down a curving path, with the purple crowding in on either side, I thought of Henry James. Years ago, he sat in Lamb House in Rye, in the southeast of England, and wrote about the conjunction of the old and new cultures. And if he thought the old world conventions were sterile — because they were simply conventions — he also criticized the new world because it had not yet allowed itself time to create conventions; it remained rude and uncut. The new had a vitality and sparkle that had long since died in the old culture, but it did not know yet how to channel that vitality for productive and pleasurable human commerce. One culture had gone beyond the childbearing age; the other had not yet reached puberty.

I have to admit to an impatience with James. Once, many years ago, I took a summer course in Fordham and had to read ten of his novels in six weeks. My sensibility was refined to death. Since then, I have seldom been able to read him with any perceptible enjoyment. That is a function of my own immaturity, perhaps; I'm waiting for the right moment. To read James, we have to be able to see the whole world in an offhand remark or notice the crumbling of a personality in the flutter of a handkerchief. I'll get there. Sometime.

> **"He may have had hair on his chest, but his mind... had yet to reach puberty."**

But he is perceptive on that relationship between America and Europe. We were once pilgrims fleeing to a promised land, and now we're pilgrims returning to the ruins and holy places of a landscape that burns in the back of our imaginations, that beckons like the ghost of Hamlet's father. But the problem is that we are not always sensitive to the holy places. Nor have we learned the emotional and conventional response that dovetails with the stimulus.

I recall several years ago attending a performance of John Webster's "Duchess of Malfi" at Stratford-on-Avon. Interestingly enough, the audience was mostly British, but in front of me sat a family of three — father, mother, son — from somewhere in the southern United States (the musical and honeyed accent was rather pleasant). The father, at least, had left his ten-gallon hat at home, but his girth did preclude a totally unobstructed view of the dramatic proceedings.

I can understand his fidgeting during the dumb show when the duchess is banished for giving birth to three supposedly illegitimate children: the convention is not easy and the gestures are melodramatic in the extreme. I can accept his gulping two gins during the intermission: Renaissance politics in dubious iambic pentameter, laced with surreptitious assignations and the babbling of madmen, are not ordinary fare in the southern oil fields. I don't think.

But the emotion is true. And Judi Dench as the duchess gave a powerful and plaintive performance that obviously moved the audience. At the climax of the play, however, when the duchess is strangled on stage by two executioners, each holding the end of a rope that is gradually tightened around her neck—and when one could hear a pin drop in the theater—the man without the ten-gallon hat turned to his wife and bellowed, "Get a load of that, Gertie, isn't that a hoot!"

The play proceeded; the people within 50 feet of him stayed silent; his teenage son leaned as far away from him as he could, trying to communicate at least an emotional distance; Gertie laughed with gusto.

The play did proceed. But he never realized he exhibited, in a particularly unmannered and offensive way, an insensitivity toward those who were trying to provide for him an insight into human mortality. He may have had hair on his chest, but his mind and imagination had yet to reach puberty.

I was reading Paul Theroux's book on England, *Kingdom by the Sea,* and was struck by what I consider an unwarranted biliousness and superficiality. He doesn't seem to find anything salutary about the English character, English customs, even English scenery. But the book was a popular success. Did the English buy it? Are they masochistic? Did Americans buy it? Probably. It confirms our chauvinistic nonsense. One can find all sorts of inefficiencies in the English character, and one can blame them for not wanting, at times, to be better than second-rate; but there's an honesty there — a willingness to let the 'warts show — that's appealing.

Paul Theroux was wrong: the problem in England is not putting up with the English, it's putting up with the Americans.

Anyway, I went back to the hotel and packed a few books, a couple apples, and some cookies for the boat trip the next day to Iona. I wasn't sure I wanted to do this: the weather can be rough, and the water rougher, and the boat takes ten hours to get out there and back — not counting the time spent on the island. The sky was wet and unsteady. But, I figured, this is one of the reasons I came to this part of the country. I wanted to see where St. Columba lived and, during the latter part of the sixth century, began the Christianization of the northern isles. Most visitors are impressed by its otherworldliness, and I wanted to see what was so special about it. Sam Johnson, for example, in the eighteenth century, after having dragged Boswell through all these Hebridean outposts, said, "That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the field of Marathon or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona."

At seven in the morning, I boarded the *Columba* with about a hundred other people and we set off westward, in a bit of a choppy sea and under a canopy of dark clouds, from the port of Oban and proceeded around the eastern and northern sides of the island of Mull, passing Duart Castle on the left — where the present Lord Chamberlain of England, the Lord Maclean, lives — and the small town of Lochaline on the island of Morvern on the right. Lochaline is where the remaining 36 islanders of St. Kilda's had to settle and begin their lives over again, after they were evacuated from that lonely and primitive Atlantic outpost in 1930. Their civilization had failed, and they had to walk away from its death.

> **"We visitors from another world were moving in a dimension they were not a part of."**

Off the western shore of Mull and heading south, we passed on our right the island of Staffa, a strange basaltic creation of a volcanic action that took place about 30 million years ago. The rocky but relatively smooth upper part of the island seems supported by massive hexagonal pillars, resembling the baleen of whales, all around the base. Queen Victoria, undaunted as usual by admonitions about the physical dangers of alighting on that rocky shore, visited here — as did Mendelssohn. After he toured Fingal's Cave on the island, he wrote his famous composition. So, almost predictably, as the ship passed the yawning, black mouth of the cave, the loudspeaker switched on and played the composer's "Fingal's Cave Overture." Mendelssohn's delicacy was missing: the music did battle with static.

It was clear we were sailing farther and farther away from the twentieth century,

even though we were drinking Watney's Ale at the same time.

We approached Iona. The ship stopped about a half mile offshore. We could see a small village of perhaps ten houses, a pier, and, outside the village, the Iona Abbey standing guard on the edge of the small cliff. There were no trees. And there was no sound in the air — just the slapping of the water against the sides of the boat.

A small ferryboat arrived and attached itself to the *Columba.* We could not all fit into it — after jumping across an uncomfortable foot of open sea — so it took two trips. We landed on the island on the small pier between two white beaches. The one on the left is called the Bay of Martyrs because 68 monks were slain there by the Vikings in 806 A.D. On the right, the beach is called Traigh Ban nam Monach ("White Strand of the Monks"). During a raid in 986, an army of Danes murdered the abbot and fifteen monks. It was not a safe time to be building churches.

Once on the island, some stopped at a small store to buy ice cream and postcards; some took pictures down on the beach; I followed others headed toward the Abbey. Columba built the first structure of wood there in 563; in succeeding centuries, several others were sacked by Norsemen; and the present one, built on the remains of the Benedictine monastery started around 1200, was given to the Church of Scotland by the Duke of Argyll in 1899. A small group of people, calling themselves the Iona Community, a religious organization founded by Lord Macleod of Fuinary and approved by the Church, is presently continuing the work of restoration.

It's the age of everything that is so fascinating. It's not dead, just old. And because it's so old, it's quiet and serene.

On the narrow road to the Abbey, I passed two young men and a young woman working in a vegetable garden; farther on, a bent man with a shepherd's crook was trying to get a flock of sheep across the road so a horse and buggy could continue on toward the village; and a small boy was digging a grave next to St. Mary's Chapel, the oldest ruins of the Abbey. Each was intent on the task at hand, none of them was talking, and none seemed interested in our pilgrimage. We visitors from another world were moving in a dimension they were not a part of.

As I walked through the low Abbey gate, I heard a woman, who was obviously a volunteer helping at the Abbey, speaking to one of the visitors. She was certainly an American. Middle-aged, with a round and cheery face, her brown hair brushed back simply, she wore the heavy, natural tweed that is a product of so many of these islands. When the others moved on, I approached her and asked where she was from. She smiled, recognizing my own accent, and said, "La Jolla."

I told her what I was doing there and asked her what she was doing there.

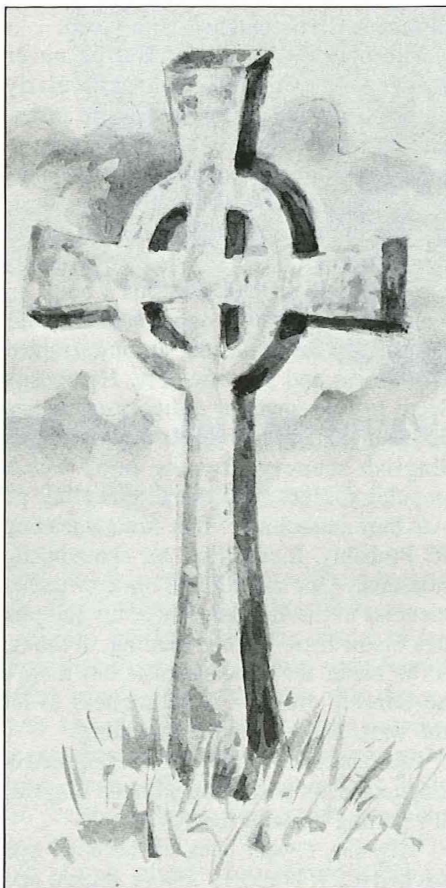
"I came here over a year ago to complete my master's thesis in history. I finished it after a couple months and then just stayed on. I couldn't leave."

"Do you work here at the Abbey all the time?"

"A small part of each day. I like to stay close to this building. May I show you around?"

And she did. I couldn't have asked for a better guide.

After pointing out the huge St. John's Cross in front of the Abbey, the first to incorporate the celtic ring and, according to her, the finest known example in the British Isles, we wandered through the Abbey: the thirteenth-century north transept, the dark cloister, the bright choir where light comes in through pale colored glass.



Celtic cross

Then she took me into the oldest part of the edifice: St. Columba's Shrine. The foundations are ancient and legend locates this spot as the burial place of St. Columba. These old, quiet stones breathe an air we are not familiar with. She pointed down along the base where the oldest ones sat: their scars saw forgotten wars and were probably chipped by Viking swords. Possibly they still felt the fear of that morning when Norse songs rang through the mist and Abbot Norbert was murdered; but if that's true, then they also still heard the medieval hymn sung on Easter morning, "Victimae Paschali Laudes."

She showed me an engraved stone on the floor in the southeastern corner: shiny, reflecting just a narrow sliver of light from a tiny window across the room. The words were indistinguishable to me, but she said you could just make out the a's and l's of "Alleluia."

She touched the stone with just the tips of her fingers, as if it were a talisman.

"We want to preserve this. So much around here is beaten away by the wind and the hail. They're fierce. But this whole place, this island, has to remain. We work hard to keep it safe."

I liked her use of the word "we."

When I left the grounds of the Abbey, I walked up a low hill to look out over the western part of the island. The wind was soft just then, and the sun broke through huge puffs of clouds onto a green landscape that was littered with boulders and threaded by stone fences. Johnson was right, you could breathe the piety: comically, it almost seeps up through the grass that the sheep were steadily munching. If I had had my New Testament with me, I would have taken it out and read aloud to that respectful, silent, but understandably inattentive audience.

I walked back to the pier, and we sailed for Oban over a calm and sunlit sea.

When I arrived at the hotel and sat for their late dinner, I noticed the couple who had been arguing the day before were not there. I couldn't help hoping that they would take the trip to Iona and that they would meet there an American woman from La Jolla who honored and respected a tradition that was not hers, who touched gently the stones of an ancient religion that was not hers, and who understood a time and a place that certainly were old but also always new.

William J. Rewak, S.J., is the president of Santa Clara University.