

Saint Petroc, the most recent icon by Michael Galovic

Written by Guy (Petroc) Freeland

St Petroc (c.468-564 (?), FD June 4), the major Celtic saint whose name I took when I was received into the Orthodox Church in 1962, is widely venerated, with many church dedications, in Cornwall and Devon, extending into Wales and Brittany. Coming from South Wales, Petroc established a monastery at Padstow, Cornwall with offshoots at Little Petherick and Bodmin. The icon portrays the Saint with the stag which fled to him for protection from the hunters. Michael has based the depiction of the event on the "White Hart" livery badge of Richard II portrayed on the famous Wilton Diptych (c.1395-1399). The Saint is also depicted carrying the stone, recorded as being placed on his tomb, which he carried as he walked from Padstow to Little Petherick (intended for the building of the Church?). It was in the parish church of St Petroc Minor, Little Petherick that my wife Jill and I were married, in accordance with the Orthodox marriage rite, in 1963.

Aesthetics is secondary with icons, but the first thing anyone would notice about Michael Galovic's icon is that it is extremely pleasing to the eye. The colours of the flowery meadow and the Saint's vesture blend in amazing harmony. With St Petroc, I think Michael has caught the unique spirituality of the Celtic Saints to a tee. This spirituality is perfectly reflected in the Prayer of St Aidan of Lindisfarne where he likens the spiritual life of the monk to the tides which cut the island off twice a day and then reconnect it with the outside world. Likewise, the monk needs to spend periods in isolated prayer and meditation, or enclosed in community, but then to venture forth on pilgrimage and to address the world – until pulled back again by the rising of the tide to the island to be alone with God.

Undoubtedly, for Petroc the whole of life would have been a pilgrimage, but within the great pilgrimage every journey, whether of empirical discovery of God's world, of mission or of ministry would have been a pilgrimage with Christ as the destination, a search for the place of the monk's

Resurrection. While Michael's Petroc has a great stillness, dispassion and inner integrity, and also benevolence (there was nothing severe, judgemental, no Hell fire preaching, about the Celtic saints), he has also captured a strong sense of motion and this is expressed in the wide-open eyes attentive to every detail of God's surrounding Creation and the gaze directed to his immediate destination, Little Petherick, not to some transcendental world with angels twanging on celestial harps.

Intensely focussed eyes in traditional iconography would have been painted in accordance with the centrifugal theory of vision believed in at the time, in which rays of light were thought to be physically generated by the eye and travel to the object on which the eye was focussed. So, there is nothing paradoxical about "motion in stillness". Petroc, though perfectly still and recollected, is wholly focussed on his destination and objective in carrying a heavy block of stone (I suspect he did it frequently while building works were underway) to Little Petherick and, even if not actually walking, is, in a real sense, none the less travelling towards his goal.

An unusual and deeply meaningful feature of the icon lies in the juxtaposition of saint and hart. Saints depicted in animal rescue mode usually have the creature (in the case of Petroc, the Vita allows the choice of wolf, deer or, yes, dragon) lying against the leg, perhaps being patted, or actually clambering up the body in the fashion of the family dog. But in this icon rescued stag and saint are turned in opposite directions, the stag's gaze directed to the viewer's left (as on the Diptych), out into the surrounding countryside the domain of deer, Petroc's to the right. There is no suggestion here of domination and submission, of possessing and possessed, the Saint respects the stag's integrity as a creature distinct from himself created by God to live a life in a deer's world. The stag rests in the love and peace of Petroc, totally trusting the Saint's protection, while not being required, as if a

sort of pet, to salute the Saint as master. On the Diptych the hart's antlers etched into the guilt undoubtedly denote the anointing of Richard II with Holy Chrism and the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, but here the antlers (which have to be discovered by close observation of the icon, the spiritual seldom leaps out at you) suggest God's sacramental consecration of deer as a unique Creation engendered by the Earth. The relationship of Saint and stag reflect that feature of Celtic spirituality everyone knows, its penetration by Green Theology. This distinctive characteristic is also strongly suggested by Michael's subtle use of a palette of greens. For Celtic Christians all of Nature was infused with the Holy Spirit and they themselves were as one with God's entire Creation.

Michael's Petroc is not an icon to be viewed across a voluminous nave to a distant iconostasis, it is a work intended for personal devotion. In fact, it is an icon of my patron Saint created for me. The icon is written in such a way that it needs to be viewed at close quarters, being packed with minute detail. The more one contemplates it, the more significant spiritual detail one discovers, and not just the consecrating antlers. Michael's creative borrowing of the Wilton Diptych for the stag and meadow has a touch of genius about it, although the idea was clearly suggested by his spotting my computer mouse mat (purchased at the National Gallery in London, which houses the Diptych) that sports a perfectly reproduced image of Richard's livery badge. Michael's employment of the Diptych witnesses to the fact that I stand between two traditions, English by virtue of my ancestry, upbringing, education and culture, and Eastern



St Petroc, 2024 an icon 38 x 30cm by Michael Galovic

Orthodox by virtue of religious belief. It also marks another step along the path Michael Galovic has been cautiously and sensitively pursuing over many years of bringing Eastern iconography and Western religious painting together harmoniously.

On a perusal of the contents of my library, Michael also spotted a propped-up photograph of a striking window of St Petroc in Bodmin which, for years, had served me as a surrogate for the icon I didn't have. With that perceptive intuition good painters always have, he immediately realised that the photograph was the key to the way I envisaged St Petroc and my communion with the Saint in prayer. The window thereby joined the Diptych as an inspiration for the icon.

Guy (Petroc) Freeland, June 2024