

The Chronicles of Iona: Exile

Paula de Fougérolles

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“Iona is not a place one visits on a whim,” says a burly Scottish warlord to the Irish abbot who plans to colonize the isle. “Beset by vile storms” and surrounded by even viler barbarian Picts, the rocky, windswept land—continues the warrior to the holy man—“must be *wooded*.”

Such is the central location where medieval historian Paula de Fougérolles has set *The Chronicles of Iona: Exile*, her sixth-century tale of faith and fighting. The author’s credentials as a scholar, linguist, and writer of academic articles and nonfiction works assure the reader that the historical details in this novel are accurate. However, it is de Fougérolles’s brilliant and vibrant prose along with her ability to tell a story that make this book a real joy.

Prolific and popular author Bernard Cornwell’s Excalibur trilogy is set in the same period and his ongoing Saxon Tales quintet covers similar themes set a few centuries later. But de Fougérolles is every bit the action writer he is and her prose is perhaps even more elegant. Her two main characters, a warrior and a saint, would fit well in any “buddy” film; they are colorful, authentic, and engaging, especially when they play off one another. To create and infuse such energy into the exciting and engrossing pairing of an Irish saint and a Scottish warlord requires more than just a writer’s skill or a historian’s appreciation; it takes a talented storyteller.

The first of de Fougérolles’s main characters, Columba, an Irish abbot who would later be sainted for his work in converting the heathens, is like no saint the nuns ever taught about in parochial school. Áedán mac nGabráin—the warrior whom some call the founder of Scotland—is the military alter-ego to the man of God. Both characters are so well written that they could carry the story on their own, but in putting them together, de Fougérolles makes the plot even stronger.

There is—simply put—a lot going on in this book. The battles are bloody and thrilling, the romance tasteful but not tepid, and the politics intricate yet understandable. Likewise, the religious themes are similar to waves that swell and crash upon the rocks of that tiny isle for which the novel is named, yet they never drown the reader or wash away the rest of the story.

Any reader with an interest in the history of Ireland, Scotland, the church, or the military of the so-called Dark Ages will love this book. That said, anyone who likes a good, solid story will find it difficult to stop at the chapter breaks. That is because *The Chronicles of Iona: Exile* is about more than a saint bringing civilization and the word of God to pagan barbarians; it is a tale of war and struggle, of honor and treachery, of faith and comradeship. More than a chronicle, it is a saga.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (July 9, 2012)

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