

# FROM IONA TO LIMEHOUSE

A "Listener" Interview

by A.M.R.

A RECENT homecomer to New Zealand after eight years abroad, the Reverend Alexander Miller, now Presbyterian minister at Port Ahuriri, Napier, has had an astonishing range of acquaintanceship.

"I saw the blitz out in the East End," he told me when I saw him for *The Listener*, "and then when my parish had gone up in smoke or evacuated itself into the country I helped George McLeod in his Iona Community activities, moving around England and Scotland. Since then I have had some contact with Christians from the continental resistance movements and travelled somewhat in America and Canada, partly around Universities, for the World Student Christian Movement, and partly working in a Niagara foundry. I could tell you hair-raising and laugh-raising tales, of course, about war damage I have seen in the act of happening, or in its results; but I guess it is not physical damage you want to hear about, but about the spiritual effects of the war—in Britain and elsewhere."

I agreed. But had not Britain been braced rather than damaged by the war?

## Prophets Wanted

"Well, certainly we amazed ourselves to discover how strongly we did believe in democracy after all. But do not confuse that fact with any sentimental idea that war creates some sort of moral uplift. Admittedly the British people have changed their government. And that is a very big thing—for Britain. But events have shown that people can be bombed to bits without any sort of mental or spiritual change in them. To effect that someone has to be at hand with a prophetic interpretation of the events. And I can't say that churches anywhere in the world seem to have that degree of insight and certainty at present. The British churches are a long way from dead, mind you. But I find out here—and in America—a tendency to glamorise some of their experimental activities, such as Religion and Life Weeks, Factory Chaplaincies and so on. Actually, as in every industrialised community, the churches in Britain are up against the fact that week-day behaviour and religious theory just cannot be squared, and they will continue to be ineffective until they understand both their own theology and their current environment well enough to apply the one to the other."

## The Iona Community

"That does not sound very cheerful." "No, but there are hopeful features. The ecumenical movement at its best—I mean the extending practice of world-wide church co-operation—is one. The Iona Community is another."

"Your second mention of Iona, Mr. Miller. What is it?"

"Well, Iona you know, of course, is the little island in the Hebrides through

which Irish monks first brought Christianity to the British mainland. Its cathedral and monastery have been in ruins for centuries. But now divinity students and tradesmen have been working on the island summer after summer—the students labouring for the crafts men and all living and worshipping together—until the old community buildings are practically restored. That sounds romantic perhaps. But it is quite practical really. For the students work after that for two years in needy industrial parishes. And the buildings are used almost continuously, except in winter, for conferences and youth camps and so on."

"Do they stop at Conferences?"

"No, the Community has begun a Workers' Christian University in Glasgow. They gutted an old warehouse to make classrooms, and Iona men working as ministers or tradesmen through the city send their promising young people there to learn Christian theology and social facts. Incidentally the chapel at one end of the lounge faces the cafeteria at the other end, with the smells of each floating into the other. That's symbolism for you."

"Of the right kind, I should say."

"Yes, I think so. Then the Christian Frontier too is symptomatic, though in quite a different way, of better thinking and living yet to come. It is a sort of guerrilla group that unofficially pioneers for the British Council of Churches. It runs—among other things—the *Christian Newsletter* which most ministers and editors in New Zealand will know well. And I had the honour to get into the still more unofficial group inside the unofficial Frontier—we called it the Mool—which used to meet at someone-or-other's country place at week-ends to hammer out a 'line' for the Newsletter, as events brought ideas and problems to front-stage."

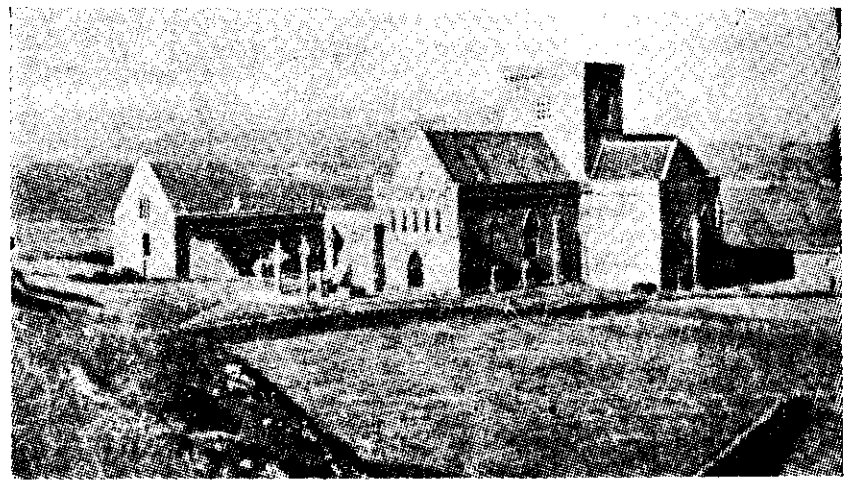
## Familiar Names

"Students and tradesmen again?"

"No, quite different. It included Middleton Murry, T. S. Eliot, Moberley (Sir Walter), Barbara Ward, Michael Polanyi, Karl Mannheim—just to give you names I have seen sometimes in *The Listener*. I need not describe Barbara Ward. It was done so well recently. She is an independent young thing and used very fully the immense amount of intellectual and practical freedom many Catholics do not seem to realise they possess. Moberley is Chairman of the University Grants Committee, right in the centre of Britain's web of higher learning. Polanyi you know as a world-top chemist and a renegade Marxist. He has swung completely from Communist values into Idealism, stressing freedom against security and so on. Idealism of course is as much an aberration from Christianity as Marxism is. But then I am only a western innocent and have not been through the maelstrom like these Europeans."

"What about Eliot?"

"Eliot? Well he is obviously the poet of our century so far. But he is too much the mannered intellectual to entirely belong to our times. He is mild in discussion, but can show quite a fierce obstinacy too. Socialists suspect that he revolts from the idea of a proletarian society mainly because he does not much like the proletariat."



The partially rebuilt Abbey at Iona

"And Middleton Murry?"

"There are different opinions about him. The quality of his work does vary enormously, of course, from his great output of daily journalism to his very penetrating *Adelphi* articles. Near the war's beginning he outlined its origins and issues with what seemed amazing insight in some BBC talks called *Europe in Travail*."

## Of Dorothy Sayers

"Tell me something about Dorothy Sayers. Is it true that she swears like a bullock driver?"

"And looks 90% more masculine than a man, smokes continuously, and wears super-outrage clothes over an already out-size frame? Well, some of these things are true, but I am not game to say which. Some of us prefer her to be writing highbrow whodunits rather than theology. But her broadcast religious plays brought thousands of letters to her asking for intellectual guidance. So she got a crowd of us together, Roman Catholic and Orthodox priests and mere ordinary parsons, like myself, and said 'when people ask what the divinity of Christ or something like that means I want to be able to reply "the Church says" instead of "I think myself." If you people will put theology into English I will put it into good English.' We got to work. But I don't think the *Penguin* she was to write up from it has come out yet."

## Religion in the U.S.

"You must have met interesting figures from other countries—visiting theologians, for example?"

"Well, I think the outstanding among those was Reinhold Niebuhr. He started as a socialist in downtown Detroit and to-day is normally a theological professor in New York. The State Department is using him to help draft their Directives to the United States Occupation Army and very soon the World Council of Churches is sending him to Germany as their official representative. He was always a jump ahead of us British in his thinking—mainly because he thinks in Christian categories unashamedly."

"Then you do not agree with the 'Red Dean' that America is a hundred years behind Britain in everything but religion and in that is 150 years behind?"

"The Dean has got contaminated with American exaggeration—which never is behind. The distance United States is backward is that between the two Post-Wars. I found American students on the whole where New Zealand students were about 1932—starry-eyed for UNO and just beginning to get really 'het up' over

social injustice, and faintly aware of various hypocrisies inherent in their economic ideal of individual success. Britain's enemies at present are cynicism and inertia. America's are idealism and frivolity—meaning not foolery, of course, but a not rigorous enough analysis of the world they live in."

"And would you, like Cardinal Hinsley, count the Red Dean as 'a pest'?"

"He is a charming fellow to meet and a most persuasive speaker. But my Anglican neighbour in Limehouse, whose special record makes Hewlett Johnson look very watery pink, regrets that he has become 'Britain's champion stooge.'"

## Action in Limehouse

"Tell me about your neighbour."

"Father Groser?"

"You have not given me his name."

"Well that is his name. Limehouse, Stepney, Poplar, the Isle of Dogs and thereabouts was our common parish. Groser had just made it for himself out of a derelict church after all city appointments had been refused him because he was such a flaming socialist. When my church got bombed I shared his, holding a Presbyterian Service at 11 a.m. in incense smoke still lingering after his mass at 10. Then that church got bombed, too. And the one he shifted to after that. . . . He led among other things the great Rent Strike of 1937. Tenants were being turfed out of uncontrolled houses because they would not pay more than the controlled rate. Groser's Tenants' Defence League then started collecting all rents at the controlled rates and helping them until they could get a just settlement. When evictions started no one resisted them. But once the bailiffs had gone all the neighbours put the family's furniture back again. Taken to court Groser blandly pleaded legally guilty but said he appealed to a higher court—the British people's sense of justice—and won."

"And will that sort of East End be rebuilt, Mr. Miller?"

"I cannot believe it. It was a horrible warren of tiny sweat shops interspersed with grimy barracks of houses. They have plans in England for orderly industrial development, plus flats, plus new suburbs beyond the Green Belt. . . . But one point of what I have been saying is, you will follow, that that sort of reconstruction depends on some pretty radical mental and spiritual reconstruction. Hence my interest in these people who, in various ways, are clearing away the accumulated rubbish of many centuries in order to strike foundations solid enough to bear a thoroughly 20th Century society."