

DEATH ON LINDISFARNE

Also by Fay Sampson

For adults:

The Land of Angels
The Flight of the Sparrow
A Casket of Earth
The Island Pilgrimage
The Silent Fort
Star Dancer

The Aidan Mysteries:

The Hunted Hare

The Suzie Fewings series:

In the Blood
A Malignant House
Those in Peril
Father Unknown
The Overlooker

The Morgan le Fay series:

Wise Woman's Telling
Nun's Telling
Blacksmith's Telling
Taliesin's Telling
Herself
Daughter of Tintagel (Omnibus edition)

For children:

The Sorcerer's Trap
The Sorcerer's Daughter
Them
Hard Rock

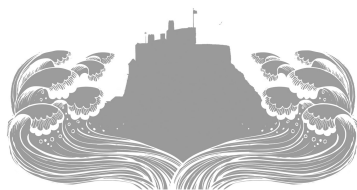
The Pangur Ban series:

Pangur Ban
Finnglas of the Horses
Finnglas and the Stones of Choosing
Shape Shifter
The Serpent of Senargad
The White Horse is Running

Non-fiction:

Visions and Voyages: The Story of Celtic Spirituality
Runes on the Cross: The Story of our Anglo-Saxon Heritage

Death on Lindisfarne



Fay Sampson

The second volume in The Aidan Mysteries



LION FICTION

Text copyright © 2013 Fay Sampson
This edition copyright © 2013 Lion Hudson

The right of Fay Sampson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of

Lion Hudson plc

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 025 7
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 053 0

First edition 2013

Agent: Joanna Devereux at Pollinger Ltd: www.pollingerltd.com

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, March 2013, LH26

Author's Note

This story is set on Holy Island, off the coast of Northumbria. It is also known by its Anglo-Saxon name of Lindisfarne.

Although the setting is real, the living characters are fictitious. There are several retreat houses on the island. I have warm memories of the hospitality of the Open Gate, run by the Community of St Aidan and St Hilda, and of the helpfulness of the warden of Marygate. But the guesthouse of St Colman's and the Fellowship of St Ebba and St Oswald are my own inventions for the purpose of this novel. James's True Gospel Church is not based on any real church, in Huddersfield or elsewhere.

I am very grateful to Joe Baynham for information about the Holy Island Coastguard and Rescue Service and about local tides and currents. Needless to say, any mistakes in interpreting this advice are my responsibility alone. No real-life members of the team, or of the Northumbrian police, are portrayed in this book.

The poem in Chapter 6 is from "The Death of Urien" in the *Red Book of Hergest, XII*. My warm thanks are due to the Northumbria Community for permission to quote in Chapter 8 from their liturgy for Compline, published in *Celtic Daily Prayer* (HarperCollins, 2005). It can also be found at www.northumbriacommunity.org. The prayer in Chapter 16 is from *Carmina Gaedelica*, that rich source of Gaelic spirituality collected and translated by Alexander Carmichael in the nineteenth century. He was told it by the Argyll crofter Ann Livingstone.

Further Reading

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, or *A History of the English Church and People*. Various editions.

John Marsden, *Northanhymbre Saga* (Kyle Cathie, 1992).

Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Phaidon, 1981).

Fay Sampson, *Visions and Voyages* (Lion, 2007).

Fay Sampson, *Runes on the Cross* (Triangle, 2000).

Historical Characters

Aethelfrith “the Ferocious”. Sixth- to seventh-century king of northern Northumbria. He gained control of southern Northumbria by killing the males of the ruling family.

Agilbert. Seventh-century French bishop of Wessex. Led the Roman party at the Synod of Whitby.

Aidan. Seventh-century Irish monk who became the first abbot of Lindisfarne.

Alchfrith. Seventh-century son of King Oswy and sub-king of southern Northumbria.

Bebba. Sixth- to seventh-century British princess. Married Aethelfrith, king of northern Northumbria. Gave her name to Bamburgh.

Bede. Seventh- to eighth-century monk of Jarrow and historian.

Benedict Biscop. Seventh-century warrior and monk. Accompanied Wilfrid to Rome. Founded the abbeys of Wearmouth and Jarrow.

Caedmon. Seventh-century worker at the abbey of Whitby. Composed poems in the English language.

Chad. Seventh-century pupil at Lindisfarne. Became bishop of York and Lichfield.

Colman. Seventh-century abbot of Lindisfarne. Led the Celtic party at the Synod of Whitby. Moved to Ireland after the Celtic Church was defeated.

Columba. Sixth-century abbot of Derry and founder of the abbey of Iona. Greatly revered by the Celtic Church.

Corman. Seventh-century monk sent by Iona as chaplain to King Oswald when he conquered Northumbria.

Cuthbert. Seventh-century prior and bishop of Lindisfarne.

Death on Lindisfarne

Eadfrith. Seventh- to eighth-century bishop of Lindisfarne. Scribe of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Eanfled. Seventh-century daughter of King Edwin of Northumbria. Brought up in Kent after Edwin's death. Married King Oswy of Northumbria.

Ebba. Seventh-century daughter of King Aethelfrith of Northumbria. Fled to Scotland when her father died. Became abbess of Coldingham.

Edwin. Seventh-century prince of southern Northumbria. Fled to Wales when Aethelfrith killed his father. Became king of all Northumbria.

Fiachna. Seventh-century king of Dalriada in Scotland and Ulster. Joined Urien's campaign to drive the Angles out of Northumbria.

Hilda/Hild. Seventh-century great-niece of Edwin. Abbess of Whitby.

James. Sixth- to seventh-century Roman missionary to the English and choirmaster.

Kevin. Sixth- to seventh-century abbot of Glendalough.

Melangell. Sixth-century Irish princess who became abbess at Pennant Melangell in Wales.

Morcant. Sixth-century king of the northern Britons. Joined Urien's campaign against the Angles but believed to be responsible for his assassination.

Oswald. Seventh-century son of Aethelfrith. Converted to Christianity on Iona. Returned to Northumbria to seize the kingdom from the Mercians.

Oswin. Seventh-century cousin of Oswald and king of southern Northumbria.

Oswy. Seventh-century brother of Oswald. Granted northern Northumbria by the Mercians and seized southern Northumbria by killing Oswin. Victorious over Mercians. Presided over Synod of Whitby.

Paulinus. Seventh-century Roman missionary. Accompanied Eanfled to Northumbria as bishop. Fled to Kent when Edwin was killed.

Penda. Seventh-century king of Mercia. Conquered Northumbria. Killed in battle with Oswy.

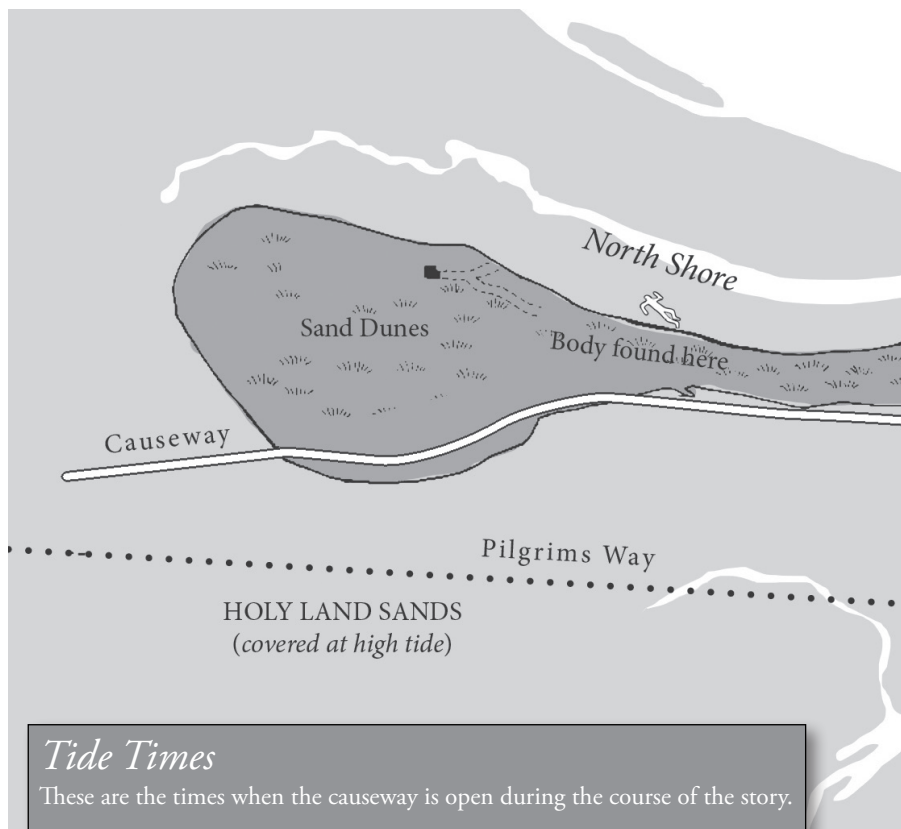
Rhydderch. Sixth- to seventh-century king of Strathclyde. Joined Urien's campaign against the Angles.

Taliesin. Sixth-century British poet, associated with the court of Urien.

Death on Lindisfarne

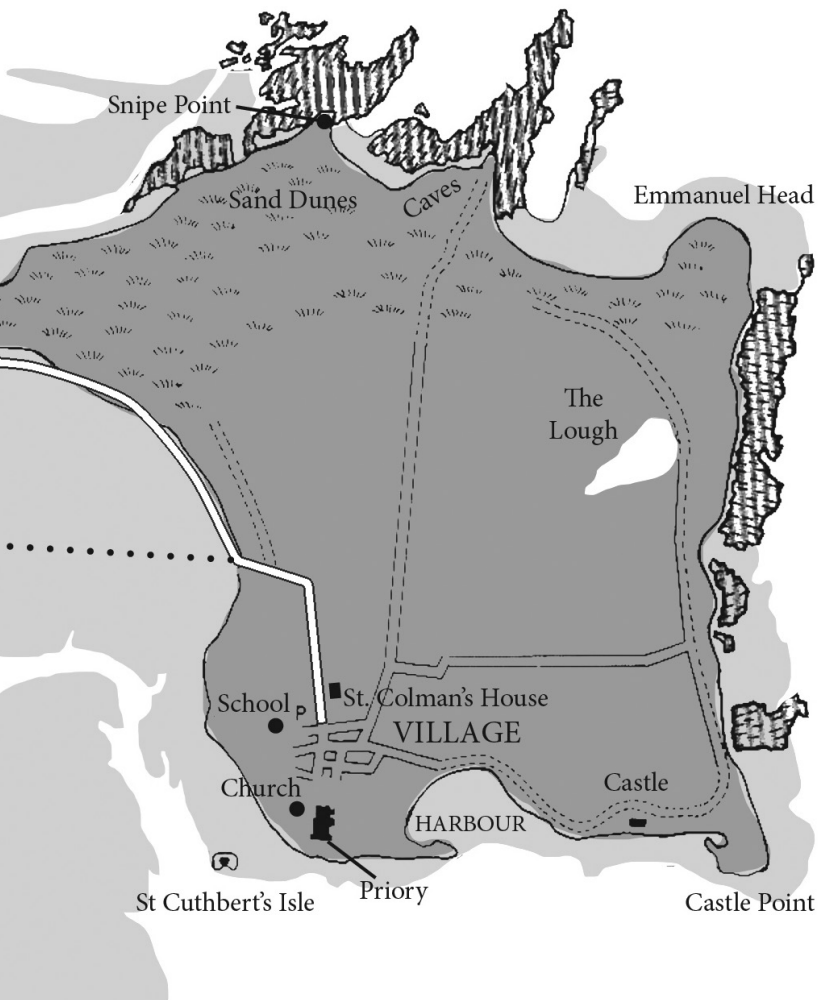
Urien. Sixth-century British king of Rheged in northern Britain. Led an unsuccessful campaign to drive out the Anglian invaders.

Wilfrid. Seventh- to eighth-century. Went to Lindisfarne in Aidan's time, then travelled to Rome. Successful spokesman for the Roman party against the Celtic Church at the Synod of Whitby. Abbot of Ripon and bishop of York.



Tide Times
 These are the times when the causeway is open during the course of the story.

Saturday	11:05–19:10	23:40–07:30 (Sun)
Sunday	11:55–20:20	
Monday	00:30–08:40	12:50–21:35
Tuesday	01:30–09:45	13:55–22:35
Wednesday	02:40–10:45	15:00–23:25
Thursday	03:45–11:40	16:05–00:05 (Fri)
Friday	04:45–12:20	17:00–00:40 (Sat)
Saturday	05:35–12:55	17:50–01:15 (Sun)



Holy Island or Lindisfarne



Chapter One

“DADDY, ARE YOU *SURE* this is a good idea?” Melangell tilted her pointed face towards her father. Her eight-year-old voice had the patient reproach of one used to dealing with a wayward parent.

Aidan looked ahead at the line of slender poles which led the way across the glistening sands towards the eastern end of Lindisfarne. Blue sky was reflected in the pools left by the receding water. He glanced to his left. Now the tide was falling there was a steady traffic of cars crossing the modern causeway to the island. But even that would be submerged at high water. Lindisfarne – Holy Island – was only intermittently linked to the mainland.

“Of course I am. Walking across the sands is the only proper way to come to Lindisfarne. That’s how the pilgrims always came in the past. And the monks who lived here back in the time of St Aidan and Cuthbert. You wouldn’t rather drive here in a *car*, would you?”

He was pleased to hear the cheerful confidence in his own voice. He had got his calculations right, hadn’t he? He had parked the car for a week on the Northumbrian coast. He had helped Melangell pack a small rucksack with spare clothes. He had shouldered a larger one himself and his all-important camera bag. And he had consulted the tide tables with considerable care.

Death on Lindisfarne

The sea channel that separated the island from the coast had been falling for a while, uncovering pink-tinged sand. It was jewelled with shells and pebbles. He must try to resist the temptation to take dozens of photographs of the miraculous and unique patterns the shells and quartz revealed at every step. He needed to time this journey right, so that the water had retreated from the Pilgrims' Way, but not leave it so late that the tide turned and swept back in over the sands before they could complete their crossing.

He gave a grin of delight and drew a deep breath of anticipation.

"Come on, then. To Holy Island."

The wet sand oozed slightly round his boots and Melangell's trainers but held firm. Aidan had abandoned his modern walking pole for a wooden staff. It seemed more appropriate.

"Mummy said the king used to come and talk to St Aidan on Lindisfarne. But he only brought a few men and he never stayed to dinner, because he knew the monks were poor and didn't have much to eat. It's in her book."

Aidan stopped short. He couldn't help himself. The loss was still too new, too raw. He glanced down at his daughter with her mop of light-brown curls and her freckled elfin face. He had feared for Melangell. Seven had been terribly young to lose her mother last year. But she had seemed to accept the bereavement better than he had. She could talk of Jenny easily and fondly, as if her mother were still a real presence, someone she could turn to whenever she wanted.

Perhaps she is, Aidan thought. *I ought to believe that, oughtn't I? That Jenny is here, now, watching over us.* But the pain was real. They had come to Lindisfarne together, researching the first of Jenny's books about Celtic saints and kings. There was a row of these small books in Melangell's bedroom, her constant companions. All of them were illustrated with Aidan's photographs. The Lindisfarne book had been a special joy for Jenny and Aidan, because the saint who founded the monastery here had shared his own name.

The camera case hung heavy on Aidan's shoulder. He still carried it dutifully with him wherever he went. He still took photographs. If he was lucky, he sold some of them. But the chief purpose of his

Death on Lindisfarne

photography had been taken away from him. Without Jenny's enthusiasm, her pursuit of Celtic history and visions, he no longer knew with any certainty what he was taking photographs for.

Just now, his attention should be concentrated on following the line of poles to mid-channel.

Melangell stopped doubtfully at the edge of a deeper pool.

"You told me we could walk across."

The Easter sunlight had drifted behind a bank of high cloud. The sand looked more brown than pink, the rippling water in front of them grey and cold.

"You can. As long as you don't mind getting your feet wet. If we want to get to the other side before the tide catches us, it might be better to get our boots off."

He unlaced his own and slung them round his neck. Melangell picked up her trainers and held them in her hand. He took her other hand and they stepped into the shock of the shallow current.

"Ow, it's *cold!*"

"It's the authentic experience, though, isn't it? You have to imagine all the other visitors who came this way. Northumbrians, Scots, Irish, missionaries from Rome. All paddling across this little bit of the North Sea. Like us."

"Did they have nuns on Holy Island?"

"Sadly, no. St Aidan was a great friend of Hilda. But she had to go and set up her own monastery at Whitby. Only hers had men as well as women."

The water swirled around his ankles. With the coming of spring he had seized the opportunity to put on shorts for walking. Melangell was having to roll her jeans higher.

"OK? Do you want a lift?"

"I can *manage*," she retorted.

A few steps later they gained the wet sand on the far side. Halfway ahead stood a refuge box on stilts. They pressed on towards it.

As they stood in its shadow, the low spit of Lindisfarne looked suddenly much closer. All the same, Aidan turned his eyes seaward. The North Sea was a grey line along the horizon. It was hard to judge

Death on Lindisfarne

distances with no vertical features to mark perspective. How long before the tide turned? Had it done so already? How fast would that line of sea come sweeping in across the sands where they stood?

They would be leaving behind the only place of safety on this route.

The wood of the pole beside him was still dark and dank from the previous tide. There were only a few hours a day when it was possible to cross on foot safely.

Yet now they had passed the mid-point, he felt sufficiently confident to unfasten his camera bag and take out his Nikon. His hand hesitated over which lens to use, rejected a wide-angle and settled on an f2.8 telephoto one.

The first glimpse of the village on the tip of Lindisfarne sprang into instant life. No longer just a water tower and a smudge of roofs against the grey background. He could see now how the line of poles would lead them safely up the shore.

He moved the camera, trying to find how best to frame the shot that would capture that sense of arrival. The end of pilgrimage. As yet, the ruined abbey and the statue of St Aidan were still out of sight. But this view was not unlike the one that would have greeted King Oswald, or St Cuthbert, or all the other famous names of the past whose histories had led them to this island.

He steadied the lens, then gave a sudden start. He had not intended to photograph people. This was all about the sense of sacred place. Yet there were two people framed in his shot. A man and a woman, perhaps? Or a girl. The smaller figure looked quite slight. Even with the lens's magnification, it was not possible to be sure of their faces or ages, or even their gender. The one he thought was a girl wore a red sweater or jacket, the larger figure something brown.

They seemed to be holding each other. A couple of lovers? Or was the man holding on to the girl? As he watched through his viewfinder she broke away from him. Instinctively Aidan snapped the shutter.

She was not exactly running away from him now. More floundering, as if through softer sand than the damp pebble-strewn bed he and Melangell stood on.

Death on Lindisfarne

He lowered the camera, and suddenly the pair were distant specks. The island shore was further away than the zoom lens of his camera had made it seem for those few moments.

He took a few more shots, focusing this time on the composition of poles and shoreline. Then he slung the camera back on his shoulder.

“Come on,” he said. “This is not the place to stand about wasting time.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.” It sounded an adult phrase. Had she picked it up from Jenny?

That pain again.

Melangell started forward. Then she paused. “Are those people over there? If they want to walk across to the mainland, they’ll have to hurry, won’t they?”

He looked round at her in surprise. “You’ve got sharper eyes than I have. I didn’t notice them until I used the zoom lens.”

“I can see a little red dot and a darker one.”

“I don’t expect they’re coming across. They’ve just come down to the beach for a walk. Perhaps they’re waiting to see if *we* make it across before the sea gets us.”

“It won’t, will it?” The upturned pointed face was momentarily anxious.

“No.” He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Not if we don’t hang about.”

They toiled on across the barely shelving sands. He took Melangell’s hand. When at last they passed the line of sea wrack that marked the high tide point he lifted her up and swung her round in celebration.

“Told you! We did it. Now wasn’t that much more fun than driving across the causeway?”

She tumbled down into softer sand and let handfuls of it fall through her fingers. She sat up to see what she had found. A blue-black mussel shell, the white-ridged fan of a cockle, a scrap of amber seaweed. Suddenly she dived to capture something that had fallen into the sand by her leg. She lifted it up triumphantly.

“She must have dropped it. One of those people we saw when we were halfway across.”

Death on Lindisfarne

She held out her hand, palm upward. Nestled in it was a single earring. A little golden beast with a scarlet tongue. Its tail twisted into Celtic knotwork that twined around to form a ring.

“Interesting,” said Aidan. “It looks like something from the pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels.”

He looked around. He hadn’t been watching the shoreline since he took that photograph. The couple he had seen briefly grappling on the beach were nowhere to be seen.

“Hang on to that,” he said. “Maybe we should put a card in the village shop to say we’ve found it. Now, let’s see if we can find St Colman’s House. I don’t know about you, but I’ve worked up an appetite for tea.”

He kept to himself the pain he feared might be lying in wait for him.