

"An Irish Moment," by Terence J. Sheehy (1989)

"Hibernia, Insula Sanctorum et Doctorum," Island of Saints and Scholars, was the title the Irish missionary monks won for their country during the 6th and 7th centuries. This period in the history of Ireland has been hailed as its Golden Age, the "Irish miracle." At this time, wave after wave of learned, truly humble and holy Irish monks felt compelled to become 'peregrini,' or 'wanderers for Christ.' Such had been the total success of the conversion of the pagan Celtic Irish to Christianity by Saint Patrick that the people of Ireland had not only accepted the teachings of Christ, but had also shown an astounding enthusiasm to share their newly found faith with the pagans of Europe.

Irish monk-scribes also recorded the natural world around them in depictions of leaping salmon, an otter with a fish in his mouth, or the play of light and shadow in the margins of books. 'Pleasant is the glint of the sun today upon these margins, because it flickers so.' A glimpse of a monk in his cell working on an illuminated manuscript can be seen in a poem by an anonymous Irish monk which, in one English translation, says: 'I and Pangur Ban, my cat/'Tis a like task we are at/Hunting mice is his delight/Hunting words I sit all night/Better far than praise of men/'Tis to sit with book and pen/Pangur bears me no ill-will/He, too, plies his simple skill...'

One of the most splendid relics of Irish monastic life is the monastery of bee-hive cells still standing on the most isolated rock in Europe, Skellig Michael. This island is one of three little pinnacles known as the Skelligs that lie off the coast of County Kerry. Skellig Michael is difficult to approach in heavy seas - the huge mass of steep, slate rock, less than a half-mile long and a quarter-of-a-mile wide, rises sheer out of the water to over 700 feet in height. The runs of the Abbey stand over 500 feet up from the crude landing stage. There is one small, green patch around the stark, grey rocks called 'Christ's Saddle'. On a second plateau above are five bee-hive-shaped stone cells and a tiny oratory perched on top of the precipitous cliff. At a lower level stands a sixth bee-hive cell, a second little chapel, stone crosses, some burial places of the monks and a holy well. In the end, the Vikings in their long boats came and murdered the monks and pillaged their chape!

Is - and yet, ironically, it is said that the Norse king, Olaf, was baptised by a monk on Skellig Michael. Today the island is uninhabited by human souls, a haunt of myriad rare seabirds, including fulmar petrels, kittiwake gulls, puffins, choughs, guillemots, peregrine falcons and even stormy petrels. Sir Kenneth CLARK at the beginning of his television series 'Civilisation' remarked, "Looking back from the giant civilisations of 12th-century France or 17th-century Rome, it is hard to believe that for quite a long time Western Christianity survived by clinging on to places like Skellig Michael."

A sharp contrast to life on the Skelligs in the turbulent waters of the Atlantic Ocean was to be found in the vast monastic universities on the mainland, such as those at Kells, Bangor and Clonmacnoise. Here hundreds of bee-hive cells housed the monk-students and teachers. Equipped with simple stone chapels and kitchens, these monasteries also had an unique Celtic architectural defense against the raiding Vikings, the 100-foot-high round tower. With its entrance many feet above the ground, this served as both a watch

tower and an alarm tower when the dreaded longboats of the Vikings were seen coming up the estuaries on hit-and-run plundering raids. On these occasions, the monks would scatter, and their precious altar pieces and illuminated manuscripts would be stored in the tower, the entrance ladder being pulled in to await the departure of the raiders. As it had no corners it was impossible for the raiders to breach the tower.

The monks of Skellig Michael and of the mainland monastic universities had a deep love of nature. Like the hero Finn of the ancient Irish saga, the 'Fianna,' they loved music, which, to him and to them, was the song of blackbird, the scream of an eagle, the roar of a waterfall and the baying of hounds. The Irish monks did not merely remain content with ephemeral music. They believed, as did the poet and dreamer of dreams, Oisín, that the music which delighted them best was 'the music of the thing that happens,' for they were men of action as well as dreamers.

We are reminded of their great artistry in a wealth of Irish manuscripts, such as those within the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow, two of the most valuable books in the world. These are Byzantine in character, their iconography shot through with Eastern associations, reflecting the influence of Syria and the Egypt Coptic lands, but the unique Irish script was a cultural phenomenon. The

oval-eyed saints gaze out at you from the pages of the Book of Kells. Written in Latin, it contains the four Gospels, plus prefaces to some of them. The pages are either of parchment or vellum, and originally were gloriously ragged. Experts consider it unlikely that the whole book was the work of one single monk, most likely four. The often-reproduced portrait of the barefoot Christ has purple and royal peacocks to the left and right of his shoulders, alongside chalices and vines. While the Book of Kells is thought to be of the 8th or 9th centuries, it is possible that it is of an earlier

century. It was found in Kells in Co. Meath, where there was once a famous abbey. It is possible that the work was started by Irish monks in the monastery of Iona, and then brought to Kells from there by the followers of Saint Colmcille when the Vikings forced them to flee. Held in the safety of the parish church of Kells, the book was removed to the Library of the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in Dublin for safe-keeping during the destructive rule of CROMWELL. It can still be found there today.

The bold calligraphy and illumination of books such as the Stowe Missal, the Book of the Dun Cow, or the Book of Armagh, like the Celtic Christianity they portrayed, were manuscripts clear, intense and definitive. Their sole purpose was to show the reader the Word of God, the Gospels, and the scribes had enjoyment in so doing. Spirals, trumpets, La Tene curvilinear motifs and patterns, and fantastic and exotic animals abound in their texts of the Gospels. Snakes, eagles, calves, and lions are there, all depicted by the monks in the most beautiful colour combinations - those of the real world around them - vermilion red, green, yellow, brown and black. As a consequence, these Irish manuscripts are among the most original and animated in the history of calligraphy.

The humanity of the illuminators and scribes is often evident in their work. One can see, for example, among the words on a line in the Book of Kells a 'doodle' of a bumble bee

Here, within these pages of sacred texts, a monastic cat watches a monastic mouse, a dog stretches, a cock struts. Sometimes a little margin entry illuminates the history of the time. A note written during the days of the plundering of Irish monasteries by the Norse raiders reads: 'Fierce and wild is the wind tonight/It tosses the tresses of the sea to white /On such a night as this I take my ease/Fierce Norsemen only course the quiet seas. In the margins of some of the most beautiful Celtic manuscripts in the world are the musings of some of the Celtic scribes. 'My hand is weary with writing, my sharp quill is not steady, my slender, beaked pen juts forth a black draught of shining, dark blue! ink, a stream of the wisdom of Blessed God.'