

ARCHAEOLOGY

A Saint's Book

Book of Kells, Famous Medieval Irish Manuscript Volume, Studied by American Architect for Possible Restoration

By DR. FRANK THONE

IRELAND gave the world much, in the ages that men call Dark. Flung far to one side of the track of the great tribal migrations that broke the Roman Empire in the West, double-moated against the trampling of barbarian invasions, the people of the Happy Island were able to keep alive a high and rich culture, with its own art and literature, laws and settled ways of life. Saint Patrick, who bore the light of Christian Rome even from the southern fringe of settlements in Munster to the King's House of Ulster in the North, found no such dark pagan shadows as missionaries had to fight in other North European lands. People and nobles alike heard him gladly, and the new faith and learning found transplantation and blending easy with the old art and culture.

For long, while the rest of Western Europe weltered in the anarchy of wild tribes that finally were half-tamed by the spiritual authority of Rome into the beginnings of order we know as feudalism, Ireland "lay in a patch of peace like a dog in a patch of sun." Beautiful things were wrought in gold and silver, stone and leather, by Irish artists and artisans.

Security For Scholars

Sheltered in the great Irish monasteries, scholarly monks (many of them from lands as far away as Byzantium) were producing books whose few surviving battered, fragmentary copies are still the wonders of the world. Done on costly vellum, carefully lettered in permanent inks, the capital letters and page borders illuminated in bewilderingly intricate tracery and pictures of saints done in rainbow colors, bound in gold and studded with jewels, one of these ancient Irish holy books was a whole treasury in itself. Nothing was counted too much or too good to lavish on the sacred texts. The scribe's whole life, the best gems of the King's own crown, were spent without stopping to reckon them up at all.

Acknowledged king above all other ancient Irish books was the Book of

Kells. Even now in its old age, this thousand-year-old volume rates as a marvel of skill and beauty. To earlier men it even seemed there must have been supernatural inspiration for its workmanship. A writer in the twelfth century was told that it was the result of direct angelic intervention, and was ready to believe the tale. Even in the chillier light of the sixteenth century, after the Irish monasteries had been systematically expropriated and robbed for the benefit of Henry VIII and his "deserving Tudor" followers, one Gerald Plunkett of Dublin, who had possession of the Book for a time, made note: "This worke doth passe all mens conyng that now doth live in any place. I doubt not there . . . anything but that ye writer hath obtained God's grace."

A Thousand Years Old

Just what is this Book of Kells, that has made such a stir in the world?

It is a book of the Gospels and certain other religious writings, done on thick sheets of vellum by unknown scribes over a thousand years ago, and kept for many generations in the ancient town of Kells, in County Meath, not far from Dublin. Kells was once the residence of Columcille, who was a great bishop and a great saint, and might have been a great ruler in Ireland as well, had he not elected to leave the world for the Church. Hence the Book is sometimes mentioned as belonging to Columcille.

In its present state, the Book of Kells has 339 leaves. It originally had more, but of course part of them were lost during the vicissitudes of the centuries. Some twenty of its pages are magnificently illuminated—covered all over with the intricate polychrome scrollwork that only Irish artists could trace, some of them enshrining saints' portraits done in the formalized, somewhat stiff style of the times. Originally the Book of Kells had a gem-studded gold cover; and that is what began its troubles. It was not yet two centuries old when that magnificent binding caused it to fall among thieves. In the *Chronicles of Ulster*, the year 1006 A.D. is noted by the following paragraph:

"The large Gospel of St. Columcille . . . in its cover of gold studded with precious stones . . . the chief relic of the Western World, was stolen from the Greater Church at Kells, and found, after the lapse of some months, concealed under some sods, destitute of its gold-covered binding."

Yet even in its despoiled state, the Book continued to be a wonder of the world; for it was nearly two centuries later that Giraldus Cambrensis wrote his elaborate praise of the "angelic" workmanship of a marvelous manuscript he had seen at Kildare, which many modern scholars feel quite sure was the Book of Kells.

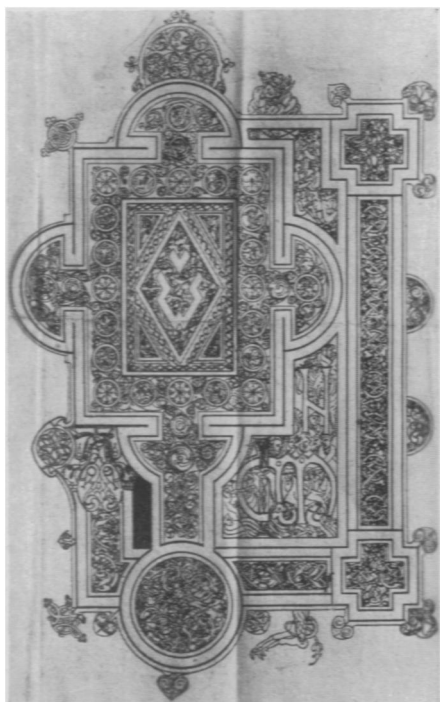
In Troubled Times

The Book appears definitely in documentary history—and in trouble—when the agents of Henry VIII seized the monastery at Kells. It is listed among the effects of the closed establishment by the last abbot, Richard Plunkett, under date of Nov. 18, 1539. It appears to have remained in private hands, including those of a presumable relative of the abbot's, Gerald Plunkett, for about 40 years.

By then the sober and scholarly James I was on the throne. He commissioned the noted Bishop Ussher to seek out and purchase notable documents and manuscripts bearing on church history in Great Britain and Ireland. (This Bishop Ussher, by the way, is the same one whose Bible dates are still printed in the margins of the King James version of the Bible and are often defended as part of the sacred text itself by literalist believers.) The bishop discharged his commission well, acquiring among other things this Grail of all manuscripts, the Book of Kells. An entry in his handwriting shows that he had got possession of it, and had counted the leaves (then 344 in number) on August 24, 1621.

Within five years after the death of Bishop Ussher, in 1661, a part of his collection was transferred to the library of Trinity College, Dublin. With it came the much-adventured Book of Kells; and it has remained there, Trinity's chief literary treasure, for the past 276 years.

Yet even so its troubles were not over. Early in the nineteenth century some librarian with more of a sense of



"FORASMUCH AS"

The famous Quoniam page from the Book of Kells; the beginning of the Gospel according to Saint Luke.

mechanical neatness than of the real values of things decided to have the Book properly rebound. So all the old irregular edges of the pages were trimmed off nice and even—and many of the fabulously beautiful border illuminations were ruthlessly shorn off and mutilated in the process. (One is left wondering when the Dark Ages really were: a thousand years ago, when the book was written, or a hundred years ago, when an "educated" university officer could calmly commit such a stupid piece of vandalism!)

And now comes a new man, an American of Celtic background, much interested in the contributions the Western Island has made to our common civilization and still more interested in what forgotten treasures further search may turn up. He is Dr. John Carroll Broderick, architect, now resident in California. He wants to do his bit for the great Book of Kells. He has already studied the notable old manuscript in Dublin, making many preliminary sketches and examinations, and now he has an ambitious plan and program which he hopes to put through.

It is nothing less than the complete rehabilitation of the great Book, and the placing of some 250 copies of it in the leading libraries of the world.

Dr. Broderick, however, has no

notions of further profanation of the original manuscript itself. Enough well-meaning harm has already been done in that direction, he thinks. He wants to turn his architect-artist's skill to the careful copying of the elaborate illuminated pages and borders, using inks as like those of a thousand years ago as he can make or obtain. He wants to restore, from other Latin texts, the lost pages and passages, and to complete the gaps left in places by the original scribes themselves.

Another line of study which Dr. Broderick hopes to pursue with the Book of Kells is an examination with ultraviolet and infrared light, to see whether there are any traces of an older writing under the existing lines. This was often done with ancient manuscripts, because the vellum on which they were written was so expensive. The older writing was erased and the new written over it. Such a twice-written manuscript is known to scientists as a "palimpsest." Was the Book of Kells written originally on virgin vellum, or is it a palimpsest? That is something which the "invisible light" of modern science may help to clarify.

"The Doubtful Page"

Dr. Broderick's studies have already brought out one or two hitherto unsuspected facts about the Book, and corrected one or two erroneous assumptions of long standing. For example, the saint depicted on one illuminated page has long been so much a subject of dispute that the page has achieved the traditional name of "the doubtful page." Dr. Broderick called attention to two eagles, drawn on opposite sides of the seated figure's head. These, in Biblical symbolism, are the mark of St. John the Evangelist, as the lion is of St. Mark, the calf is of St. Luke, and an angel is of St. Matthew. This discovery seems to leave no doubt that the picture is meant to represent St. John, though the saint's dark beard does not fit in with the modern conventional notion of a smooth-cheeked young Apostle in the Johannine role. It is worthy of note, however, that despite his dark beard, St. John's hair, even here, is shown as long and blond.

Dr. Broderick's identification of the saint on the "doubtful page" as John set up a new dilemma. For there was a figure on another page that had long been thought to be an image of the fourth evangelist. Dr. Broderick pointed out, however, that in view of the four-times-repeated motif of the Cross, and other symbolism in the surrounding



ST. JOHN WITH A BEARD

Long called the "doubtful page" because of dispute regarding the identity of the portrait. But the four eagles belong to Saint John, Dr. Broderick pointed out.

design, that this picture was intended to represent Christ himself. The Dublin scholars are inclined to accept his interpretation of these two figures.

Architectural background is evident in some of the outlines of the page "foundations" copied by Dr. Broderick. With the intricate curves and scrolls left off, the designs might almost serve as ground plans for churches.

A beautiful example of this architectural style of drawing is to be found in the elaborately illuminated first page of the Gospel according to St. Luke, as studied by Dr. Broderick. The whole page is taken up with the first word of the Gospel, "Quoniam," which is rendered in English versions as "Forasmuch as." Here the Q takes up most of the page, a great, square-sided letter so filled with scrollwork that it looks like a church window. Within the Q is a V-shaped U and an O that looks more like a W. The rest of the letters, at lower right, are more recognizable as parts of the alphabet, though they are combined and intertwined with a crowd of human figures and faces. Figuring out and explaining a diagram like this gives architectural knowledge a real opportunity.

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