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The Chief Relic of the Western World

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THE great manuscript of the gospels known as the Book of Kells lies under heavy guard in the shadowed solemnity of Trinity College Library in Dublin. It has 340 vellum leaves — 680 pages, only two of them without colour — measuring on average thirteen inches by nine-and-a-half. Every week the glass case is opened for a few seconds and a page is carefully turned to reveal fresh wonders. And what wonders! Line upon line of gorgeous script as fresh and crisp as the day it was penned, gaily illuminated capitals, brightly painted birds and beasts and fishes in a riot of tendrils and twisting and tail-biting, semi-abstract little men and cats and mice with funny faces and an endless variety of strange and comical positions; angels, too, and black devils and God or Christ himself amidst great scenes of biblical allegory — along with page upon page of multicoloured design so tight and intricate that no matter how closely you look, another kaleidoscopic world of knotwork and spirals seems to open up before you.

In 1006 the Annals of Ulster referred to the Book of Kells as ‘the chief relic of the western world’. Five hundred years later Gerald Plunket observed that ‘this work doth pass all men’s cunning’. The dust jacket of the volume under review describes it as ‘one of the supreme artistic creations to survive from the middle ages’. Personally, I would be quite happy to settle for ‘the most beautiful book ever made’.

It is, it seems, a product of the Western Isles.

Now I have to follow that right away by saying that, in the words of the book’s guardian, the Keeper of Manuscripts of Trinity College Library, there is little that is certain about the Book of Kells. Ambivalence, even multivalence — if it did not possess such qualities, it could scarcely even claim to be the supreme Celtic work of art. So, as Michelle Brown writes, “All the cultural elements present in the insular world and its neighbours are held up to the mirror of Kells and converted by its own distinctive matrix into tantalisingly elusive reflections, only fleetingly reminiscent of well-known forms. The recognition of echoes and shades within this enchanted mirror has led many scholars to seize upon specific links and to elevate them to the status of tangible affiliations. Thus Irish, Pictish, Hiberno-Saxon and Carolingian echoes have jostled one another in the academic, and popular, imagination and have been used as the basis for specific claims of date and origin.”

The new volume consists of 27 papers from an academic forum which tried to make sense of it all, called in the blurb ‘the first international conference devoted to a single manuscript’. These are full of fascinating detail. For example, two specialists from Cologne, Robert Fuchs and Doris Oltrogge, employed a technique called spectrometric analysis to examine the pigments used in creating the book. They found that the red in Kells is red lead and red ochre, the purple is purple dye and pink mixture, the brown is buckthorn ink and brown ochre, the blue is blue mixture and indigo, and the yellow is orpiment and yellow ochre. Their conclusion is that ‘the scriptorium of the Book of Kells had access to the whole range of materials available on the British Isles’. I would also add, as was confirmed to me last week by a medical historian from Cambridge University, that many of the pigments used in monastic scriptoria — orpiment being a good example — also served as medicines in monastic hospitals.

Then there is this more general account by the historian Donnchadh Ó Corráin. “Later Irish hagiography is full of miracles about books: their recovery from water unharmed, their miraculous writing and reading, their use to banish demons and monsters, and their wonderful interaction with animals: from Ciarán’s use of a living antlered stag as a bookstand to the fly that walked along each line of Mochua’s psalter as he read and remained as a living book-mark until he resumed reading. Similarly, there is a celebration of the acquisition of literacy — saints can read without being taught, can read strange languages sight unseen, are taught to read by angels — and of the craft of the scribe. Columba, without having seen the scribe’s copy, predicts that there will be a single mistake — a given letter missing on a given page — and he is right. All this is a remarkable celebration of the technology of literacy. As McNally put it, ‘the Irish Christians place a maximum emphasis on the written word as a sacred sign, for the Christian God was himself the veritable author of a Book’.”

Given this, it is not surprising that the literary scholar Éamonn Ó Carragáin insists upon our remembering that the fundamental image is the manuscript itself, not any page within it. It was designed, he points out, to be carried in procession in all its beauty as the Word made flesh. He describes the use of gospels containing particular illustrations in an evangelical ceremony called the *apertio aurium* (‘opening of ears’). Kells is *not* such a book, he finds, but contains echoes of such books, ‘as if the designers of Kells wished throughout their book to refer to the ancient liturgical tradition of the *apertio aurium* . . . but that they never intended their book to be actually used in such a ceremony’. Such an indirect use of the tradition, he concludes, may be a sign that Kells comes from a highly developed monastic culture that had long got past the necessity of converting the heathen.

Which brings us to those vexed questions of when and where. One contributor, Peter Harbison, tells us that a show of hands at the conference revealed a slight majority for an 8th-century over a 9th-century date, and a much larger majority for Iona over Kells as the most likely place of origin. The papers, where they touch on origins, read like a roll-call of this result. Ó Corráin goes for Iona, while ranking it with the great monastery-towns of Ireland. Ian Fisher, of our own Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, plumps for mid-8th-century Iona. Nancy Netzer, from her study of the book’s ‘beast canon tables’, suggests mid-8th-century Iona too, but believes the solution may lie in a comparative study of metalwork. And Michael Ryan, from metalwork, goes for the late 8th or early 9th century, as does William O'Sullivan on the basis of the scripts.

Why is the date important? Because it helps establish the place. Peter Harbison, in a piece on high crosses, points out that if the book was made before 804, it was probably made in Iona, because that is when the Columban monastery at Kells (in what is now Co. Meath) is first mentioned in the historical records. In 801 the Vikings had reached Iona for the first time and burned the monastery; after they had raided it again in 806 and killed 68 monks, conditions there would not have been at all conducive to the production of a manuscript of such magnificence. In fact there was more 'red martyrdom' in 825 when St Blathmac refused to give up to the Norsemen the precious metalwork of St Columba's shrine. Harbison therefore concludes that if the book could be shown to be later than 806, 'its painters would be more likely to have been sitting in the safer surroundings of Kells, whither some of the Iona monks fled for refuge'.

So the roll-call continues. Martin Werner, from a study of the religious symbolism of the illustrations, believes that the book was begun in Iona in the late 8th century. Michelle Brown, from a study of the decoration itself, points to a late 8th- or early 9th-century date and refers coyly to 'southern England, Ireland and the area where the Book of Kells was probably written' — meaning, obviously, Scotland/Northumbria. The point is, as John Higgitt shows from an examination of the display script and the decorative capital letters, that the Book of Kells seems to lie somewhere along a line of calligraphic development that runs from the Celtic monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria about 750, through Iona about 800, to Kells about 850. But Lindisfarne appears to have few supporters nowadays, and even the author of a paper on 'Kells and its Book', D L Swan, points out that, according to the 'Annals of Ulster', in 814 the building of the church of Kells was completed, and in 831 and 849 the Iona abbots travelled to Ireland with the reliquaries of Colum Cille. Could these have included *Soiscel Mor Cholaim Chille*, the Great Gospel of Colum Cille, he asks? Could the archaeological evidence revealed in the area of the early stone church of Kells relate to preparations for these events?

There is a remarkable convergence of academic opinion going on here, and I think that every *Eileanach* can feel justifiable pride that the Gaelic-speaking people of our islands are at last being widely acknowledged as having produced one of the world's greatest works of art. I certainly believe that the combined research of so many scholars must mean that the ultimate secrets of the chief relic of the western world lie somewhere between the covers of this book. If only we knew *exactly* where.

Felicity O'Mahony (ed.), *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a conference at Trinity College Dublin 6-9 September 1992*. Published for Trinity College Library Dublin by Scolar Press 1994. xiv + 617 pp.

***WHFP* 7.6.96**