

The Light from the West

A period of almost a thousand years, from the disintegration of the Roman Empire to the time of the Renaissance, has long been known as the Dark Ages. In the last half century, historians have begun to acknowledge what Irishmen have known all along - that there was a good deal of intellectual light - even questioning of conventional wisdom - during those centuries and much of it came from Eire.

The sixth, seventh and eighth centuries were perhaps the greatest in Irish history, when the light from Hibernia flooded Europe in its darkest hour of barbarism. Iona, Lindisfarne, Glastonbury, Luxeuil, Peronne, St. Gallen, Bobbio Wurzburg, Regensburg, Munich, Salzburg, Vienna and even Kiev, all were sites of monasteries which came into being through the work of Irish monks. During the darkest days of "Dark Ages" monastery after monastery grew from the seedbed of the especially fruitful Luxeuil.

St. Columbanus (not to be confused with St. Columba who founded Iona) was a Leinsterman, born about the time (c.543) St. Ciaran established the famed learning center at [Clonmacnoise](#). At Bangor, he studied, Latin, Greek, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and more and then set forth for the continent to carry the message of Christ to the unbaptized. His first major success was the conversion of Sigebert, King of Austrasia, after which he journeyed to the Vosges Mountains, where he started a monastery at Anagrai and then at Luxeuil which also had a school.

Columbanus was something of a "character" like the prophets of old. One of his contemporaries wrote that he showed "a magnificence of rhetoric and an intransigence of attitude." He challenged Pope Gregory the Great on the method for fixing the date of Easter, a dispute the Irish Church eventually lost, but he used a little "blarney" in his letter to Gregory, complimenting the Pope on a recent pastoral, although Columbanus was a more notable scholar himself.

He publicly rebuked King Theudeich II for the King's moral failings once too often. The monk was right but he was forcibly expelled from Luxeuil, transported to Nantes and put on a boat for Ireland. The ship was driven back by weather and Columbanus and his companion were put ashore by the superstitious sailors. He and his friend Gall found their way to Switzerland, where Gall founded a monastery in the area still known as St. Gall. Columbanus went to Italy where he started the foundation at Bobbio, where he died in 615. He left letters, sermons and poems which proved him to be well versed in both Latin and Greek classics. And he was typical - one of hundreds of monks who left Ireland to spread both the Gospel and secular learning. It was said at that time that any scholar in western Europe who knew Greek must be Irish.

We have all read that one of the reasons for prolific vocations was the poverty of the people and the comparatively better lifestyle of the clergy. This was certainly not the case in the early Middle Ages; asceticism was the attraction. Life at home in Ireland was too prosperous! - and ultimate sacrifice to an Irishman was exile. Columbanus formulated a rule of monastic life reflecting those of Finnian and Comgall at home. His monks ate half as much as Benedict's and sang twice as many psalms, endured corporal punishment and exile. The basis of their cuisine was cabbage with variety provided by other vegetables and bread. As the years passed, however, the monasteries adopted the more moderate rule of St. Benedict.

St. Virgil (Ferghal), born in Ireland (c 710) labored at Salzburg and was accused of holding to a geographic belief that could be entertained by no sane man, "to wit: the world was round and there might be dwellers on its undersurface!!

In Switzerland, earlier than Gall, was St. Fridolin, who brought Christianity there almost in the time of [St. Patrick](#). At least eight foundations are credited to him. His earliest biographer expressly states that he was an Irishman.

The most famous of Irish missionaries in France after Columbanus was Fursey or Fursa who was a nephew of St. Brendan, educated under him and called "the Sublime" by Bede. Fursa is the patron saint of Peronne and was credited with many miracles in his lifetime. He had marvelous visions of the "other world" which were written down and said to be an inspiration to Dante. Another Leinsterman, Livinus, was martyred in Flanders (663) and his relics are preserved at the church of St. Babo in Ghent.

Nor were the ladies left out. St. Dymphna, from Monaghan, labored and is remembered by a church in Gheel. St. Gunifort and his sister St. Dardaluch are honored in Pavia, Italy and Fressing, Bavaria.

St. Kilian founded no monastery, but he preached the Gospel in Wurzburg, rebuking Duke Gozbert for an improper marriage. The Duke gave in, but his wife had Kilian and two companions beheaded when Gozbert was away. Kilian is still revered in Wurzburg. These are but a few of hundreds of devout and scholarly Irish who went forth to "teach all nations". In the ninth century, there were Irish lay scholars all over Europe - at Liege, Cologne, Reims, Reichenau, Fulden and Tours, many imported by Charlemagne. Fleeing from the Viking raiders, these laymen were noted more for conviviality than asceticism (many drinking songs are attributed to them) but they had a real role in establishing France as a center of learning.

(Written by Mary Minogue & originally printed in 1991)

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