Celtic Christian Ireland: Storehouse of the Past, Workshop for the Future

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THE DOMINICAN COLLEGE HUMANITIES PROGRAM introduces its students in the fall semester to the three great civilizations which are the bedrock—the well-spring—of Western culture: the Hellenic, the Judeo-Christian, the Roman. In the spring semester the student returns and, if attentive, notices that though the classics born around the rim of the Mediterranean remain highly influential, the settings in which they will continue to thrive have expanded to Europe and the British Isles. It may seem to the student consulting a map that the progression from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea to Aegean, Adriatic and Atlantic waters is natural enough. But there is an interesting loop to the journey of Western art and learning, a loop up through “Hibernia” (balanced, in fact, by a similar loop through Constantinople) that both preserved and enriched the heritage that spread over the European continent.

“You cannot understand the Middle Ages unless you know something about Ireland,” quotes Ludwig Bieler, a Celtic scholar. “Ireland might indeed be called a harbinger of the Middle Ages. Not, to be sure, the only one, but one of the most effective. During the centuries between Christian
antiquity and the Carolingian revival, when the foundations of medieval Europe were being laid, only the Irish had something to contribute that was new as well as lasting."

The question to be pursued in this essay involves the little loop, the byway through the history, culture and soul of Ireland which produced such an enkindling of spirituality. What was the flame burning in the hearth that warmed the house of Ireland, her larger neighbor to the east, and parts of Western Europe in the fifth through ninth centuries? Why did such a fire catch, burn hot but quick, to be banked by the invasions that followed? Or to phrase the question more classically: What is the character of the Christian religious experience that made Ireland both a storehouse where ancient learning could be guarded and a workshop from which new treasures could be brought forth, best of the old and the new?

**Background**

In order to begin work on these questions, we must go back to Christianity, that very special blending of Semitic and Hellenistic cultures, and look at its first few hundred years of life. The initial blaze of Christianity with its unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ had died down in some sense by the end of the second century, if by that we can understand that its period of origins was over, its scripture set, its governmental patterns beginning to stabilize, its expectations of the imminent end of the world modified. Though it continued to gain new adherents and so to expand, it also began early to retrench and to seek a mutually beneficial arrangement with the civil authorities which were heir to the Roman Empire. Within three centuries the young Christian Church was closely allied, for good and for ill, with the aging structures of the Roman Empire. Political and economic privileges were acquired, probably vital for the continued growth of Christian communities. Theology, rising from the confrontation of experience and world views of various sorts with systematic thought as well as with the rich poetry of the Bible, was being forged as it defended orthodox views against heterodoxy. In general, it is fair to say that the lines were converging toward harmony and uniformity, for good and for ill. The price paid was loss of a certain freshness and vitality.

New sprouts continued, of course. Individuals seeking a more ascetic and vigorous spiritual discipline than they found in the mainstream went out to the deserts to deepen their relationship with God and, paradoxically it would seem, with other human beings. Groups of such individuals eventually gathered to pray and contemplate and be of service to the Church in various ways. Monastic life, a phenomenon close to the heart of many and diverse religions, had emerged from within the Christian community.
One other quick summary must precede our inquiry into the story of Irish Christian culture, and that involves the Celtic peoples, of whom the Irish were one group. Part of the distinctiveness of Irish Christianity can be seen and understood only as we look at its pagan Celtic heritage.

The Celts are discernible as a linguistic or cultural group whose presence in Europe stretches back to the third millennium B.C. They were not a narrowly distinct group but represent rather a general identity, responsive to various changes as other cultural elements came into contact with them. The group germane to the present study seems to have dwelt in northwestern Europe in the first millennium B.C. with a flowering of their culture in the fifth through first centuries. The Greeks and Romans were quite interested in the Celts, as we can read in Plato, Xenophon, Caesar, Livy and others. Celtic tribes menaced Rome in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and allied with her Carthaginian foes; Julius Caesar encountered Celts in the first century B.C. when he went into Gaul; St. Paul writes to them as Galatians in the first century of our own era, urging them to persevere in their conversion to Christianity.

The Celtic group in which we are most interested moved into Ireland in the second half of the first millennium B.C. The culture that they took with them has been the subject of considerable study but little consensus. Some scholars (both ancient and modern) have tended to idealize them as intellectually advanced, akin to the Greeks and Romans. These scholars describe the priests as philosophers musing over the indestructibility of the soul, as attuned to the secrets of nature, as arbitrating cases according to rational principles. Others see them as barbarians whose shaman priests propitiated nature and manipulated their fellows. The issue is an important one, though perhaps beyond resolution and certainly beyond the scope of this paper. What is significant is the undeniable fact of compatibility between the Celtic culture of Ireland and the Christianity that later encountered it. In the interests of demonstrating that point, a few aspects of Celtic culture can be described.

The Irish epics and sagas are the most useful source of information on pre-Christian Ireland. They indicate a society which valued learning, certainly among the priestly and poet classes. The episodes in the stories embody legal principles presumably operative in the society: for example, a bargain once made held, even if it involved more than the partners understood at its inception. Social patterns were based on the family and on agriculture. Women as well as men play important roles in the myths. The gods and goddesses often take human form themselves, illustrating the Celtic belief that physical death does not end life but merely shifts it to another expression. The stories reflect a love of nature and an emphasis on trees and groves, springs, wells and rivers as important sites. Animals are often helpful to the heroes or harmful, but in either case quite actively
involved. The fascination with animals shows up in the highly abstract and geometric art characteristic of Celtic culture in the British Isles and on the continent in the early centuries of the present era: primarily small scale metalwork objects with intricate and delicate patterns composed of geometric and zoomorphic (abstract animal) forms.

**Preliminary Assessment**

So, with these brief summaries of Christian and Celtic cultures before us, we can begin to gaze into the fire that ignited and spread so quickly when the two came together in fifth-century Ireland. The Irish produced a beautiful and distinctive form of Christianity that caught quickly, burned brightly, flickered and was restoked, but whose early vigor was pretty well spent within a few hundred years. The embers into which we can gaze—the illuminated manuscripts, the stone crosses, the adventure literature, the monastic ruins, the metalwork—invite us to think about the culture which produced them, for such a unified diversity of fine art is not produced except under very remarkable circumstances. As we become familiar with the heritage of Irish Christian culture we may feel wistful and deprived and curious about the fire itself, and hence the subject of this essay: an inquiry into the nature of Irish Christianity in the fifth through ninth centuries.

So let us look now at the chalices and reliquaries, casings for vital religious experiences; let us follow the animals with their toes and tails curved among the lattices of illuminated letters celebrating God's word revealed to man; let us follow the saints on their travels around Ireland and away from it; let us go on pilgrimage to the graveyards of Ireland and read the carved stone crosses that have been proclaiming for hundreds of years the triumph of life over death. Let us examine the Penitentials or manuals for priests hearing confessions, the arguments over the date for Easter, the controversy over the shape of the tonsure on the heads of the monks; and let us ask what it all means.

As we examine these now cold artifacts, one sense that emerges is that Irish Christianity was a brief equilibrium, the product of a skein of paradoxes or tensions which held together very creatively for a short time. A great love of nature, expressed in an extremely abstract and geometric art; a fierce love of the homeland, coupled (in some cases) with a determination to renounce it forever; an absorption in the codification of rules and laws and moral circumstances, and yet a sense of play and creativity with shapes and words; a fervor for some things matched with a tremendous apathy—almost a defeatism—about others; kindness and warmth and cold disdain; practicality and dreaminess; obedience and inventiveness; the impetus to gather in community in order to accomplish common aims, challenged by a rugged and indomitable independence. These anomalous but evidently
fruitful blends can be seen clearly in the lives of Irish Christian monks, scholars, poets and artists of the early Middle Ages and in the art they left to their Church and to Western Civilization.

Such lines of tension, though observed and described as causes now, are not really constructed from the outside, of course, but grow from a center. The Irish Christian culture was produced from the lives and energies of strong and creative men and women who fell deeply in love with God and sought to embody that love constantly and in every aspect of their lives. It is in the effects of these attempts and in their intensity that we can glimpse the God whose presence these saints craved. We can also see why this particular set of tensions did not last very long. The quickness of the Irish flame and its genius can lead us to be glad that it existed, to regret its loss, to consider its lessons for us, and to reflect upon the God it so desired to show forth.

*Coming of Christianity to Ireland*

Christianity does not seem to have come to Ireland very much before the arrival of St. Patrick in the first half of the fifth century. Patrick was a Briton, born into a Christian family but not particularly fervent in the practice of his faith. Captured from his father’s house by slave traders, he lived as a captive in Ireland until he escaped and made his way on foot (two hundred miles) to the coast, finally reaching his home. He was then inspired in a vision to return and evangelize his captors, having himself awakened to the value of his own Christian status. Patrick had found God (so to speak) and now wished to bring that same experience to the Irish. Such a determination enables us to discern the secret of his great energy to accomplish his task: his love for God and his eagerness to draw into that love people whom he cherished. Patrick himself says:

> When I, once rustic, exiled, unlearned, who does not know how to provide for the future, this at least I most certainly know that before I was humiliated I was like a stone lying in the deep mire; and He that is mighty came and in his mercy lifted me up, and raised me aloft, and placed me on the top of the wall. And therefore I ought to cry aloud and so render something to the Lord for his great benefits here and in eternity—benefits which the mind of men is unable to appraise. . . . But after I came to Ireland—every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed—the love of God and his fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved, so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountain; and I used to get up for prayers before
daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me—as I now see because the spirit within me was then fervent.\textsuperscript{14}

Patrick's autobiographical writings, his \textit{Confession} and letters, constitute more a praise of God and a spiritual bequest than a systematic account of his life; details of the latter are incidental, leaving much to inference \textsuperscript{15} (and thus to legend). His preparation to return to Ireland involved formal study and ordination to the priesthood in France. One source of information, Prosper of Aquitaine, a contemporary historian-analyst, also informs us that Patrick was not the first to be sent to Ireland but was preceded by one Palladius and by a pair, Lupus and Germanus. Palladius was sent by Pope Celestine in 431 to check a heresy known as Pelagianism.\textsuperscript{16}

Pelagianism, perhaps most familiar to us from the writings of St. Augustine, denied the doctrine of original sin and its attendant view of human nature as flawed in some basic way. Pelagius insisted upon the ability of human beings to choose the good without needing the assistance of grace. The birth of Irish Christianity from the matrix of this question about our humanity is very significant. Much of the rigor of the early practice of the faith is understandable as a denial of the Pelagian position that goodness comes easily and as a recognition that asceticism and discipline can train the mind, will, heart and body to choose well—with the assistance of God's grace.

At any rate, even if he was not the bishops' first choice to cross the channel, the lack of success of Palladius occasioned the sending of Patrick in about 435. Patrick's success was quick and dramatic. We have the story of his confrontation with the Irish lords at Cashel, their giving way before his zeal and message, and the ceremony of conversion. Legend has it that Patrick accidentally skewered the foot of the high king of Munster with his staff; but the neophyte, thinking that the painful gesture was part of his initiation into an austere faith, bore it without flinching.\textsuperscript{17}

Though it is impossible to glean unambiguous historical data from ancient sources whose purposes were more varied, the confrontation between Christian and Celtic cultures does not seem to have been particularly bitter or violent, a refreshing and intriguing contrast with so much of Church history. The two traditions seem like two strong and independent people who meet, are drawn to each other, assess and then do the rearranging necessary for a deep and mutually beneficial friendship. The cultures shared a deep belief in and respect for the supernatural, a love of learning, a zest for storytelling, an appreciation of natural symbols. The Irish seem to have been amazingly open to the Christian wooing and the result is more an awakening of latent possibilities than a sea change.
Centers of Learning

Whether in loose imitation of monasteries in France (influence of Martin of Tours is suggested) or, more likely, as the most natural embodiment of the new life, Patrick and the other early Irish saints known to us gathered into groups; the map of Ireland is dotted with ruins of monasteries allegedly founded by Patrick, Kevin, Declan, Brigid, Enda, Comgall, Ciaran, Columba, Brendan. Monasteries, however the details may be arranged, are places where people can gather who want every aspect of their lives to enhance their relationship with God. (Or so they begin.)

The ruins of St. Kevin’s monastery at Glendalough in County Wicklow give a sense of what the founders had in mind for the incarnation of their faith. The details of Kevin’s life may be apocryphal but are nonetheless instructive for what they show about historiography (or hagiology) as well as spirituality. The Bible provides birth story motifs for Kevin, as for many other religious figures. An angel intervened shortly before his baptism and revealed his name; the milk needed for his infant diet was provided by a mysterious and reliable white cow who dropped by the household morning and evening. There are several tales of the young boy’s generous gifts of food which was in his care to beggars; when he was rebuked for his largesse, the supplies were found to be complete again. Kevin was sent as a boy of about twelve to a monastery where he studied, presumably the Bible and the Church Fathers, the Latin classics (including Virgil and Horace) and the pagan lore of Ireland. In the template that produced the stories of Kevin’s life and so many other Celtic lives we can see again that intense thirst for God and things of God, a desire to retreat to communion with him in ever-deeper solitude, a fierce asceticism.

Kevin’s refuge was Glendalough, and we see there ruins of a split-level monastic settlement, clustered around two lakes. Typically there were individual stone cells—huts, really—for the monks and several tiny chapels, suggesting the individual nature of Irish monasticism. There was a church slightly larger than the chapels but still small, perhaps thirty by forty feet. When there was need for more space, typically a second church would be built rather than the first enlarged. Kevin’s desire was to be a hermit, not a founder, teacher or abbot: his “bed,” a stone slab, is located apart from the cells and overlooks the upper lake. Yet Glendalough was a community, a school, a scriptorium, and it attracted saints and scholars from all over Ireland.

The rather anti-social side of these early men and their misogynist behaviors (they rudely and often physically rebuffed the friendship of women: Kevin repulsed the later holy woman Kathleen with a bunch of nettles; Columbanus stepped over the prostrate body of his mother in his haste to escape a female) seem extreme to us, even unhealthy. As Kevin
retreated from social intercourse, even in the monastery, he entered into
greater intimacy with all of nature, especially befriendings animals. There is
insight behind such paradox. It was a creative experiment to live such a
physically simple and austere life immersed in the wildly, sensuously
beautiful valley of Glendalough. To restrain oneself from superficial human
contacts so that one can study, be absorbed in nature, and listen to God
more deeply is a classic quest in religions. These passions—or the behav-
iors that are intended to reflect them—could seem aberrations, but a closer
scrutiny of these early Irish Christians will show healthy fruits from such
lives.

Though there may have been more monasteries for men, such centers for
women were not uncommon. St. Brigid, at whose school Kevin is said to
have studied, provides one such example. As would be the case later in the
thirteenth-century Dominican foundations for women, the fifth- and sixth-
century Irish women’s monasteries provided places for converts to Chris-
tianity to live apart from their families, centers where their faith could be
protected, strengthened and embodied. The foundresses, even in stereo-
type, seem to have been strong people: innovative, efficient, scholarly,23
resembling the heroines of the Irish sagas. The Brigid of pagan literature, a
daughter of royalty, mother goddess and fertility figure, presided over
learning and literature, crafts and healing arts.24

Monasteries were organized along familial lines, with land and leader-
ship kept within families and inherited. Though the ruins hardly credit it,
monastic enclosures often contained (in addition to the cells, chapels and
churches mentioned above) facilities for schools and for the copying and
illuminating of manuscripts, as well as support for the feeding and clothing
of the permanent residents. Love of scholarship and of Christian texts
specifically is one of the most appealing and intriguing aspects of the Irish
contribution to Christianity. It deserves to be weighed against claims of
other social inadequacies. To treasure the written word, copy and illumina-
te it, to study and interpret it and keep it vital and moving is a height of
love of neighbor as well as of God.

The Christian “conquest” made available to the insular Celts a system of
alphabetic writing flexible enough to allow for the development of litera-
ture. The Irish already had many stories of their origins and of the exploits
of their heroes and these benefited from Christian culture in two ways.
First, the writing itself. Though the poets who told the stories relied on
their memories and their skill at recounting the stories to keep them vital,
the transition from oral art to literature required an alphabet. The Irish had
evolved a script called ogham, somewhat analogous to Roman numerals,
with sounds being represented by combinations of linear strokes. Just as it
is difficult to imagine much sophistication in higher mathematics with a
system as ponderous as Roman numerals, so it is hard to envision the
growth and subtlety of literature without an alphabet, and in this case, the Latin language. Equally important, the classics and the scriptures provided the story-loving Irish with many new themes, motifs and episodes. Irish forebears quickly joined the descendants of Adam and Eve and Noah. Scriptural episodes offered embellishments for the lives of the saints, as we have seen. The apocryphal texts were special favorites, being even more replete with mysterious (not to say bizarre) elements than was canonical material. Materials not so eagerly accepted in the Roman Church turn up in Irish material. So stories show Judas as having killed himself not in remorse for his betrayal of Jesus but so that he could be in place and so released when Christ harrowed hell; the blind soldier Longinus who pierced the side of the dead Jesus is cured of his affliction by the wine/blood that gushes forth; that same effusion, spilling to the earth, baptizes the head of Adam which was carried to the correct spot by the Great Flood. Even the names of the last two people who will be killed by the antichrist before the second coming of Christ are revealed: Enoch and Elijah, who never quite died even in canonical scripture. The Irish named the three magi: Melchio, Aspar, Patisara. Later medievalists would depend on Irish sources for some of this information. The Irish scholars used the Apocrypha quite freely and flexibly, not being too scrupulous about logical or theological implications.

Though scripture was the chief subject of study (and the religious classics that commented upon it), the Irish managed that work without much knowledge of Hebrew. They produced useful commentaries on Greek as well as Latin classics. They wrote poems, prayers and hymns, biographies and homilies, breviaries and missals, some in Latin and some in the vernacular. The poets delighted in the endless variety of arrangement of words, beautiful to eye and ear, challenging and sustaining to mind and heart. The Irish receive the credit for adding the technique of final word rhyme to Latin poetry. And so the intellectual and spiritual blaze began and burned brightly and grew steadily, adding luster and insight to the classics on which it fed.

Perhaps the best place to look more carefully at scriptural manuscript illumination is at the monastery at Kells (County Meath), a sixth-century foundation credited to St. Columba. While we are there we can examine some other facets of Irish Christian culture as well.

Before looking at the finest of the manuscripts produced by the Irish monks, it is surely fitting to recognize the contribution of many nameless men and women who spent their lives copying, preserving and protecting the scriptural texts and thus making them more widely available. That it was sometimes a far from glorious task can be glimpsed through marginal notes telling of defective materials, bad light, ill health, cold weather, need for haste. The earliest extant Irish Christian manuscript is a sixth-century
psalter, the Cathach of St. Columba, also called "The Battler," as it was carried into battle as an aid to victory. The most famous, ornate and highly sophisticated manuscript is the Book of Kells, an eighth- or ninth-century work.

The Book of Kells is a Latin text of the four gospels, and ironically, for all its splendor, a rather poor text. One assumes, often correctly, that the scribes responsible for the transmission of texts were skilled at Latin grammar, vocabulary and syntax; trained in interpretation; experienced at reading the transcriptions of their fellows. The Book of Kells is, however, a jumble of St. Jerome's text and an older Latin text, with too many errors, misspellings, misreadings and anomalies. 33 Its script is a distinctive, insular majuscule, written on lined vellum in black ink, illustrated lavishly with blues, reds, greens, yellows and especially purples. 34 The colors were produced from natural extracts of animal, vegetable or mineral products, mixed with water and a fixative such as egg white. These colors achieved brilliant effect by being applied in clear, bold pattern and designs of paint overlay. 35

The plan behind the illustration of the text is not possible to discern, what with pages missing and pages blank. Experts can detect at least three artists at work within the pages, each with a distinctive style. There are illuminations of initial letters, of the chi/rho abbreviation-symbol for Christ; there are whole carpet pages of illustration only, with no text. The evangelists are portrayed in a form that seems, to those accustomed to Greek and Roman art, quite abstract and stylized. Faces are rigid, hair stiff, anatomy bent to space available, clothing shaping patterns rather than conforming to physical contours which should lie underneath. One scholar points out that these figures had quite a journey "from the classical world where [they] began into a Celtic one where real things must first be dismembered and then pieced together again according to a different law. In the absence of manuscripts showing the successive stages of the process, we shall probably never fully understand how the hard-won gains of the European pictorial tradition came to be jettisoned so casually by the insular scribes . . . ." Though he concludes, "Patterns of patterns though they be, these portraits are, nevertheless, endowed with a haunting majesty." 36

Perhaps the description, a bit patronizing, really, bears its own deeper insight "according to a different law." The Irish art is more conceptual than representational, meant to suggest rational content rather than to be suggestive of visual accuracy. The scene of the Temptation of Christ in the Book of Kells is one of the most interesting full-page illuminations in the manuscript. Set within a decorated frame, the illustration depicts a half-length figure of Christ, on top of or behind the Temple, in either case towering in relation to the building. The Temple architecture is reminiscent of Irish houses, churches and the popular metal house-shaped reliquary shrines. An ugly, dark, skeletal devil appears below and to the right,
counseling the larger figure. While depictions of the Temptation of Christ are not uncommon in Christian art, the accurate setting for them is the desert, where none attends but the protagonists. The unusual addition here of a crowd of onlookers seems to suggest a conflation or montage of Christ's temptation with his preaching ministry. Hence the effect is filled with theological depth as well as with visual interest: believers learn from the example of Jesus' struggle with evil as well as benefiting from it less tangibly as they attend the "pioneer" of human experience (as the letter to the Hebrews puts it).³⁷

Animals abound in the Book of Kells, as in related manuscripts. Fish, snakes, birds, otters, cats, butterflies, mice and hens chase each other and intertwine, often biting each other. Some are fantastic and mythical. Some are realistic enough to prompt one scholar of Celtic art to imagine their particular creator spending hours with his sketching book in the monastery animal yard, training his eye and hand to catch the creatures' contours and movements.³⁸ In addition to their decorative function, the animals have symbolic relevance: otter, cats, mice, butterflies (representing the cosmological entirety of sea, earth and air) are depicted consuming wafer and fish, Eucharistic symbols.³⁹

Abstract ornamentation of nearly infinite variety fills spaces on the pages of the manuscript. Spirals are interwoven so intricately that it requires a magnifying glass to lead the eye along their pathways. Intricate but never confused, reports Françoise Henry; the spirals inevitably arrive at their destination without a snarl or a slip-up.⁴⁰ Finally there are plain letters with simple blotches of color, like acts of self-denial amid the luxuriance of their fellows.⁴¹

One scholar concludes for us:

This extraordinary manuscript is difficult to approach or to judge as a work of art. Its mysterious motives are too removed from the twentieth century (although they form one of the minor obsessive themes of that latter-day example of Celtic concentration on intricate pattern, Finnegans Wake) and they achieve too fully the aims of an art which was non-classical, non-representational, non-humanistic, and which was destined to remain outside the mainstream of European culture . . . . The Book of Kells is to be marveled at rather than enjoyed . . . .⁴²

From this treasure and its siblings, what can we infer about the Irish monks? Certainly a love for the scripture and a care for its transmission, but also a tremendous reverence for the manner of its proclamation. The infinite patience to interweave the spirals; the elaborate variation of geometric squares and circles, many richly filled in; the endless creativity at
recasting birds and snakes into new species give insight into the love of seemingly pointless elaboration. And the passion to arrange and order almost infinite numbers of intricate flourishes tells us about the depth of devotion to this particular *opus Dei*. It also leads one scholar to suggest that we know little, actually, about pagan Celtic ornamentation and its motivation, and that the determined presence of the nature motifs may be intentionally related to the vitality of the work of art.43

Related to these same characteristics but more practical and less appreciated today are the Irish *Penitentials*, also traditionally associated with St. Columba. These works were classifications of moral transgressions with appropriate penance prescribed. In the first few centuries of the Christian Church, sin was recognized to be social as well as individual and was atoned for by public, usually extended, penance. The Irish Church was the first to restructure the sacrament of penance in recognition of its aim to heal both individual and society as well as to correct and punish.44 The *Penitentials* furnished graded penances, so there was some fit between sin and penance. Sensibly, penances varied in length and severity according to the nature of the sin, the frequency and persistence of same, and the rank and disposition of the sinner. Penances were mostly fasting, prayer and almsgiving. An example at random will illustrate the pattern:

If one of the clerics or ministers of God makes strife, he shall do penance for a period of seven days with bread and water and salt, and seek pardon from God and his neighbor, with full confession and humility; and thus can he be reconciled to God and his neighbor. If anyone has decided on a scandalous deed and plotted in his heart to strike or kill his neighbor, if (the offender) is a cleric, he shall do penance for half a year with an allowance of bread and water and for a whole year abstain from wine and meat, and thus he will be reconciled to the altar; but if he is a layman, he shall do penance for a period of seven days; since he is a man of this world, his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come. But if he is a cleric and strikes his brother or his neighbor or sheds blood, it is the same as if he had killed him, but the penance is not the same: he shall do penance with bread and water and salt and be deprived of his clerical office for an entire year, and he must pray with weeping and with tears, that he may obtain mercy of God, since Scripture says: Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; how much more he who strikes him. But if he is a layman, he shall do penance for forty days and give some money to him whom he has struck, according as some priest or arbiter determines. A cleric, however, ought not to give money to either man or woman.45
The confessor was not only a representative of Christ who would come to judge but a doctor, a "soul friend" or advisor. The Penitentials show the same love for order, for classification of endless though related variation that is visible in the manuscript illumination. They also show a respect for law and an acknowledgment that circumstances affect the quality of a human act. Not designed to be entrapping for sinners, the lists were meant to serve as bulwarks against ignorance or incompetence of priest and mental doubts or scrupulosity of penitents, all suggesting once again the particular and distinctive Celtic blend of precision and even severity with compassion and creativity. The Penitentials surely attest to the belief in weakened human nature as well as in its capacity to turn toward God. They also recognize the limits to arbitrary power which written law and respect for it could achieve.

The site of Kells also gives us access to several beautiful examples of another unique feature of Irish Christianity: the sculpted cross. Ireland's old ecclesiastical ruins hold many of these tall sentries which were sculpted between about the sixth and eleventh centuries. Church ruins often include cemeteries, of course, and our own custom of memorial markers might lead us to mistake the nature of the Celtic crosses. They are neither markers nor memorials but rather symbols proclaiming Christ's victory over death. Placed among the dead, they were a teaching to the living that the cross of Christ—appearances perhaps to the contrary—was an ultimate and decisive victory over the forces of sin and death. Like the manuscript illumination and the Penitentials, the crosses are a testimonial to the Irish love of learning and concern for the well-being of the community. And like the aforementioned texts, the crosses show the Irish love for elaborating the design so as better to communicate the content of that learning.

Generalizations are unsatisfactory but nonetheless can add some information to our assessment of early Christian Celtic culture. The earliest of the crosses may have been wooden; survivors are all stone: first plain, then adorned with simple carvings both abstract and representational, becoming in the ninth or tenth centuries more ornate and detailed. Standing up to eighteen feet tall, usually on stone bases, the crosses—for they are crosses and not crucifixes—leave the surfaces of both beams and the wheel that usually joins them available for the carving of both scriptural and mythological scenes and interlaced design familiar to us from the manuscripts.

It is difficult at first to understand rationally why the crosses are so appealing. Many are broken, chipped or just worn down, exposed as they have been for centuries to Ireland's bracing climate. Perhaps their very survival and their wordless testimony are part of it; their blunt fidelity to the belief that even amid the ruins things are not only what they seem, warms the heart of all manner of pilgrims.
The carvings on the crosses are representational, even narrational, only toward the end of the period. Quite unusual is the cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice whose face shows the Last Judgment, with Christ ushering some figures to bliss and others to wrath. The earlier carvings are more hieroglyphic and symbolic. The human figures seem at first almost grotesque, partly due to the stone medium, perhaps—though eyes that have looked also upon the stonework at Chartres are not eager to credit that explanation. Rather the rough and simple figures aim to draw the pilgrim viewer behind or through the surface to consider the truth being proclaimed. The panels juxtaposed are components to be linked together, the figures representing an abstraction to be considered. The favorite story, it would seem to this pilgrim, is the story of Adam and Eve, who are usually in some posture of sorrow. The man and woman do not lack dignity, nor are they cringing and panicked as occasionally one sees them in art (e.g., Masaccio). But they have blundered, recognize it and regret it. Other Old Testament scenes show comparable texts of human struggle against the forces of sin or temptation or danger: Cain killing Abel; Daniel in the lions' den or in the fiery furnace with his three companions; Abraham preparing to give his only son back to God; Noah helping the animals onto the ark; Jacob wrestling with an angel. One might suppose that the stone carvers simply chose the most exciting and graphic scenes to accommodate small, hard spaces. Henry would see in such choices traces of the ninth-century reform of Irish Christianity or the experience of Viking raids, both to be described below. Perhaps so, but such inferences both negate Celtic creativity and overlook the spirituality we have seen elsewhere; recognition that living a moral life involves struggle; awareness of the importance of heroic effort; belief that God will smooth the path of those who wish to draw near to him. Hence seen also are depictions of the anointing of David and David playing the harp; the baptism of Christ at the confluence of two rivers (the Jor and the Dan, as Irish tradition has it); the multiplication of loaves. Despite the seeming crudity of the carving, details are often startlingly clear: baggy pants and Viking swords can help date the crosses; a figure of the crucified Christ with outsized hands suggests a theology of his redemptive death and a subtle comment on the hidden power of the Eucharistic liturgy.

As was true elsewhere in Irish Christian culture, the Celtic past is caught up into and enriches the new insights: Celtic love of stone, heads, animals, of abstract ornamentation allows the biblical and non-biblical animals (e.g., the swan) to provide for the viewer a kaleidoscope of images that never fails to provoke new insight.
Departures

Strangely, it might seem, the next relevant aspect of early Christianity in Ireland is departures from it, departures of two sorts. The first include actual geographical journeys from Hibernia (as it is called in maps from this period) to Britain and to Europe. Once again three Irish saints will help us consider this anomalous phenomenon of determination to leave the beloved homeland.

The first journeyer we have already met: St. Columba, associated with the foundation at Kells. Columba's life is available to us in a different form than has been the case for other individuals. For he had a nearly contemporary biographer, Adamnan. (Columba's dates are ca. 520-580, Adamnan's 628-704.) Adamnan gives, in addition to the usual stock elements, quite a bit of actual information from the idiosyncratic life of the saint (and some good historical, cultural and linguistic data). The stock elements, stressing similarities between Columba and various scriptural heroes, testify of course to his sanctity. His birth was foretold to his mother; rays of light surrounded his boyish slumbers. Though born into Ireland's powerful Uí Niall clan, Columba renounced his birthright—or more accurately, he brought its beneficience into the Church. Educated first in fosterage and then at a monastery school, he studied Christian classics and Irish history, literature and poetry. His role as abbot or master of a school and his ancestral tie to secular politics involved him in a mysterious episode (possibly involving the issue of sanctuary) which led to his temporary excommunication. Another story is told also, involving Columba's zeal for his monastery. Once when our saint was on a visit to a certain Finnian, Columba's host showed him a rare manuscript psalter. Columba borrowed it and made a secret copy (by hand, of course). Finnian claimed that he had been unjustly deprived of his property (an ancient copyright litigation!) and took the matter to a third party for adjudication. The judge, St. Diarmait, decided against Columba, citing as pertinent the aphorism: “As the calf follows the cow, so the copy follows the original”—a saying more metaphorical than analogical, since manuscripts were vellum, from calfskin. The ensuing battle over the psalter 'cost many lives and a remorseful Columba decided he needed to depart, legend suggests.

So Columba had two practical incentives to emigrate (excommunication and war) and went perhaps for philosophical reasons as well: desire for greater asceticism, even a desire to do penance (the renunciation of Ireland being, even in non-religious courts, the height of same), and zeal to evangelize foreign lands. Whatever his motives, the most prominent result of Columba's exile from Ireland to the western coastal region of modern Scotland was the founding of a great monastery complex on the isle of Iona. Iona held pride of place among foundations for quite some time and was the parent of some important daughter monasteries.
Its monastic life was modeled on what Columba had known in Ireland. The community was self-supporting, with fishing providing an economic as well as nutritional base. The internal life of the monastery was centered around mutual love, shared goods, strict obedience, common prayer, rigorous fasting. The scriptorium at Iona is credited with the “Battler” psalter mentioned above and with the Book of Durrow, both alleged to be from Columba’s own hand; with the earliest manuscripts of Adamnan’s life of Columba; with many psalters; and even with the Book of Kells.

One cannot, however, think of a primarily missionary motive when considering the travels of St. Columbanus to Christian Europe and St. Brendan to the Atlantic Ocean, both also in the sixth century.

Columbanus, a man zealous for learning and sanctity even among the giants of his era, was the first of a significant number of his countrymen and women who would travel to Europe during the next several centuries. Such pilgrims, for that is what they were, were drawn to centers of holiness and learning on the continent. Columbanus’ path took him to Luxeuil, St. Gall, Bobbio, leaving seeds of reform behind him. This scholar-ascetic, wishing to draw Christians to a closer following of Christ, was influential in bringing to the monastic communities of France and Italy the passionate commitment, rigor, and penitential fervor with which Ireland was ablaze. Clerics and laity flocked to his houses and embraced Irish monastic life, more vigorous than the Benedictine life then dominant in Europe. It is through houses like Columbanus’ that the great blaze of learning, best embodied perhaps in the illuminated manuscripts, jumped from island to mainland. The art would be preserved but not imitated. The monastery as center of scholarship and the manuscripts full of truth as well as beauty found their way into the mainstream of Christian culture.

Quite different is the peregrination of St. Brendan, an Irish monk who longed to be a hermit. Apparently dissatisfied with the results of his withdrawal to an oratory on Mt. Brandon (Ireland’s second highest “mountain” at 3000 feet), Brendan gathered a group of recruits, equipped a curragh, and sailed out into the Atlantic. His travels, though not available to us in a manuscript earlier than the tenth century, show a blend of motives: wanderlust, desire for a stricter life, eagerness for a greater challenge. Behind those motives, though, we can glimpse the same search for God that characterized Columbanus’ monastic reform and Columba’s missionary efforts as well as the faith that remained in Ireland. Brendan’s travels are, among other ways they could be described, an allegory of the pilgrim’s search for God. Brendan and his men sailed the Atlantic, encountering dangers and adventures of various sorts, returning regularly to the same island in seven successive years for the celebration of Easter. A blend of mythic elements familiar from Greek, Latin and biblical classics, from Irish mythology and from mysticism, the story is filled with extraordinary
and highly elaborate motifs. It is not, perhaps, great literature, but it is a unique and therefore valuable product of Irish Christianity.

The spilling over of energy, the jumping of the flame from its own hearth, visible in at least three distinct patterns just described (missionary, pilgrim, adventurer) is not the only sort of departure of which we must speak. There is a second type of departure: a waning of vitality, a cooling of the fire, that is less positive than what we have seen in the lives of Columba, Columbanus and Brendan. If Irish Christianity was produced from a unique blend of combustible materials of Celtic compatibility and Christian vigor as described above, its core was love of God. The greatest of the Irish saints fell in love with God and manifested it in a particular way at their particular time in history. The core produced a way of life—in fact, as we have seen, a profusion of fruitfulness. Such fruits are produced only from a molten core, not from a cooler sort of attraction to the effects of it, from interest in a way of life. To devote one's energies to living a way of life is not at all the same as living a way of life because of great love.

So laxity came relatively quickly to the Irish church (eighth century) and manifested itself in a general retreat from the austerity that had been one of the hallmarks of the early Christian life. The retreat from austerity was fueled, too, by the tremendous wealth of the monasteries which led to a shift in values, to a sort of institutionalization of the way of life that had been so productive.

Reform sprang up as quickly, and it was not so much an organized and focused effort as spontaneous, unorganized, arising in several places at once. The reform, called Celi De—Companions of God, vocalized popularly as Culdees—was manifested by a shift to a greater asceticism yet, a desire to withdraw still more completely from common society (whether in or outside of the monasteries), a greater thirst for contemplation. One particularly interesting phenomenon of the reform was yet another form of departure, to the islands and peninsulas. The reformers chose spots that had been holy places long since and withdrew to live spiritually apart from their monasteries, though in some cases in physical dependence on them. First preferring simply to withdraw, the reform eventually sought also to restore vigor to the monasteries. A quest for ascetical piety replaced the earlier emphasis on intellectual and artistic concerns. Whether the efforts to revitalize Christian life would have been healthy and fruitful or not is a matter for debate, since the arrival of the Vikings from 795 onward focused the energies of the Church on another type of danger.

Arrivals

If the vitality of Irish Christianity can be said to have left its own hearth in the ways noted above, we ought also to suggest that invasions of two types brought to an end the period being described in this paper.
The first type of visitor was very obvious: Viking and Norse ships brought raiders to the coast and settlers eventually to the inner regions of Ireland. The monastic centers, with stable economic reserves and valuable and beautiful liturgical treasures, were obvious targets. The invasions brought to the monasteries disruption, disorder and fear, as inimical to regular life and intellectual pursuits as are military assaults dangerous to physical life. The foreign invasions, coming as they did in the midst of internal crisis, thwarted whatever real revitalization might have been effected. Many monks and scholars fled their monasteries and Ireland itself; the insecurity of life had a demoralizing effect on those who remained. Hence the effort at monastic renewal, the rekindling of the earlier vision, died rather ineffectually.68

A second "invasion" is more subtle to detect but no less deleterious in its impact: the long controversy between the Celtic Church and the Roman Church over matters essentially disciplinary—the determination of the Easter date, the shape of the clerical tonsure, the manner of administering certain sacraments—but also related to ecclesiastical nature and authority.69 The Irish Church had developed certain practices in isolation from Roman procedures, and only when Anglo-Roman Christians met Celtic Christians from Iona did the discrepancies become vexing. We might wonder (from perhaps a too smug pluralism) why it would matter so whether monks were identified by a circular tonsure on the crown of the head or by a swath cut across the front of the skull; or whether Christians should celebrate according to solar or lunar calculation that Christian feast which itself so reordered time. But these two quarrels were indicative of other and more basic differences between insular and continental practice of the faith.

The very structures of Celtic and Roman ecclesiastical governance clashed. The Roman Church was diocesan, organized and governed regionally, with appointments made from and allegiance due back to Rome; the model was military and imperial, born as it was from the head of the empire. The Celtic Church adopted a mode equally compatible with its own roots: a familial, monastic model, where power resided within the many monasteries and was not referable to any center external to itself. Bishops were welcomed at monasteries for various reasons, but exercise of authority was not among them.70

Needless to say, Roman efforts to secure Celtic allegiance were resisted for general as well as specific reasons. The Irish contested each point hotly and at length and lost each point as decisively. Ultimately most of the leaders of the Celtic Church bent before the inevitable. When the Benedicitives arrived in Ireland, bringing with them the dominant model of the monastic life from Europe, Ireland's indigenous model was doomed and would, in time, be snuffed out.
Conclusion

The fact that the flame did not burn hot indefinitely and that the early Irish Christian adventure seems to end on a negative note should not in any sense diminish our appreciation of the accomplishment. If it is true, as I have suggested, that the core of the Irish faith was deep love for the God whom they recognized in the preaching of Patrick and whom they sought to know and serve in each aspect of their lives, then such intensity en masse is probably inevitably ephemeral. The Irish monastic life and the art produced there—the illuminations, the crosses, the scholarly texts, the spirituality—was forged in a hearth whose conditions were not to be imitated or reproduced by mere human endeavor. The Irish received the Christian heritage and, not mere custodians, stamped with their own character what they loved the best before returning it to the common stream of tradition.  

The Irish contribution to Christianity was not political but imaginative, graphically and spiritually and in the combination. The quick, hot flame: the passionate rigor, the creative spirit, the extraordinary energy with which the Irish lived their love of God was a unique and valuable contribution to Christian culture. "We may say without exaggeration not only that some works of lasting value were produced by some outstanding Irish scholars, but also that Irish learning gave the nascent Middle Ages a stimulus which enabled them to outgrow their masters." In some ways, undoubtedly; in some other ways, perhaps we moderns might well consider ourselves learners at the feet of these early Celtic Christians.
Notes


5 Ibid., passim.


7 Ross, p. 60.

8 Herm, p. 236.

9 Ibid., pp. 240-41.

10 Ibid., p. 152.

11 Ross, pp. 58-60.


14 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 7.

15 Bieler, Works, pp. 9-10.

16 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 5.


20 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 27.

21 MacGowan, Glendalough, p. 42.

22 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 85.


28 Dumville, p. 336.
31 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 15.
35 Brown, p. 91.
37 This paragraph is heavily indebted to conversation with colleagues Wood Lockhart and Leslie Ross.
39 Meehan, p. 50.
40 Henry, p. 145.
41 Lucas, p. 79.
42 De Paor, p. 129.
43 Henry, p. 204.
45 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 50.
46 Hughes, p. 85.
47 Lucas, p. 159.
48 Ibid., p. 154.
49 Henry, p. 190.
50 Ibid., pp. 167-70.
51 Lucas, p. 112.
52 de Paor, p. 148.
53 Henry, pp. 167-68.
55 Scherman, p. 151.
56 Ibid., pp. 151-52.
57 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 11.
58 Anderson, p. 87.
59 Bieler, Harbinger, p. 47.
60 Ibid., p. 40.
61 Ibid., p. 41.
63 Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 4.
64 Lehane, pp. 68-70.
65 Scherman, p. 207.
67 Ibid., p. 61.
68 Ibid., p. 63.
69 Kenney, pp. 211 ff.
70 Finlay, pp. 169-70, 177-78 (the whole of chapter X is useful).
71 Lehane, p. 2.
72 Bieler, *Harbinger*, p. 143.