

24. J. Decarreaux, *op. cit.*, p. 202.
25. C. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York, 1950) p. 58.
26. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
27. Cf. Jonas, *Life of St. Columban*, Ed. Krusch.
28. C. Montalembert, *The Monks of the West* (London, 1896) Bk. III, p. 369.
29. Ven. Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* iii, 27.
30. L. Gougaud, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
31. N. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
33. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
34. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 260; Cf. P. Anson, "The Solitary Life in the Celtic Churches," *The Call of the Desert* (London, 1964) pp. 54-57.
35. K. Meyer Ed., *Ancient Irish Poetry* (Dublin, 1962) p. 99.
36. Cf. H. Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (London, 1931).
37. Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, I.17.
38. P. Mould, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
39. Cf. F. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, 3 Vols., 1963 and 1964 (Zodiac).
40. Cf. D. Attwater, "The Celtic Rite," *A Catholic Dictionary* (New York, 1956).
41. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
42. H. Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London, 1927) pp. 30-31.
43. H. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages* (London, 1935) p. 272.
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Gethsemani

Patrick HART, ocsso.

Irish Monastic Art and Poetry

Introduction

If St. Augustine could "Christianize" Plato, and St. Thomas Aquinas draw heavily on Aristotle in forming his philosophical synthesis, we should not be scandalized when we discover that early Christian Irish art forms were considerably influenced by a highly developed pagan art. This applies both to the decorative arts and to poetry, which had their roots in a long pagan tradition that supplied the first elements and the essential principles of an art which flourished in the monasteries after the fifth century.

What strikes one immediately is the remarkable continuity of Irish art and poetry. One of the main reasons for this seems to have been the fact that Ireland, during the first centuries of her existence, was a country in a strange isolation from the Roman Empire and the rest of the world. In this seclusion, she was free to foster and develop the age-old prehistoric tradition which had been handed down to her. "She [Ireland] did not have the Roman conception of law, state and organization stamped on her mind, nor the cold rectitude of Latin thought. She was to preserve to the Middle Ages a prehistoric fluidity of mind."¹

However, during the period from the fifth to the seventh and eighth centuries, as Celtic art adapted itself to meet the growing needs of society, Irish epics and Irish law were beginning to be recorded and attempts made to set the historical traditions of the country in line with world

chronicles. It is impossible to know definitively how much actually survived in the newly-founded monastic school of the teaching of the druidic schools to which they were in large measure heirs. With a certain continuity, we can also discern changes as indicated in the texts which have come down to us.

To understand the position of the artist and poet in early Celtic history, it is important to remember the basis of Irish society which was an extended form of the family with its closely established links between the various members, and the respective divisions over which each had its own king. The petty ruler of a *tuath* (a small rural community) was responsible to a more powerful king – and he, in his turn, subject to a more exalted monarch. “All these chieftains played an essential part in the social and cultural life of the country. They were the patrons of the artists. Their efforts to boost up their prestige and assert their importance were at the root of the power wielded by the poets, dispensers of praise and satire . . .”² One of the druid poets wrote a satirical verse whose victim is evidently a continental bishop in full pontificalia – miter, chasuble and crozier. It is believed to have been written at a time when plans for the systematic Christianization of Ireland were in the offing, and it is recorded in Muirchu’s sixth-century *Life of St. Patrick*:

Adze-head will come,
Across the bold-headed sea,
Hollow-head his mantle,
Bent-head his staff,
His table facing east,
His people, chanting, answer:
Amen, Amen.³

It was into such a society that Christianity was introduced in Ireland about the time when the Roman Empire was collapsing. We know of the missionary labors of St. Patrick chiefly through his own writings, the *Confession*, and the *Epistle to Coroticus*.⁴ (The *Cry of the Deer*, one of the oldest verses, has been traditionally ascribed to St. Patrick.) He speaks of his captivity in pagan Ireland, his escape, and finally his return to preach the Gospel message. Animated by a burning faith, which clearly shines forth from his writings, he had the immense advantage, in addition, of having lived in the country and of knowing its language and customs. St. Patrick was thus more than usually prepared for such a mission, and it explains in part his extraordinary success.

The establishment of the Church in Ireland came about without any violent disturbance. The stories of St. Patrick’s encounters with the druids and his destruction of the idol Crom Cruach suggest that the religious system of which the early sculptures and poetry were but a manifestation, was still very much alive. However, it yielded surprisingly easily, for there are no records of martyrs or persecutions. The Irish seem to have embraced the new faith quickly and wholeheartedly. At the same time, there is no evidence that St. Patrick or his followers manifested any undue intolerance of the prevalent pagan customs, but accepted and adapted whatever could be maintained of the old beliefs. As a result what we see develop is a happy compromise between the old Celtic tradition and the new faith which soon changed the country profoundly and gave it a totally new orientation.

Thus, we do not see a total obliteration of the old Celtic traditions with the coming of St. Pat-

rick and the first Christians, but rather, these Christian art forms, introduced with the coming of monasticism to Ireland, will still retain the traditional patterns of Celtic art, which we find displayed in their sacred books, chalices, bells and church buildings, as well as their poetic repertoire.

Monastic Sites and Architecture

What can we know of the appearance of the churches and primitive monasteries of early Ireland? A relatively small number of stone churches were built in the time of St. Patrick and the early monks; most of them were constructed of earth and wood. Consequently, the vast majority of these monastic dwellings and churches are no longer preserved, except those built on inaccessible island retreats, or the few made of stone – at least the foundations were of stone. In 789 there is mention made of a stone church at Armagh. When the Vikings sacked the town in 839 it is stated that they destroyed there not only wooden oratories, but also a stone church.⁵ The ruins of the foundations of this stone church show that it was a very simple edifice with no columns, pillars or arches. Actually, most of the churches and oratories were rather small in size – 30 to 35 feet long at the most – with no separate choir for the monks. The community was in direct visible contact with the liturgical actions. The monastic ruins and church foundations at Roscrea, Westmeath, Kilkenny and Kerry all indicate dwellings of this type. One of the most complete examples of stone monastic cells and chapels is on Skellig Michael, standing as firm as in the days when the monks first lived there. The Skelligs are great pyramids of steep mountains emerging from the Atlantic about ten miles from the Kerry coast. The remains of the monastery, grouped together on a narrow shelf of rock below one of its summits can only be reached by way of a precipitous stone stairs. Five huts, “beehive cells” as they are called, are still remaining, covered by corbelled domes made by an ancient method still used on the neighboring coast. Undoubtedly, this was the usual manner of building in that part of Ireland at the time when the monastery was first erected – that is, about the sixth or seventh century.

These buildings, impressive by their bareness and austere simplicity, are in no way elaborate, and correspond to Venerable Bede’s description of the monastery of Lindisfarne at the time of Colman’s departure in 664: “The place which they governed shows how frugal and temperate he and his predecessors were, for there were very few houses, besides the church, found at their departure; indeed, no more than were barely sufficient to make civilized life possible.”⁶ There are extant ruins of similar type on the islands or in the mountain valleys of Kerry, on Bishop’s Island, off the coast of Clare, on Aran, Ardillaun, Inishkea, Inishglora and Inismurry off the Sligo coast, not to mention the islands of Scotland – as far as the Orkneys and Shetlands.

Monastic expansion into Scotland, Northumbria and the Continent is only one aspect of a movement which drew the Irish *peregrini* out of their homeland. No greater self-mortification could be imagined than to be exiled from Ireland, with its closely-knit social units. St. Columba’s departure for Iona is a striking manifestation of the true spirit of the ascetic discipline of “voluntary exile for Christ.” It meant a firm determination to break with everything that was known and loved. This extreme form of ascetic discipline was sometimes undertaken as a penance for sins committed, but more often out of a spirit of mortification for the love of God, after the example of Abraham, to *whom God* had said: “Go forth out of thy country and from thy kindred and out of thy father’s house, and come into the land which I will show thee.”⁷ This conscious and deliberate seeking of a break with original surroundings – this effort to place oneself totally in the “hands

of God” is what initiated their peregrinations for the most part. It was referred to as “the white martyrdom,” although they sometimes ended up preaching the “Good News,” and some actually suffered a “red martyrdom.”

Among the early Irish monks and hermits one can trace a constant desire for a life stripped of all but the bare essentials, which explains their attraction for solitude in remote places. The lives of the Desert Fathers were forever held as an ideal before them. St. Columba speaks of his brethren who had gone to seek “a desert in the trackless sea . . .”⁸ From the very beginning monastic sites were thus established in desolate spots, such as the monastery of St. Enda (his monastery is believed to be the first of an organized type in Ireland) on the bare crags of Aran – Clonmacnois lost in the vast solitude of bogs and marshes – Inis Cealtra, Devenish and Nendrum situated on islands in lakes and estuaries.

Tradition holds that St. Brendan built hermitages on the summit of the Dingle peninsula on one of the most forbidding of the sea pyramids of the Blaskets, habitually engulfed by heavy clouds. In all these places ruins are present to remind us of the eremitical ideal, so cherished by the early Irish monks.⁹

The Columban monks as described by Adamnan, the biographer of St. Columba, give us a vivid picture of these sea-faring men who “seem to have been nearly amphibious creatures always coming out of a boat or seeking one . . . a life where the blowing of the wind in a sail, the bird cast ashore by the tempest . . . the loathsome and very dangerous creatures of the sea . . .”¹⁰ were everyday realities. A few centuries later, a poet was to put the following lines in the mouth of St. Columba, which ring true to his spirit and life:

Delightful I think it is to be in the bosom of an isle,
On the crest of a rock
That I may look there on the manifold
Face of the sea
That I may see its heavy waves
Over the glittering ocean
As they chant a melody to their Father
Of their eternal course . . .¹¹

St. Columban (also referred to as Columbanus), a monk of Bangor, who, according to his biographer, Jonas, “began to desire the pilgrimage” decided to depart for the Continent about 590. His fruitful as well as exciting twenty-five years’ journey through Western Europe is only too well-known.¹² His monastic schools at Luxeuil, St. Gall and Bobbio were among the most important cultural centers of the Early Middle Ages. It is to a voyage on the Rhine that we owe the robust “Boat Song” punctuated by the recurring refrain: “Ho, my men! Let ringing echo sound our Ho!” which measured the dipping of the oars. This poem is considered by many to be his greatest achievement in verse, and it shows that St. Columban was able to express himself personally even through a classical medium. It merits to be quoted here in full:

Lo, cut in forests, the driven keel passes on the stream
Of twin-horned Rhine, and glides as if anointed on the flood.
Ho, my men! Let ringing echo sound our Ho!

The winds raise their blasts, the dread rain works its woe,
 But men's ready strength conquers and routs the storm.
 Ho, my men! Let ringing echo sound our Ho!
 For the clouds yield to endurance, and the storm yields,
 Effort tames them all, unwearied toil conquers all things.
 Ho, my men! Let ringing echo sound our Ho!
 Bear, and preserve yourselves for favouring fortune,
 Ye that have suffered worse, to these also God shall give an end.
 Ho, my men! Let ringing echo sound our Ho!
 Thus the hated foe deals as he wearies our hearts,
 And by ill temptation shakes the inward hearts with rage.
 Let your mind, my men, recalling Christ sound Ho!
 Stand fixed in your intent, and spurn the foeman's wiles,
 Duly protect yourselves with armour of the virtues.
 Let your mind, my men, recalling Christ sound Ho!
 Firm faith and blessed zeal conquer all,
 And the old enemy, yielding, breaks his darts.
 Let your mind, my men, recalling Christ sound Ho!
 The King of virtues too, Fount of being, highest Power,
 Offers prizes to him who strives, and to the victor gives them.
 Let your mind, my men, recalling Christ sound Ho!¹³

Carvings and Metalwork

In the hermitages of the more primitive establishments, nothing more than a stone pillar marked with a cross, or a slab bearing a few symbolical ornaments, was needed to mark the tombs of these early monks and hermits and to sum up in cryptic fashion the hope which inspired their lives. Naturally, the larger monastic sites inhabited by hundreds of students required more elaborate ornamentation. We see this supplied by crosses carved on all sides. With the growth of monasticism, the crosses, once very simple and crude, become larger and more imposing in appearance. No longer are they just rough blocks of stone, but take on a more regular monumental design, some six feet or more in height. It is possible that Coptic slabs influenced the Irish in this area, as well as Visigothic Spain.¹⁴

One of the most impressive monuments, the Fahan slab, stands nearly nine feet high, on which affronted birds recall those of similar design on Coptic slabs. On the north edge of the slab a perfectly clear and well-defined inscription has been cut in Greek uncials and is the Greek version of the *Gloria Patri*: "glory and honor to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit." This same version is found in the Antiphony of Bangor (around the middle of the seventh century). A direct influence from Greek manuscripts has caused the appearance in Ireland of a form of Greek uncials which is not only found in this inscription, but occurs also in the copy of the *Vita Columbae* written by Adamnan at Iona towards the end of the seventh century.

The origins of the Irish high cross are complex, and various influences are traceable. In general, they are easily distinguishable from the English crosses of the same period. Each had

its own repertoire of decorative patterns. On the Irish crosses we find spirals, interlacings and angular patterns as the chief motifs, while the vegetable scroll is one of the favorite elements in English decoration. The English crosses never had a circle connecting the arms of the cross. In Ireland, the circle is the rule, though not absolute, as is sometimes maintained. (The circle traditionally represented a halo.) The very earliest Irish crosses do not have it, such as the Carndonagh cross, or that of the Skellig.

Crosses were in abundance around the various monastic sites, as indicated by a poem on Oengus-Céli-Dé:

Disert Bethech, where dwelt the man
Whom hosts of angels were wont to visit;
A pious cloister behind a circle of crosses, . . .
'Tis in Clonenagh he was reared,
In Clonenagh he was buried;
In Clonenagh of many crosses
He first read his psalms.¹⁵

Or again, referring to Cormac, the Abbot of Durrow, the poet sketches a bright picture of a monastery situated in a small forest of crosses:

O Cormac, beautiful thy church,
With its books and learning;
A devout city with a hundred crosses.¹⁶

Turning next to metalwork, we discover at once that in the Irish texts the smith is considered a seer – that is, a man endowed with a prophetic gift. “He and the goldsmith belonged to that social class intermediary between the warring aristocracy and the common people, which included beside the highest category of craftsmen, the lawyers, the poets, the historians . . .”¹⁷

The distinctive feature of Irish metalwork is its incredible delicacy. In comparison, Continental and Saxon metalwork is rather crude. When the Tara brooch was being cleaned in the British Museum Laboratory, the difference of scale and relative coarseness became singularly evident. The best-known metalworks are, of course, the Ardagh chalice and the Tara brooch, and we shall limit ourselves to these two works at the present time. Both have red and blue studs of varying relief, according to the method which was practiced for centuries before by enamellers. As a result, the studs of the Ardagh chalice and the Tara brooch have kept their brilliance all these many centuries.

The chalice was discovered in 1868 by a boy digging potatoes at Ardagh (Limerick) to the south of the Shannon estuary. Along with it were found concealed four brooches and a small bronze chalice under a stone slab within the roots of a thorn bush. It has been suggested that when Mass was offered in the *rath* during Penal times, it may have been hidden away for safe-keeping. Writing of the massive beauty of the chalice, which achieves an elegance by the sheer economy of means and variety of decoration employed, Françoise Henry explains: “The whole balance of the composition has still the strength and restraint of the best seventh century work and belongs to that moment of perfection which marks the turning point between a youthful, impetuous, though already experienced, art, and a surfeited and over-elaborate decoration.”¹⁸

Upon examining the Tara brooch, as in the case of the Ardagh chalice, one is immediately struck by the extreme versatility of the filigree work. “Beasts designed by an amazingly fine and intricate network of gold wires glitter amidst raised bands of amber . . . Contrasting with this arachnidean embroidery, fierce-looking reptiles skirt the outlines of the jewel and add a wild punctuation of upturned heads.”¹⁹

As we shall see in the decoration of manuscripts, the animal and vegetal motifs will play an even more important role than in the carvings and metalwork during this period of Irish art.

Scripts and Manuscript Illumination

It is undoubtedly true to say that St. Patrick and the early monastic pioneers brought books with them, such as the Gospels and the Psalter. Of their appearance, we can gain some idea by examining fifth century Latin manuscripts of Gaul and Italy. It seems certain that the first Irish books were imitations of these books with perhaps large letters at the beginning of important paragraphs and with a bare minimum of decoration. Unfortunately, the first attempts by the Irish scribes of the fifth and early sixth centuries have been lost to us. Thus, we are unable to follow their first experiences with any degree of accuracy, so as to ascertain the method by which they altered their models, evolving them gradually into that imposing Irish majuscule script which was to retain for centuries its distinctive character, as well as the slightly rounded minuscule which was used for the more common type of books.

Only in the second half of the sixth century can we see the extant works of the Irish scribes in verses of the psalms engraved on wax tablets and on the pages of a manuscript which tradition attributes to the pen of St. Columba, “the Cathach” (which means battler or champion). According to competent paleologists, no objection can be raised to dating this manuscript at the time of St. Columba. Some maintain that it is the very book which caused the much-disputed battle with St. Finnian, and in consequence the exile of St. Columba to Iona. Be that as it may, the Cathach is extremely valuable in that it shows us the decoration of Irish manuscripts before contacts with the Continent had become close, and long before the development of the Northumbrian *scriptoria*. This makes it an essential landmark in the history of “insular” illumination.

We can add to the Cathach certain Irish elements in the decoration of some of the oldest of the Bobbio manuscripts, which date to the years closely following the death of St. Columban (A.D. 615). They were written in Irish characters similar to the Cathach, and their script has the same archaic features. Their scribes use a distinctive type of abbreviation, which is characteristic of Irish manuscripts. This gives us a good idea of the methods of writing which the first companions of St. Columban and their successors had learned in the Irish *scriptoria* before coming to the Continent.

A very interesting phenomenon occurs which merits our attention – namely, the use of dots in the early Irish manuscripts. Those who have made a thorough study of this phenomenon assure us that it is Coptic in origin, and has been found in paintings of the monasteries in the Egyptian desert. It seems to have passed into Byzantine art and can be found in Byzantine manuscripts of the sixth century.²⁰

It is rather difficult to establish with certitude how Irish scribes came to know of its use. A valuable clue is given in the Irish litanies, which enumerate Oriental monks who came to Ireland – among them are Egyptians, Armenians and “Romani” – the latter denoting Byzantines at that

period. Other elements of decoration – especially the close parallels in Coptic bindings of the sixth century, as well as some carved panels from Coptic slabs, would seem to indicate that we must look in the direction of Egypt to find the ultimate inspiration of these manuscripts.

A quatrain in a poem on the *Rule of Bangor*, which was copied towards the middle of the seventh century into the *Antiphony of Bangor* points in the same direction:

House full of delight
Built on the rock
And indeed true vine
Transplanted from Egypt . . .²¹

But who can say with certainty how these evident contacts between the early Celtic monks and their counterparts in the Egyptian desert occurred? The Irish monastic rules indicate Egypt as their inspiration in great measure, as has been well-established. It is very likely that with the intensive trade which was carried on through Gibraltar (pottery objects of Egypt have been found in excavations dating from this early period at Garranes) there were certain importations from Egypt into Ireland. This continued until the end of the sixth century, and probably stopped at this period owing to the Arab invasion. Thus, it is permissible to indulge in considerable speculation about comings and goings which this commercial current made possible between Ireland and Egypt and the Near East, with perhaps the occasional arrival in Ireland of an Oriental monk fleeing the swords of the Arabs!

At the end of the seventh century a new repertoire appears, although it is impossible to know whether it was first elaborated in some Irish “insular” center, Iona or Northumbria. On the already existing theme of animal bodies woven into a continuous pattern is wedded the fascination of very delicately sketched animals such as enlivened the margins of Oriental manuscripts. “The shock of this new element determines the formation of a style and the appearance of agile little monsters sometimes reminiscent of greyhounds, combined with long-necked birds, both endowed with a wonderful array of claws and talons.”²²

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the ornamental pages is the wonderfully incisive and animated quality in which everything is set in motion. Letters suddenly turn into monsters, which bite their own necks – frames unexpectedly curl up into a pair of legs or develop a biting snout. (It is evident that the Irish artists were not lacking humor in their work!) From various art objects found in Scandinavia, we can trace the development of the animal themes into animal-interlacing. In the Swedish Emporium of Birka the first step in adaptation is seen in the caricatures of birds solemnly pacing up and down the branches of small trees, a modified version of a design of Oriental origin. A gilt bronze object in the Bergen Museum has also preserved several specimens of the transformation of the animal from two beasts on either side of a tree down to animal-interlacing. A third stage is represented by a pail found at Sondre, Norway, where the scroll has disappeared and only the birds are left, linked to one another by an interlacement of the tail feathers passing through the two segments of their split neck. This apparently did not fully satisfy the artist, since it was too obvious and straightforward. As Françoise Henry suggests: “The censer in Bergen Museum and the fragment from Torshov introduce a more subtle solution; the artist suddenly finds a means of reconciling his love for abstract forms and distrust of the ob-

vious . . . The body of the animal, coiled on itself, now takes the place of the missing branch, and there will be a continuous entwinement of scroll-shaped animal bodies.”²³

It is believed that interlacing arose in Chaldea from a stylized representation of running water, as is evident from the ducks figured gliding across its surface. This often connoted fertility, as well as purification. But wherever the style originated, it never became very popular with the sculptors or metalworkers. This strengthens the hypothesis that it remained the work of erudite minds during periods of relaxation from their more serious work, much in the same way as the famous Irish monk’s poem about his pet cat, Pangur, which was scribbled in the margin of a manuscript. It deserves to be quoted here in part:

I and my white Pangur
Have each his special art:
His mind is set on hunting mice,
Mine is upon my special craft . . .

He rejoices with quick leaps
When in his sharp claw sticks a mouse:
I too rejoice when I have grasped
A problem difficult and dearly loved . . .

He is a master of the work
Which every day he does:
While I am at my own work
To bring difficulty to clearness.²⁴

The Book of Durrow, a version of the Vulgate, which includes some Old Testament readings, was written in an elegant Irish majuscule of a more evolved type than the Cathach. There has been a tendency to consider the Books of Durrow, Lindisfarne and Kells as landmarks in a continuous evolution of Irish manuscript illumination. The great luxury books reached their technical perfection in the incomparable Book of Kells (c. 800). It has been asserted, although it cannot be proven, that it was written at Iona, and later brought to Kells for safety from the Viking raids in 806. This is plausible, but in any case, the Book of Kells represents, as Ludwig Bieler rightly concludes, “Irish calligraphy and illumination in its full maturity, and as far as we know, it is the most richly decorated manuscript ever produced in an Irish scriptorium.”²⁵

Conclusion

As we have seen from this brief survey, early Irish art and poetry had as its basis the existing art forms of the country. The pagan Irish had their own sculpture and ornament which they retained, making such transformations as they found necessary, and the whole repertoire of curvilinear decoration was adopted, much the same as in the stories and poems of the fabulous sea voyages. However, the way in which the Celts handled their ornament was extremely original. “Celtic art throughout its history is dominated by a constant desire to escape from two threatening dangers; it shrinks as violently from the exact and literal imitation of living shapes as from the complete assimilation of an ornament to the rigidity of an obvious geometric figure.”²⁶ Other abstract artists, in

their fear of reality, have taken refuge in a safe rigidity of geometrical figures. This tendency, latent in Coptic and early Armenian decoration, triumphed in Arab art. But the more subtle artists like the early Chinese and the Celts knew the monotony and dryness which comes of the acceptance of such rigidly abstract figures, and did their best to avoid them as all costs.

This dread of imitation of real shapes and the fear of geometry are only two aspects of the same attitude of mind. Geometrical figures are, as much as the shape of an animal or a plant, universal realities which escape individual control. They are permanent and unchangeable, purely objective truths which have to be accepted as such. The magical conception of the world rests on a notion of man as not subject to scientific laws. Obedient to this conception, Irish art and poetry, rather than submit to an immutable tyranny of facts, took refuge in a universe free of restrictions and limitations. The animals and plants of the Irish artist are not usually those we are familiar with. Though never seen, they are to our minds within the realm of the possible – they have a “livable appearance,” and are as convincing as beasts of Irish poetry and fairy tales. But their anatomy is strange and allows them to perform astounding feats of ingenuity.

Animals and plants of unknown species are subjected to strange transformations. All the parts of this fantastic universe are interchangeable and can suddenly alter their form and merge into one another. The animals occasionally interlace with plants and partake of their nature. This multiform and changing world where nothing is what it appears to be is but the plastic equivalent of that country of wonders which haunts the mind of the Irish poets, and in which all those impossible fancies seem to come true, which the real world does not make possible.

The voyage theme – to the Happy Island or to the Other World of pagan times – was changed into a quest for the Promised Land, in the spirit of Abraham in the Old Testament, by the Christian Irish. Everything the traveler experiences has the same shifting and elusive quality as has a page of the Book of Durrow, the Lichfield Gospels or the Book of Kells:

What is clear sea
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is
That to me in my chariot of two wheels
Is a delightful plain with a wealth of flowers.

Bran sees
A mass of waves beating across the clear sea;
I see myself in the Plain of Sports
Red-headed flowers that have no flaw.

Speckled salmon leap from the womb
Out of the white sea on which thou lookest:
They are calves, they are lambs of fair hue,
With truce, without mutual slaughter.²⁷

The sea voyage tales, with the half-faded memories of gods and heroes and the shreds of mythology which linger through them, still enchanted the Irish poet of Christian times, not only because they allude in fantastic terms to a familiar seafaring life, but also because, like the deco-

ration of the stone crosses and the manuscripts, they obey a primitive logic from which he had not yet freed himself. He had not as yet accepted completely the world as something distinct from himself, to be treated objectively. This would only come later.

It can be easily seen that the Irish monks and hermits did not carry renunciation to the point of a total suppression of all artistic, poetic and intellectual pursuits. A life of studies seems to have been one of the essential features of the organization of monasteries and the intellectual level remained very high amid the general cultural decay of the time.

Perhaps the most felicitous union of the literary tradition and religious feeling was in the nature poetry, hardly to be excelled anywhere in Europe. The native poetry had already manifested in its lyrics, sagas and seasonal poems, a remarkable sensitivity to natural beauty. The monastic movement in the Celtic church provided a far stronger impetus to nature poetry. Exile from family, whether beyond the seas or to a lonely solitude in Ireland itself, was held to be a bloodless, but nonetheless meritorious, martyrdom. The primitive cells of the hermits brought them in direct contact with earth, sky and all creation in their daily existence. The almost Franciscan poetry which flowered would naturally have a special appeal for monastic scribes. Consequently, a considerable amount of it has been preserved to us. One of the most attractive nature poems is the dialogue between King Gúaire of Connacht (+ c. 663) and his half-brother, the hermit Marbán. The following passage is from the opening section:

I have a bothy in the wood –
None knows it save the Lord, my God;
One wall an ash, the other hazel,
And a great fern makes the door.

The doorposts are made of heather,
The lintel of honey suckle;
And wild forest all around
Yields mast for well-fed swine.

This size my hut: the smallest thing,
Homestead amid well-trod paths;
A woman (but blackbird clothed and seeming)
Warbles sweetly from the gable . . .²⁸

A whole tradition of eremitical poetry developed in a wonderful way in such a congenial atmosphere. The following selection from the *Song of the Hermit* is typical of this tradition, written by an anonymous eighth or ninth century Irish poet:

Alone in my little hut,
Without a human being in my company,
Dear has been the pilgrimage
Before going to meet death . . .

Treading the paths of the Gospel,
 Singing psalms every hour
 An end of talking and long stories;
 Constant bending of the knees . . .²⁹

During the seventh and eighth centuries close contacts with England and the Continent brought about a conflicting sense of regularity, which will be manifested in the later manuscripts and illuminations (the Carolingian influence can be detected in the Book of Kells early in the ninth century). The composition of crosses and tomb stones will become more elaborate in their decoration. Although the tendency to asymmetry and equivalence remains strongly part and parcel of the Celtic mind, nevertheless in the following centuries Irish poetry will develop into one of the most complex systems of meters, rhymes and assonances ever invented.

Writing more directly in regard to the enormous legacy of Irish art to posterity, Ludwig Bieler rightly observes in his monumental work: "This art, whether it is manifested in metal and stone or on the illuminated pages of manuscripts over the wide field of Irish expansion . . . is not only unique in the Middle Ages, it is also the first and in the West the only, example of an abstract art in an articulate civilization which was still spiritually integrated."³⁰

In conclusion, one may legitimately ask to what an extent the example of this early Irish art and poetry will be made relevant to contemporary artists and poets sharing the same concerns. And how about twentieth century *monastic* artists and poets? Monks today are in a position to take an active interest in these areas, since all are now able to enjoy a fuller participation in the Liturgy as well as the intellectual life of the monastery. Would it be too much to hope for a new flowering of art and poetry in our monasteries during this era of renewal and return to the sources?

I am convinced that we have much to learn from both the artistic and poetic repertoire of early Christian Ireland. We should be grateful to those pioneers of recent years who have labored so perseveringly to open our eyes to a more adequate appreciation of this rich monastic tradition, which is one of the glories of our Western heritage.

1. F. Henry, *Irish Art* (New York, 1965) Vol. I, p. 17. See N. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints of the Early Celtic Church* (London, 1961).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. *Analecta Bollandiana*, 1882, p. 531.
4. St. Patrick, *Collected Works*, Ed. L. Bieler (London, 1953).
5. See *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, Ed. J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1851) Vol. I.
6. Ven. Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* III, 26.
7. See Plummer, *Vita Prima Sancti Brendani*, pp. 103-104.
8. Adamnan, *Vita Col.* II, 42.
9. J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Dublin, 1931) p. 408.
10. See Adamnan, *op. cit.*
11. K. Jackson, *Nature Poetry* (Cambridge, 1955) p. 9.
12. See the *Life of Columban* by Jonas, ed. B. Krusch in *M.G.H. SS. rer. Merov.*, IV, 1-152.
13. S. Walker, *Sancti Colombani Opera* (Dublin, 1957) pp. 191-2.
14. See F. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-127.
15. K. Meyer, *Irish Poetry* (London, 1911) p. 88.
16. W. Reeves, *St. Columba* (Dublin, 1857) p. 269.
17. F. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

18. F. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
21. F. Warren, *The Antiphony of Bangor* (London, 1895) II, p. 28.
22. F. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
24. K. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
25. L. Bieler, *Ireland, Harbinger of the Middle Ages* (London, 1963) p. 134.
26. F. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 202.
27. K. Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, p. 290.
28. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
29. T. Merton, from an unpublished manuscript, "Anthology of Irish Poetry" (Gethsemani, 1964) p. 23.
30. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

Gethsemani/Monte Cistello

Patrick HART *ocso*.

Eremitism in the Celtic Church

Introduction

Before the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of the *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, monks of insight and vision in Europe and America had already begun to rediscover their "lost heritage." Due in part to the immense labors of such articulate monks as Dom Jean Leclercq and Dom Garcia Colombàs among the Benedictines, and Father Louis Merton of the Cistercians, the solitary life once more began to be appreciated within the ambience of the monastic communities.

Following Vatican II, the spirit of *aggiornamento* soon found its way into the very heart of contemplative monasteries and monks began to take stock of their lives by examining them in the light of the whole of monastic tradition, including eremitism as found in the East and the West. This "return to the sources," and reassessment of monastic ideals, taking into account present day needs and realities, has resulted in a measure of experimentation by monastic communities. The renewed interest in the solitary life is a striking manifestation of the dynamic spirit at work in the Church today.

But one may doubt the validity of the eremitical form of life for the twentieth century, when there is such a desperate need for a more relevant apostolic action, both at home and in the foreign missions, and for a more authentic Christian witness in all areas of social life. Does not the solitary opt for a selfish existence free from any real Christian commitment? Does he not strive to escape the inevitable vicissitudes of daily life in community? Is he not interested exclusively in his own salvation?

In a convincing article written before Vatican II but republished in English more recently, Dom Garcia Colombàs reminds us that the genuine hermit is not a misanthropist, or a man who has simply lost interest in the rest of humanity: "Hermits do not withdraw into solitude because they hate men. They do it in order to become more closely united with the whole monastic and Christian community."¹ His arguments for the solitary life have considerable impact because they are firmly rooted in the Scriptures and the Fathers.