
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ABOUT ANCIENT IRISH HANDWRITING AND BOOKS.

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IN his essay on Palæography in Sandys' *Companion to Latin Studies*, pp. 780 f., Sir E. M. Thompson, late Director of the British Museum, gives a high tribute of praise to the work of the Irish scribes. The Irish script is the despair and admiration of all judges. Yet he shows how simple its origin was. It was the Roman half-uncial script which was the first model selected by the Irish scribes in preference to the uncial style which was more elaborate. To quote Sir E. M. Thompson's article:

"The Irish scribe adopted the Roman half-uncial script; and then, with his innate sense of beauty of form, he produced from it the handsome literary hand which culminated in the native half-uncial writing, as seen in perfection in the Book of Kells and in other contemporary MSS. of the latter part of the seventh century. But the round half-uncial literary hand thus moulded was too elaborate an instrument for the ordinary uses of life. It was necessary also to provide a script which should serve all the duties of a current hand. Therefore, taking the same model, the Roman half-uncial, the Irish scribe adapted it to commoner uses, and writing the letters more negligently, he evolved the compact pointed minuscule hand which became the current form of handwriting of the country, and which again, in its turn, was in course of time also moulded into a book-hand and eventually superseded the half-uncial.

"Isolated as Ireland became and little disturbed by external influences, the national script grew stereotyped and passed from generation to generation and from century to century with so little change as to become almost the despair of palæographers. To fix the period of Irish MSS. is always more or less difficult. The old forms of the letters remained; and even at the present day the hand which the Irish scholar writes differs but little in the lettering from the pointed minuscule hand of the Middle Ages."

Sir E. M. Thompson proceeds to point out the influence the Irish hand had upon the script of other countries.

"Britain," he says, "borrowed it *en bloc*; and, in the early Middle Ages, the Irish missionaries who spread over the continent of Europe and who there became the founders of so many great religious houses, carried their native script with them.

"Thus, at such centres at Luxeuil in France, Wurzburg in Germany, St. Gall in Switzerland, and Bobbio in Italy, Irish writing flourished and MSS. in the Irish hand multiplied."

But in time the script thus used in foreign places deteriorated, when the connection with Ireland was lost and the Irish monks passed away. It has, however, served its purpose and has an important position in the history of Latin palæography.

The most notable extant example of the English half-uncial hand which was founded upon the Irish hand of the same class is the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (or Durham Book) which is now in the

British Museum. This is supposed to be the work of Bishop Eadfrith about A.D. 700. The English improved upon this borrowed script; they also borrowed the Irish minuscule hand, which is found in places in the Book of Kells, and gave it an English character which is seen in the Cambridge copy of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.

The Irish books are not only famous for their script but also for their ornamentation, which is in a class by itself both as regards drawing and colouring. Some of these books deserve special mention.

The Books of Kells and Armagh are among the treasures of Trinity College. The former, an eighth-century copy of the gospels, is the finest specimen extant of Irish calligraphy and illumination. Giraldus Cambrensis said it was "the work of angelic rather than of human skill." The interlaced designs and spiral lines, peculiar to Irish art, are wonderfully minute and accurate. Their monotony is at times relieved by a grinning Irish face. Ussher, when Bishop of Meath, inserted this note in it: "Aug. 24, 1621. I reckoned the leaves of this and found them to be 344. He who reckoned before me counted six score to the hundred." The Book of Armagh has several documents, among them the "Confession," probably the earliest known writing made in these islands, and the oldest "Lives" of St. Patrick. Part of the book was written under the direction of Abbot Torbach, who died A.D. 807, part later. Folio 16 has a note said to have been inserted in the presence of Brian Boru, "Emperor of the Scots," when he visited Armagh and placed twenty ounces of gold on its altar (*circ.* A.D. 1002).

It was the Irish custom to make silver cases and leather satchels for their books. Trinity has the "polaire" or satchel of this one, a fine specimen of Irish work. This Book of Armagh was preserved for centuries by an hereditary line of keepers who held certain lands in virtue of their office. The last keeper named Moyre pledged it for £5 in 1680.

The *Book of Durrow* is wrongly stated to be the work of Columba, our missionary to Scotland, who is said to have written 300 books, and this one in twelve days! All are said to have had the property, when immersed, of not losing a letter! The story is told that some monks carrying away the Durham Gospels for safety lost it in a shipwreck, but it was found some days after on the shore, with a few stains of salt water on it. The silver shrine of the *Book of Durrow* has an inscription showing that it was made by order of King Flann (A.D. 879–916). The *Book of Dimna*, hidden by Roscrea monks in the hills above Nenagh, was found by boys, who sold both it and its case to a Nenagh doctor. Another Nenagh resident brought back to Ireland the Stowe Missal carried away during the Danish invasions. Many Irish manuscripts are treasured in the libraries of the Continent, chiefly at St. Gall and Bobbio, and in England, but numbers perished in the Danish invasions.