Book Reviews

Why *did* the Irish save civilization?

by Paul Gallagher

How the Irish Saved Civilization
by Thomas Cahill
Doubleday & Co., New York, 1995
229 pages, $22.50

This unusual book merits an unusual summary comment: It is worth reading, despite its complete misstatement of the fundamentals of the cultural history of Western civilization.

Its subject matter was suppressed completely for 500 years, from the 12th-century Norman/English invasions and forced "religious reforms" of Ireland, until the 17th century. Then it became a subject of scholarship in the Catholic Church until the mid-19th century, when it once again disappeared under the worldwide image of the degradation of Ireland. The subject is that the path through which Christianity saved civilization from the devastation and collapse of the Roman Empire, was the "Irish" monastery movement which flourished roughly from 450-850 A.D. During most of those 400 years, Ireland was the generative center of cultural progress in Europe.

Cahill, who had a Jesuit education, is basing himself upon that 17th-19th-century Catholic scholarship about the "Irish saints"; he understands the subject far less well than those earlier authors did. But those sources are not known to the great majority of educated citizens, and their authors assumed their readers' knowledge of Latin. Cahill provides lively English translations of both Latin and Irish, and he includes some very interesting illustrations, particularly of the books produced by the Irish monastic scriptoria. In fact, the real focus of this short book is those scriptoria, and it might have been called *How the Irish Saved the Books of Western Civilization*.

The first illustrations show the opening pages of the Lindisfarne Gospel, an illustrated codex produced at the Irish-led monastery of Lindisfarne shortly after 600 A.D. The large, ornately illustrated Greek letters "Chi Rho Iota" (the first three letters of the word Christou—"of Christ"—

the beginning of the Gospel of St. Matthew) lead to the beautifully painted second page in Latin. Most readers are at least aware of this work of art, but what will surprise them is the small script under the Latin words: a translation to Old English, which (along with Welsh) had then just begun to be written, by virtue of the educational work of the Irish monks. In the Book of Kells, the vernacular translation is Irish, which had become a written language even earlier (around 550 A.D.) by the agency of this same movement of monks, who developed a new alphabet combining Greek with Latin characters, and several new scripts or styles of handwriting for the purpose. Cahill provides illustrations of them: Irish majuscule (the first upper- and lower-case printing); Irish minuscule (the first cursive handwriting); Hisperia Famina (a conceptual shorthand). These spread through monasteries all over Europe founded by the Irish monks, and still formed the basis for typefaces, with the advent of printing presses 1,000 years later.

This writing and reading in vernacular languages, of Greek, Roman, and Christian Classical works, was the basis of an extraordinary Europe-wide educational process under the direction of Irish-founded monasteries, a precursor of the 15th-century Golden Renaissance. But aside from its books and scriptoria, Cahill discusses this teaching movement very little. He does give a very indicative quotation from the famous English scholar and historian, the Venerable Bede, in the early seventh century: "Many of the nobles of the English nation and lesser men also as numerous as bees had set out thither [to Ireland], either for the grace of sacred learning or a more austere life. And some of them dedicated themselves faithfully to the monastic life; others rejoiced rather to give themselves to learning, going about from one master's cell to another. All these the Irish willingly received, and saw to it to supply them with food day by day, without cost, and books for their studies, free of charge."

Bede was describing a free, Classical education available to young men and women of all stations in life—most of them being educated, not for a monastic life, but for a return to secular life—at monastery schools which numbered in the hundreds in Europe by 700 A.D., all under the impulse of the Irish monastery movement. By that year, perhaps 250,000 persons, of the 4.5 million population of Gaul (modern France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and the Rhine region of Germany) were teachers, students, or lay brothers and sisters of these schools. Two hundred years earlier, in the rubble of the Roman Empire, there had been almost no such schools in Europe, and "the libraries, like tombs, were closed forever."

The saints themselves

But to every historian of this period comes the question, "Why? By what generating principle were these extraordinary services to the progress of human civilization

achieved?" In dealing with St. Patrick, St. Columba, St. Columban, and the other pioneer missionaries of this movement, Cahill is completely off base. At the core of his history is the attempt to counterpose St. Augustine and St. Patrick as polar opposites, and to describe the Platonist St. Augustine thus: "The doctrine he has enunciated will echo down the ages in the cruelest infamies. . . . Augustine, father of many firsts, is also father of the Inquisition. . . . Mary, mother of celibate clerics who have turned their back on human love, would have presented Augustine with the perfect heavenly projection of his domineering mother."

This suffices to describe what sort of modern New Age Catholic Mr. Cahill is (and he is the author of *Jesus' Little Instruction Book,* from which the saints preserve us!). He adds to it statements which he does not even attempt to support: "Patrick himself probably never heard of Augustine, and if he did hear of him he undoubtedly never read him." And this leads him to an absurd belittling of his own subject: "Though the Irish succeeded in transcribing the works of the ancient philosophers, they could not really understand them. . . ."

The few historical certainties of the life of St. Patrick are not incidents or miracles, but conceptual signs of the nature of the Christian concept of man as *imago viva Dei,* in the living image of God. His mission to the Irish, around 430, was the first to barbarians outside Roman law, as Cahill observes. It succeeded in a way that no Christian mission had before, converting an entire national population in less than a century; but it based itself upon the work of those beachheads of Augustinian Christianity by which St. Patrick was trained: the movement of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine around Milan in the fourth century, and the networks of St. Martin of Tours (France) in the early fifth century. St. Patrick and his great successors Columba and Columban were the leaders of a Christian missionary movement focused on the Augustinian concept of the Trinity, as expressed by St. Augustine and by Pope St. Leo the Great (441-451). This moment was unique in a post-Roman world in which "Christian" leadership otherwise was in heretical denial of the divinity of Christ—that is, of the Trinity of God. In Christianity, the divinity of Christ and the sacredness of human life, *imago viva Dei,* are the same concept, inseparable. This was the uniqueness of the Irish monastery movement, which spread so far, so fast, and with such results for human progress—from St. Patrick's foundations.

Cahill wants rather to tell his readers that St. Patrick fits the false stereotype created by malicious Norman/British writers since the 12th century: the magical, Druidic "Celtic Christian," indifferent to the pope and careless of rigorous Roman Catholicism. "In this tradition, there is also a sensuous reveling in the splendors of the created world. . . . I think it likely that, had Augustine read the 'Breastplate,' he would have sniffed heresy." ("St. Patrick's Breastplate," his famous prayer, written in Irish, is a hymn to the Trinity.)

Cahill is saying that the Irish monastic movement was Aristotelian, anti-Platonic, religiously concerned with the "reality" of sense perceptions, rather than ideas or any intelligible truth about God; and that its prodigious production of books and libraries expressed merely a fascination with the written word, not a religious mission. Though Cahill wants to glorify such a "Celtic Christianity," it is still the same thing vilified by Bernard of Clairvaux and by the Norman invaders of Henry II in 1172: the "heretical and unconformable beliefs" of "the mere Irish." The author even winds up quoting, on the lack of chastity in Irish monasteries, the Norman scholastic toady of Henry II, Geraldus Cambrensis, who may be called the grandfather of all British slanderers of the Irish.
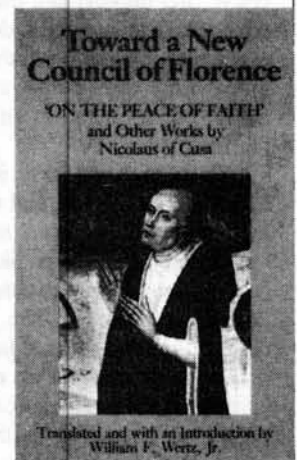
So where Cahill had started out to debunk the British denigration of Irish cultural and intellectual history, his own New Age cultural axioms bring him to support those British slanders. He wanted to show that the Irish monks preserved the intellectual works of Classical culture from obliteration by the Roman imperial catastrophe, and he succeeded in giving many graphic details of this achievement. But he also wanted to claim that the movement which did this despised the "intellectual" qualities of the greatest Platonic intellectual leader of the church, St. Augustine. A more humorous publisher might market this book as a mystery story: Why, then, with what motive, did they do it?