

MEDIEVAL TRANSCRIPTIONS

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THINK it was Carlyle who wrote that of all the wonderful and worthy things that man could make here below the most wonderful and most worthy are the things called Books. Today, books are as much a part of our daily life as a war communique, or a tax bill. It is practically impossible to conceive of an existence without them; even Junior, to whom latin books are a special kind of plague, would not part with his comic books, or sport stories. Yet, writing materials were once so precious, that even the texts of Holy Scripture were sometimes scraped or washed off in order that the materials might be used over again. Fortunately, the underlying texts were never completely obliterated, with the result that many of them have been made legible through the application of chemicals, and the use of violet rays. Since the original is generally of greater value to the scholar, many important texts have been preserved by these restorations.

Printed books as we know them are only five centuries old, though manuscript volumes existed for centuries previous to the invention of printing. These shall be considered below. In the preservation, by duplication, of the many original and valuable works which they cherished in their libraries, the medieval monks rendered a priceless service to their Church, and to future civilizations. William Dana Orcutt observes, "It has been said that more than half the literary work of Europe was executed in religious houses."¹

The story of these transcriptions and duplications is an interesting one. In the beginning, the religious who had been given the task of a copyist as part of his daily religious life began his work each day with a parchment stretched out on the desk before him, and beside it lay the original text. For as long as five or six hours a day, he continued at the laborious work of transcribing, and then carried on his regular religious schedule. The modern student who complain of a few hours of note-taking can appreciate the drudgery of this daily task. But even when the monk was finished with a particular work, he had only added a single copy to his library, for there were no carbon sheets for these copyists. Despite their difficulties,

¹ *Master Makers of the Book*, New York, 1928, p. 13.

these transcribers were faithful and loyal to their work. One of the most famous accounts of the determination to finish a transcription is narrated in the story of the death of Venerable Bede. "Through that day till eventide he lingered, when the boy (Vulberche by name) said to him again, 'There is still, Dear Master, one more sentence not yet finished.' 'Write quickly,' he answered. Shortly afterwards, the boy spoke again, 'Now, that sentence is finished.' 'Well hast thou spoken,' he replied, 'it is finished.'"²

Since the single work produced by each scribe was not adequate to the demands from the ever increasing number of monasteries, the *Scriptorium*, wherein many copies of the text could be produced at the same time, came into being. A large group of monks, sometimes as many as twenty-five or thirty, would sit behind their desks, each provided with a sheet of parchment. High upon a platform, with the text to be copied in his hands, sat the official reader. When all were ready, the reader began to read slowly his text, and a new edition had begun. The size of the room determined the number of books in each edition, for if thirty monks could be seated behind their desks, then the new transcription would contain thirty volumes. Obviously, the *Scriptorium* was a decided advantage to the large monasteries especially, since they could spare the monks from other duties, and thereby substantially increase their number of precious volumes. Marginal notes have preserved for us something of the majesty, and of the misery, too, of the life of a copyist. Hear, for instance, the lines ascribed to Columcille, "My little dripping pen travels across the plain of shining books. On the page it squirts its draught of ink of the green-skinned holly." But other notes are not so fanciful. "What a pity for any to be like me with no friend but a dog, with no servant but his own hands, and nothing in the shape of a goblet but his shoe." Or again, hear his woeful lament, "Alas, O my hand, that thou hast written on white parchment! The parchment thou hast made famous, but thou, what will thou become—the bare extremity of a bundle of bones."³

As we picture to ourselves the score or more of monks huddled over their parchment, and carefully transcribing the reader's text, we can easily understand how errors occasionally crept into the text. For men do grow weary, even dutiful monks, and their hands become tired and cold. As the reader droned on, words and phrases must have occasionally escaped the ear of his listeners, or perhaps they mis-

² *Venerable Bede*, Dublin Review, 1935, No. 394, p. 81. Article by Fr. Bede Jarrett, O.P.

³ Green, A. S., *History of the Irish State*. London, 1925.

interpreted him. Thus did text differ from text, though both were written in the same room, under the same reader. True, they made parchment famous, while they remain the gallant troops of a forgotten army whose pens marched to a glorious victory "across the plain of shining books."

Besides these faithful workers who transmitted to us so much of our literary and cultural heritage, other specialists arose who presented to the world exquisite manuscripts of intricate systems of interlaced patterns. "Looked at from a little distance, a page of one of these manuscripts resembles a harmonious mosaic or enamelled pattern in soft concordant colors. Examine it closely, even with a magnifying glass, and the eye wearies itself in following the intricacy of its pattern, and the hand strives in vain to reproduce its accuracy even for a few inches of its course."⁴ The decoration of the volumes, and the transcription of the text were, as a rule, two separate functions. The scribe who was copying the Holy Scriptures, for instance, would leave blank spaces at the beginning of the chapters in order that the illuminator might add his designs when the text had been completely copied. Some of these illuminators would light up an entire page with their skillful use of Byzantine gold ink, made by themselves from pure Oriental gold. The most famous examples of manuscript illumination are the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, and the *Book of Kells*. The former was written by Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne, in honor of St. Cuthbert, the great Saint of Lindisfarne who died in 687 A.D. We are told by Aldred, who wrote the translation between the lines of the latin text, that Ethilward bound it, and Billfrith the anchorite wrought the ornaments on the outside. At first, this precious work was kept at Lindisfarne with the body of St. Cuthbert, but when a Danish invasion in 875 drove away the monks, they took both the body of the Saint, and the book of Gospels with them. Its subsequent history is recounted by Kenyon in romantic tones.

"For several years they wandered to and fro in northern England; then, in despair, they resolved to cross over into Ireland. But the Saint was angry at being taken from his own land, and a great storm met the boat as it put out; and as the boat lay on its side in the fury of the storm the precious volume was washed overboard and lost. Realizing the Saint's displeasure, the monks put back, in a state of much penitence and sorrow for their loss; but at last the Saint encouraged one of them in a dream to search for the book along the shore, and on a day of exceptionally low tide they found it, prac-

⁴ Kenyon, Sir Frederic, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*. New York, fourth ed., 1939, p. 183.

tically uninjured by its immersion."⁵ Kenyon further contends that there is no need to dismiss the story as a mere medieval legend, since it was the custom of the Irish monks to carry their precious volumes in special cases or covers, and there is also the significant fact that several pages of the work show evidence of injury from some sort of immersion. At any rate, its illumination and script, with interlaced ribbons, spiral lines, inter-twined birds and beasts, are a perfect example of Celtic art. "The characteristically Celtic motif of inextricable interlacement is found in an endless variety of patterns. Five full pages, in addition, are covered with that finely proportioned tessellated pattern unparalleled in any other school of art."⁶ Its only rival for beauty and perfection of design is the famous *Book of Kells*, considered the finest example of Irish manuscript work in existence. The *Golden Gospels* of Charlemagne, written in gold letters, and beautifully decorated have a gorgeousness all their own, yet critics do not hesitate in assigning it a place after these two masterpieces.

Despite these examples of Medieval specialists in the art of illumination and transcription, it is evident that the vast majority of work done by scribes, working alone or in the *Scriptorium*, was far inferior to our conception of a book. As a matter of fact, the art did not come into its own until secular scribes perceived that they must devote themselves entirely to the study of manuscript decoration if they were to realize their ambition of working in the libraries of the princes and nobles. For the most part, these professional scribes worked under far more favorable conditions than did the monk, whose hours in the *Scriptorium* were only part of his religious duties. Moreover, the nobles spared neither money nor time in providing their scribes with every means possible, in order that their libraries might boast of magnificent volumes. Federico III, Duke of Urbino in the middle of the fifteenth century, for instance, is said to have had as many as forty scribes working in his library, transcribing famous Latin, Greek, and Italian masterpieces. We must not forget that the attitude of nobles like Federico towards books which they had watched come into being under the skilled pens of their artists was quite different from that of a modern librarian, who views with pleasure the volumes fresh from the printing press. To the former, their books were a part of themselves, something to whose production they had contributed. These nobles had their books bound in such splendor that sometimes even jewels were actually inlaid in the binding. Duke Federico, according to Vespasiano da Bisticci, his

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁶ *Lindisfarne*, Dublin Review, 1935, p. 245.

book agent, had books bound in crimson, with silver clasps, and used only the finest vellum for their pages. In his account, the agent adds these significant words, "nor could you find a single printed volume in the whole library, for the Duke would have been ashamed to own one."⁷

Words such as these make us wonder if we, who seldom advert to the true value of books, have not lost something of this sense of possession because of the perfection of the printing press. We no longer consider our books as part of ourselves because we have so little to do with their production. To the medieval scribe, laboring with tired eyes, and fingers cold and cramped, the words of Carlyle would have meant a great deal, for to him, a book was among the most wonderful and most worthy things that man could make.

⁷ Orcutt, William Dana, *Master Makers of the Book*, p. 12.