

EARLY IRISH MONASTIC SCHOOLS

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F, as Cicero says, "the distinguishing property of man is to search for and follow after truth," then Ireland deserves its repute as the Isle of saints and scholars. Since the advent of Christianity religion and learning in Ireland have never been divorced, for Erin's saints have also been its scholars. The explanation of this fact is simply this, that Ireland's early monasteries were not only homes of sanctity but also institutions of high learning.

Any account of these schools must of necessity start with Saint Patrick. After his escape from captivity in Ireland, he went to France and there received his education in the monastery schools of Marmontier and Lerins. Having experienced the benefits of these schools and having been convinced of their utility, he lost little time upon his return to Ireland in erecting similar institutions. It would seem that the very first of his schools was erected in 450 at Armagh. Others were founded at Noendrum, Louth and Kildare during the fifth century; at Clonfert, Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Arran and Bangor in the sixth; at Glendalough and Lismore in the seventh.

The prevalence of the monastic spirit, the desire for solitude and meditation certainly had much influence upon the existence and the development of the great monastic institutions. But as in many great movements, no determined plan guided the system's growth. Urged on by a love for solitude with its advantages for prayer and study, a holy man withdrew from the world and sought a lonely retreat. As others came to share his lot, more land was needed and some sort of government; and thus a community gradually arose. In this way did Saint Finnian establish Clonard on the banks of the Boyne; Saint Kieran, Clonmacnoise by the waters of the Shannon; while St. Enda did the same on the barren Isles of Arran.

With the exception of those monasteries that adopted the Rule of Saint Columbanus, there was regularly no connection between one monastery and another. Each abbot composed his own rule and at his death the same autonomous character was maintained by the superior elected to succeed him. For a long time the government of the monastery and of the school as well was in the hands of the ab-

bot, but later developments necessitated a division of power, the school being given over to the care of a *druimcli* or principal. On him fell the burden of appointing the instructors, of arranging the studies, and of examining the students.

Pupils usually were recruited from the higher strata of society, but occasionally, when the sons of poor parents desired to acquire a formal education, from the lower classes. The majority of the common people therefore could neither read nor write, but in every small town there were to be found story tellers, poets and wandering bards who instructed their listeners in such a way that there is no exaggeration in stating that "a great body of people in Ireland were well educated."¹ Moreover, men had no monopoly on education. Evidence can be adduced to demonstrate the fact that women also were skilled in the arts and sciences of those days.²

As in medieval universities, the number of students in the larger institutions ran into the thousands. Smaller monastic schools generally housed as few as fifty. Venerable Bede records that the Irish monastery of Bangor in Wales was divided into seven parts, none of these divisions containing less than three hundred men.³ Thus the student body was three thousand strong. Clonard and Clonfort had the same number; St. Molaisse at Devenish had a thousand five hundred, and St. Gobba a thousand. Although the majority of the students were natives of Ireland, yet many of them were from England and the Continent. One account cites the arrival in Ireland of "fleet-loads"⁴ of students from Great Britain. In fact, they came in such large numbers that certain sections of a town or city were usually set aside for their use. Armagh in the north was divided into three sections, one of which was known as the "Trian-Saxon" (*the Saxons' Third*) because it housed so many Saxon students.

Life in the schools was not unhappy. A serious desire for knowledge united all the pupils in a spirit of study. They came to acquire an education and suffered no outside interests to distract them. Some of them lived in the homes of people in the neighborhood, others in the monastery or college proper, but by far the greatest number erected huts or cabins near the school. A not uncommon sight was a long row of huts lining the banks of a river

¹ Joyce, P., *A Social History of Ireland*, p. 480.

² *Ibid.*, p. 410. Cf. also Hayden and Moonan, *A Short History of the Irish People*, pp. 41 and 82.

³ Joyce, P., *op. cit.*, 409.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

across from the church. Many collegiate towns were formed by avenues of students' houses enclosing the monastery.

The problem of providing food, clothing and the necessities of daily existence for so many was adequately cared for. In some cases the poorer students made their way by acting as servants to their richer schoolmates. People living near the monastery cared for a second class called "poor scholars"—those students who came from afar, attracted by the reputation of good teachers and the regularity of a well-conducted school. Their only claim upon the generosity of a teacher and on the public was an ardent love of learning. A third type was the ordinary self-supporting pupil who lived in a hut near the school, divided his time between study and prayer, later became a monk and, after ordination, helped to spread knowledge in foreign lands. From these three groups there sprung the men who labored during the so-called "Dark Ages" in the revival of civilization on the Continent.

Studies were pursued in the open air, such things as spacious lecture halls being totally unknown. The teacher stood on a hillock and addressed his audience. The ardent quest for learning automatically did away with "prizes and cramming for competitive examinations."⁵ Books and education were supplied gratis to those unable to pay for them. The studies pursued included literature and science, divinity, the Sacred Scriptures and the Greek and Latin classics. The medium of teaching was Gaelic and Latin. Young students did not have "First Latin Books" as an introduction to the great authors in those days; instead, they started off immediately with the text, following it intently while the teacher read, translated and explained. Quite often—it might be the first case of a now widely-practiced custom—the professors made interlinear translations. Yet "Latin was written and spoken familiarly in the schools, at least among the students of the higher stages," to such an extent that extant manuscripts are a mixture of Gaelic and Latin. The sciences as taught in the schools were limited and imperfect according to our standards, yet Bertran Windell could say they were "remarkably accurate."⁶ Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and geography were the chief subjects. Philosophy, scripture and divinity made up the theological course after the general education in the arts and sciences was completed.

An unbroken tradition of learning in the schools was continued

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁶ Wendell, Bertran, *Irish Men of Science*, p. 44.

down to the sixteenth century. The monastic centers of education witnessed the ravaging invasions of the Danes, of the Norse, and of the English lasting over a period of more than seven centuries; yet throughout these long years, they maintained the high standard of scholarship set up for them by saintly founders—a thing that cannot be said of contemporary centers of learning in England or on the Continent. Schools started in England never survived long; Canterbury went out of existence when its founders, Theodore and Adrian, died; Jarrow ceased with Bede; while York, most famous of them all, lasted little over fifty years. Erin's schools, on the other hand, endured as a rule until far into the Middle Ages. As late as 1169 it was still necessary to enact legislation for them, for we find Armagh, oldest of the educational centers, converted into a national university for all Ireland and Scotland under the High King Ruadhri. On the Continent the story is slightly different. Most of the schools were founded by Irish missionaries who practically honeycombed Italy, France, Switzerland and Germany with their foundations. As long as Alcuin lived they enjoyed the patronage of Charlemagne, but after his death all the monasteries without exception passed into the hands of the Benedictines. Yet they too maintained the Irish tradition and endured many years.

With regard to the influence of these schools upon the history of the world, they most certainly were the means chosen by Providence to bring about a reawakening of the Christian and Catholic culture. After the fall of Rome and the breaking-up of the purely Roman civilization, the Popes utilized the monks in the work of restoration. This meant that in the North it was largely upon the Irish schools and monasteries that the revival of culture depended. As Christopher Dawson observes: "in the North the Irish monks had begun to combine the monastic life with an active missionary propaganda, both in Britain and Gaul; and Anglo-Saxon monasticism inherited their traditions as well as those of Saint Benedict and Saint Gregory."⁷

Outside of its bearing on the new civilization that arose from the ashes of the decadent Roman culture, Irish influence was perhaps felt most in the field of letters, for it is characteristic of the age that its literature was almost totally that of Schoolmen. "It is the literature of schoolmasters and grammarians, of commentators and homilists."⁸

Yet the strength and importance of the culture fostered by the Schoolmen lies not in its literary productions but in its work of edu-

⁷ Dawson, Christopher, *Mediaeval Religion*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

cating the West; and the schoolmasters of the time are admitted to have been Irish or graduate of Irish schools. In fine—to quote Christopher Dawson again,—“the most striking example of this process (of education) is to be found in Ireland and England, for here it was entirely religious in origin, being wholly due to the work of the monastic schools and missions, owing little or nothing to the social inheritance of the Roman Tradition which was so important in Gaul and Italy and Spain. . . . Consequently in Ireland alone the native culture met the Latin tradition of the Church on relatively equal terms and it was there that a synthesis of the two elements was achieved which resulted in the formation of a vernacular Christian literature and culture.”⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

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