

*Did the Irish really save civilization?*

A visit to the emerald isle's ancient monasteries helps answer the question.

## SAINTS PRESERVE US!

*text and photography by randall hyman*

**W**E BATTLED SOUTHWEST IRELAND'S stormy seas for an hour and a half before our small tour boat finally neared lonely, wave-lashed Great Skellig Island, a rocky pinnacle soaring more than 700 feet above the icy North Atlantic, 10 miles off the Iveragh Peninsula. Hidden in the chilly mists near the summit lay a monastic settlement called Skellig Michael, a cluster of igloo-shaped, mortarless stone huts built some 14 centuries ago. Not exactly what I'd call home, but as founder Saint Finnian of Clonard might have chanted—but didn't—Skellig Michael had location, location, location.

Irish real estate was a tough sell in the fifth and sixth centuries. To the rest of Europe this land lay, literally, at the ends of the Earth; beyond it lurked dragons and nothingness. It was considered a neighborhood of

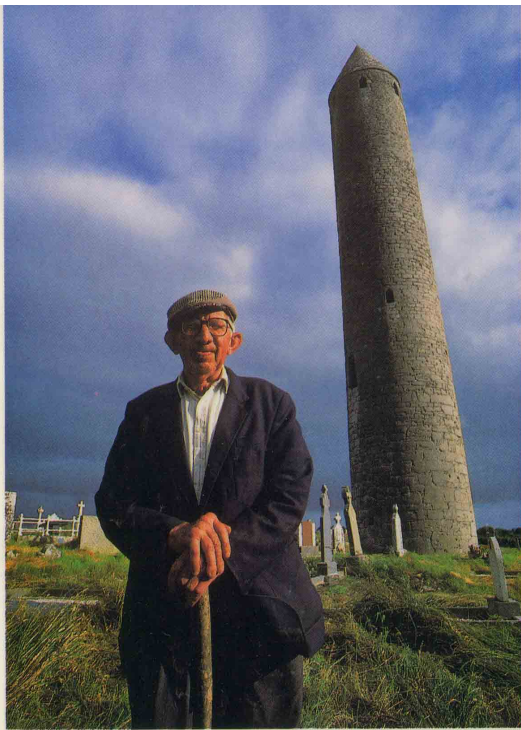
naked Celtic warriors and all-powerful Druid priests—and you couldn't get a Roman to set foot past Britain.

The only takers were monks, fleeing the barbarians who were running amok across the continent, burning libraries and cities. The Roman Empire was in shambles, and Ireland seemed a good gamble. Those who took the chance on the Emerald Isle changed the course of history, endowing the pagan land with a pantheon of saints and, along the way, saving some of the great literature of Western civilization.

Historian Thomas Cahill gave them even more credit in his 1995 book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*: "Without the Mission of the Irish Monks, who single-handedly refounded European civilization throughout the continent in the bays and valleys of their

A statue of monks in an oarless oxhide boat at Cahersiveen on Ireland's Iveragh Peninsula recalls the days when some early monks set out to sea without oars, trusting God to send them where they should go.





exile, the world that came after them would have been an entirely different one—a world without books.”

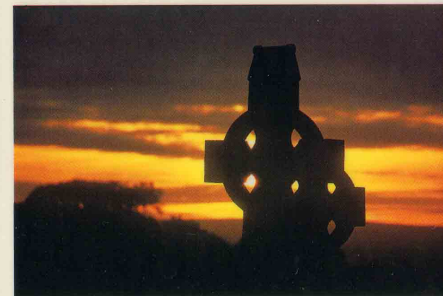
When I visited Ireland last summer, I was on my own mission to recapture those distant, spiritual times. I found a land filled with ruins—tall towers for spotting marauding Vikings, elegant chapels for prayer and sturdy shelters for weathering storms. Though Ireland has more saints than you can shake a staff at, an eclectic group of five touched my travels: Patrick the missionary, Columba the scribe and Brendan the voyager, both students of biblical scholar Finnian of Clonard, and the fifth, Colman of Kilmacduagh. Starting at Skellig Michael I traveled up and down the west coast and across to Dublin, tracing a circular journey that began and ended in southwest Ireland.

“It must have made them feel closer to God to be so high up,” reflected a young Belgian tourist after climbing 45 minutes up endless stairs to admire Skellig Michael’s six beehive huts and two oratories (chapels). Cut off from the mainland by turbulent waters, this razor blade of rock was just the spot for anyone seeking self-deprivation, seclusion and protection. The faithful brothers must have reveled in the inaccessibility of their new enclave as they wedged stone steps into the isle’s vertical flanks, but by A.D. 812 Viking raiders

greedy for silver and gold began to prey on the monks’ natural fortress. Despite the marauders, weather and isolation, the monks managed to hold on until the twelfth century, filling their days with prayer, fishing, hunting seabirds, gardening and copying manuscripts. Not until independent, grass-roots monasteries like Skellig Michael fell into disfavor with the distant church hierarchy were they abandoned or absorbed, bringing the golden age of Irish saints to a close.

**E**ARLY IN THE FIFTH CENTURY THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS address in all of Ireland lay on the other side of the Emerald Isle on a hill called Tara, the next stop on my saint-filled itinerary. This grassy knoll north of Dublin was the political and spiritual nerve center of Celtic Ireland, or Eire as it was called in the native Gaelic language. From Tara’s commanding view over the central Boyne Valley, high kings ruled all Eire until the eleventh century. The most prominent ruins today are two earthen mounds. Atop the higher one stands a pillar called Liall Fail.

“It’s the Stone of Destiny which the king would touch before becoming high king,” explained a hearty Irish matron as I snapped photos. “Its shape is quite significant. You’re a very observant gentlemen, so I’m



sure you will have observed the shape of that stone, did you?” she added with a bawdy laugh. One look at the four-foot-high phallus left no doubt that high kings were destined to become potent potentates.

When the first Christians were trickling into the neighborhood in A.D. 432, a Gaul-trained British priest named Patricius was among them. Not easily impressed by addresses or titles, Patricius decided to warm things up a bit. He dared to light an Easter bonfire atop the Hill of Slane opposite Tara. The defiant gesture virtually in the face of the high king and his Druid priests could have cost Patricius his life. Instead it led to the eventual conversion of the king and helped Patricius, known today as Patrick, launch a career that earned him his own title: saint.

By the sixth century Saint Patrick’s legacy was so great that Ireland was producing its own home-grown monks and saints-to-be. Meanwhile, the Dark Ages had descended across the rest of Europe. Barbarians had destroyed the Roman Empire, and not one library remained of the dozens that once stretched from Gaul to Thrace. Monks fleeing the continent took Europe’s most precious writings with them.

Ireland, safe from the smoldering ruins of Europe, became a repository of rare manuscripts as well as a

haven for monks, who devoted lifetimes to copying sacred and secular texts. They did not always understand the words of Virgil or Plato, but they recognized the letters. The Irish were becoming people of the book, a passion that has lasted into modern times.

The saint most synonymous with great manuscripts was Columba, born of royal O’Donnell blood around A.D. 521. Shunning the privileged birthright of his clan, Columba entered the priesthood, but his fiery Irish temper made the road to sainthood a bumpy one.

Columba studied under saint-to-be Finnian of Clonard. Finnian founded several monasteries and became known as the “Teacher of Irish Saints.” Columba also studied under another Finnian, but this one was saint-to-be Finnian of Moville. The latter Finnian became furious when he discovered Columba secretly copying Finnian’s most prized manuscript, the Cathach or “Battle Book”—now the oldest Irish psalm book in existence. Finnian claimed the replica should be his. In the dispute that ensued, High King Dermott ruled that Columba must surrender his pirated copy to Finnian. “To every cow her calf; to every book its copy,” was the verdict of this very early copyright case.

Columba’s anger over the ruling led to a bloody battle between the O’Donnell and Dermott armies.

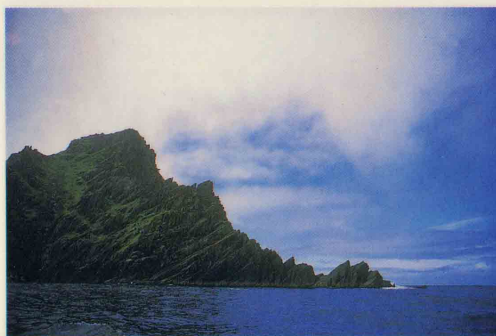
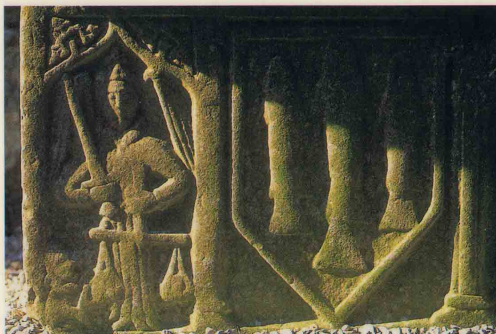
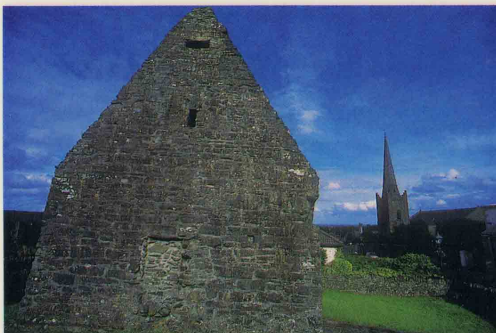
**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Horses frisk on a meadow overlooking Killarney. Nearby, dawn outlines Celtic crosses at Aghadoe. At Cashel, a replica of Saint Patrick’s Cross rests on a stone base where Saint Patrick crowned a southern Irish king. To the north, Irish high kings placed their hands on the Liall Fail stone at Tara.

**ABOVE:** Colman Finnegan tends the grounds at the Kilmacduagh monastery, home to Saint Colman in the sixth century. The tower behind him rises 112 feet and now leans two feet off vertical. Twelfth-century monks built it to keep a lookout for invading Normans and to provide a refuge for themselves and their valuables in case of attack.



Legend has it that Columba's side killed 3001 of the enemy and lost only one of their own. As penance for taking up arms as a monk, Columba was exiled to Scotland to convert one man for each who had died. He far exceeded the quota, founding a network of monasteries that spread the Gospel across all northern Britain. By the ninth century Columba's main monastery on the Scottish isle of Iona had become a great center of manuscript production that is now linked with the most famous of all Irish parchments, the Book of Kells.

It is the finest surviving illuminated manuscript of early Christian Ireland (see sidebar, page 46). The book resides at Dublin's Trinity College in a glass case,



the heart of an exhibit on medieval Irish parchments and scribal lore. I made my way down Dublin's posh, bustling Grafton Street in search of this holy grail of manuscripts. I found the entrance to Trinity College at the bottom of the hill, with an arched portal separating the serene campus from the noisy traffic outside. The Book of Kells was on display inside the Old Library.

After passing through several darkened exhibit rooms, I arrived at the inner sanctum but could only get a glimpse of the book amid the circle of admirers pressing around its case. Seeing the volume opened to just one set of pages, I wondered what marvelously detailed illustrations lay hidden inside the rest of it.

A tourism officer suggested I head to Kells itself, a town near Tara an hour's drive north of Dublin. There, she explained, I could actually handle and page through a color photocopy of the manuscript as well as visit Saint Columba's House and see the town's renowned high crosses.

"High Cross of Kells?" a local resident echoed as I searched for the legendary landmark. "Well, the

famous one isn't here now. A lorry hit it two years ago and knocked it off its pedestal in the center of town." The original was being repaired and stored while a replica was being crafted to stand in its place.

High crosses are large stone crucifixes, some as tall as 18 feet, adorned with detailed carvings of biblical scenes. These familiar ringed crosses have become an enduring symbol of Irish Christianity. The one hit by

**LEFT, FROM TOP:** Saint Columba's House is an eleventh-century church that takes its name from an Irish saint involved in a sixth-century copyright case. At the Rock of Cashel, a stone tomb panel depicts fish and a swordsman holding a scale. Monks made their home on jagged Great Skellig Island for six centuries. **ABOVE:** A view through a window at the seventh-century Gallarus Oratory shows a man silhouetted in the doorway at the other end of the building.





ABOVE: At Skellig Michael, monks built and lived in igloo-shaped, mortarless stone huts. RIGHT: The surface of a high cross at Drumcliff cemetery shows Adam and Eve, Daniel and the lion, and Cain slaying Abel.



the truck, the Market Cross, dates from 1688 and was used as a gallows by the British in a 1798 independence uprising.

Continuing up the hill, I came upon the high-peaked stone oratory known as Saint Columba's House. The ninth-century stone building seemed out of place amid the modern row houses, television antennas and police station surrounding it. The heavy iron gate was locked, but some neighborhood kids went scurrying down the hill to fetch Mrs. Carpenter, the keeper of the key.

Twenty minutes later, a prim, elderly woman trudged up the street, coat hurriedly wrapped around

her. With a jangle of keys and some pointed remarks about having her evening tea interrupted, she led me across a stone path into the ancient chapel where some say monks brought the Book of Kells close to completion and hid it away.

The inside was as imposing as the outside, with a precarious iron ladder leading a couple of dozen feet straight up into a loft where the monks hid themselves and their valuables from raiders. Although the Book of Kells may truly have been kept here, the oratory was certainly never Saint Columba's house—it was erected 200 years after his death. (continues on page 66)

## OF MICE AND MEN {AND ANGELS}



The initial page of the Gospel of Saint John displays the meticulous handwork of painstaking monks.

Its ink dyes were imported from as far away as the Middle East, and its illustrations were so lavish and profuse they took years to complete. The drawings range from elegant portraits of apostles to symbolic portrayals of mice. A twelfth-century chronicler described it as "the work, not of men but of angels."

The Book of Kells is an opulent version of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—in Latin. Originally bound in one volume rather than the present-day four, the 680-page calf-vellum parchment now resides at Dublin's Trinity College. Though it is the finest surviving manuscript of its kind, the book was not unique. Illuminated gospel books were vital tools of conversion in the Middle Ages, designed to captivate and entice those who saw them.

Its origins are a mystery. The book may actually have been produced in the late 700s on the Scottish isle of Iona at St. Columba's main monastery rather than at the town of Kells. The book's illustrations were never fully completed. Devastating Viking raids on Iona forced the monks to move to the Kells monastery in 806, where the book remained until the 1400s.

In 1006 someone briefly stole the tome. The *Annals of Ulster* recorded, "This was the principal relic of the Western World on account of its singular cover, and it was found after 20 nights and two months, its gold having been stolen off it and a sod over it." This was not the end of the book's travails, for in the 1700s an inept bookbinder trimmed its weathered edges, butchering some of the precious illustrations contained in the decorated page borders. Nevertheless, the Book of Kells remains the crowning achievement of Celtic art.

## SAINTS PRESERVE US!

### trip planner

#### GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus, (800) IRISHAIR; Delta, (800) 241-4141; and Continental, (800) 231-0856, all fly direct to Ireland from North America. Delta's and Continental's Shannon service includes a brief stop in Dublin while Aer Lingus flies nonstop to both Shannon and Dublin.

#### GETTING AROUND

You'll need a rental car to travel to some of the more remote sites covered in this article. Any of the standards (Avis, Hertz, etc.) fill the bill, though brokers such as **Kemwel Holiday Autos**, (800) 678-0678, simplify the process with discounted rates and prepaid vouchers. Buy collision insurance (CDW) with your voucher to avoid exorbitant fees in Europe or use a gold/platinum credit card that carries automatic auto insurance. (NOTE: Find out if your personal auto insurance covers Europe—credit card insurance is "secondary" and only kicks in after "primary" coverage from your personal insurer.)

#### INSIDERS' TIPS

•Intrepid explorers venturing out to the Skelligs pay about \$30 for the deluxe day-long tour, including several hours on

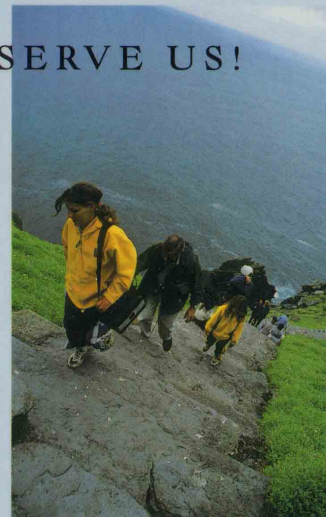


The Gallarus Oratory is Ireland's best-preserved early Christian drystone church.

Skellig Michael. No meals are provided, but in bad seas you won't want lunch anyway. Bring warm, waterproof clothes—this is the North Atlantic. Call 066-77156 or 77157 and ask for Pat Murphy's "fast" boat for a smoother, shorter ride each way (50 minutes vs. 90 minutes). Boats usually run May-October. Across the bridge on Valentia Island, shorter tours of the Skelligs (no landing) are available from the Skellig Experience Center, a small but excellent museum about the monastery, bird life, marine life and lighthouse at Skellig Michael.

•When telephoning from the U.S., dial 011 353, then the local number (drop the zero from the numbers listed here—it's used only when calling within Ireland).

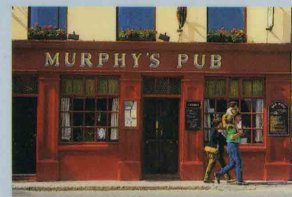
•The currency of the Republic of Ireland is the "punt" or Irish pound. At press time, \$1.00 equals Ir£0.68. Ireland plans to adopt the new universal European



Skellig Michael visitors climb steep steps to reach the monastery site.

currency, the euro, at a later time.

•Guinness beer (stout) is reputed to cure everything from colds to colicky babies. Whatever your excuse, don't forget the Guinness.



Of course, Ireland has plenty of pubs. This one's in the town of Dingle.

#### LODGING & DINING

B&Bs are about half the price of a hotel. If you need a change from B&Bs in Dingle (Saint Brendan country), try **Benners Hotel** (Ir£35-Ir£60 per person, double occupancy), Main Street, 066-51638, in a 300-year-old building in the heart of town. House rentals ("self-caters") are an economical option for longer stays, but inquire in advance about any surcharges for utilities or other miscellanies. The Irish Tourist Board has a free directory with booking information. (Rates are subject to change.)

For fast, hearty, economical meals try "pub lunches" (children are welcome and toddler snacks are free).

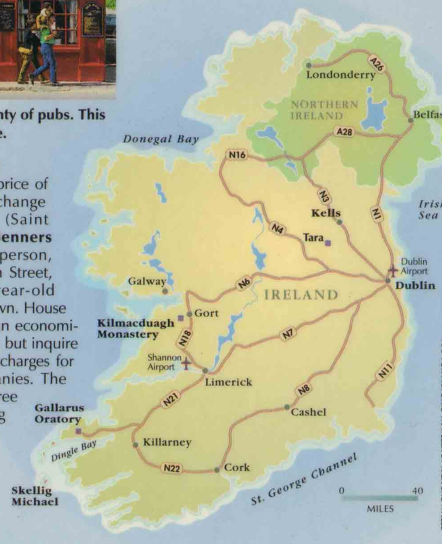
#### INFORMATION PLEASE

The Irish Tourist Board, (800) 223-6470 or [www.ireland.travel.ie/home/index.asp](http://www.ireland.travel.ie/home/index.asp), provides brochures, maps and general visitor information.

#### READING UP

*How the Irish Saved Civilization* by Thomas Cahill (Doubleday, 1995) gives a unique history of Irish saints, from the fall of Rome to the evolution of Catholicism in Ireland. *Ireland*, one of the series of Eyewitness Travel Guides, by Lisa Gerard-Sharp and Tim Perry (DK Publishing, 1997) is a must-have, user-friendly travel guide with rich photography, illustrations, 3-D maps, historical details and handy tips. *The Book of Kells: Art, Origins, History* by Iain Zazcek (Parkgate Books Ltd., 1997) is an entertaining, scholarly, quick read full of illustrations from the Book of Kells. *The Brendan Voyage* by Tim Severin (Avon Books, 1987) is an astounding first-person account of the crew that sailed from Ireland to America, tracing Saint Brendan's presumed route in an oxhide sailboat, as set forth in the book, *Navigatio*, with remarkable revelations about the gutsy monks of early Christian Ireland.

Catholic Online Saints & Angels (<http://saints.catholic.org>) has short biographies on hundreds of saints. Columba (<http://web.raex.com/~agincort/columba.htm>) gives more detailed information on Saint Columba and Saint Patrick and excellent links to Irish history sites.





# SAINTS PRESERVE US!

Continued from page 46

The name comes from Columban monks who fled here from Iona in the ninth century.

Across the street loomed Saint Columba's Church (another honorary name, since it dates from 1778; parts of it are Medieval, but none of it dates to Columba's time) where the rest of the Kells monastery once stood. Three high crosses graced the cemetery around the church. To my chagrin, I discovered that the copy of the Book of Kells sat in a glass case inside the church, as untouchable as the original.

The Book of Kells was the happy exception to countless other illuminated manuscripts destroyed by Viking raiders, starting in the ninth century. Norsemen often stripped the jewels, gold and silver from their covers and boxes and then discarded the priceless manuscripts. The marauders targeted monasteries for other valuables as well, such as crosses and sacramental goblets. Over time the unarmed monks devised ploys to foil Vikings and later Norman marauders.

The most lasting vestiges of the monks' defenses are the round towers that still pepper the Irish landscape. Averaging over 100 feet high and resembling lighthouses, these stone structures served as bell towers, lookout posts and manuscript vaults. The entrances were usually at least a dozen feet off the ground and reached by ladders that the defenders could haul up from inside. Retractable ladders inside the towers connected several wooden platforms leading to the top. Like treed squirrels, the monks were able to drop missiles on their attackers on their way up.

The Kilmacduagh monastery near Gort brought me back to the western side of Ireland. There I met 73-year-old Colman Finnegan, the monastery's caretaker. "My family's been here four generations on that spot across the road," he said. It was past visiting hours, but Finnegan seemed happy to have company as he tended the overgrown cemetery surrounding the 112-foot-tall tower.

A chilly wind laced with the fragrance of rain-soaked grasses

whipped across the lonely site of a monastery founded in the sixth century by Saint Colman, one of more than 200 Irish saints of the same name whose tangled histories have led many researchers down uncertain paths. From the monastery, monks would scan the austere limestone landscape of the Burrens, searching for advancing raiders. High King Brian Boru vanquished the Vikings in A.D. 1014, so this twelfth-century tower was for protection against Ireland's newest invaders, the Normans.

As afternoon sun peeked through a fast-moving squall, the silhouetted tower appeared to be leaning. It was no optical illusion. Shifting and settling of the earth over the centuries has tilted the structure two feet off vertical. Other than that, the tower seemed in perfect condition. "They went to tuckpoint the top years ago," said Finnegan. "When they got up with the scaffolding they found out there was nothing to do." As with Skellig Michael, the masonry of Irish monks was built to last.

Heading back down toward the

Skellig Islands, I reached the Dingle Peninsula, an area associated with Saint Brendan. Brendan is famous for his seven-year voyage to find the promised land of the saints in the mid-500s. Along with a group of chosen monks, he built a boat from animal hides and set sail. An early scribe wrote an account of Brendan's voyage, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. In the 1970s, explorer Tim Severin sailed a hide boat from Ireland to Newfoundland by way of Iceland and Greenland, using the directions laid out in the *Navigatio*. If Severin correctly followed the directions and indeed reached the same destination, Brendan voyaged to the New World nearly 1,000 years before Christopher Columbus. Supposedly Saint Brendan launched his boat to America from a creek here on the Dingle Peninsula. Mount Brandon dominates the peninsula and still attracts annual pilgrims as the site of Brendan's ancient hermitage.

On the Dingle Peninsula near the creek where Saint Brendan may have set off on his journey I also found one of the oldest and most pristine of all monastic structures, the Gallarus Oratory, built as early as the seventh or eighth century. The stone chapel has a timeless solidity. Mortarless, like the beehive huts at Skellig Michael, it is shaped like an overturned boat. Twice during the course of every night, the monks who lived here would interrupt their sleep to go to the oratory to chant and pray, no matter the ice and storm. Snug inside during a North Atlantic squall, the storm raging outside silenced by four-foot-thick walls, a friend of mine passed the time writing poetry. It seemed an appropriate activity.

As much as the world has changed, places like Gallarus have remained the same. I watched as the storm passed and emerald pastures glowed in the evening light along the shore. Monks once enjoyed this same view. Scanning our surroundings, I reckoned the old neighborhood still had location. **HT**

RANDALL HYMAN's story and photos on Scotland's whisky heritage appeared in the May 1998 issue.

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