

THE SECRET OF KELLS

By Ken McNaughton

The Secret of Kells is an animated film that makes a perfect introduction for children and adults to the Book of Kells.



The Book of Kells is an illuminated manuscript in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament, together with various prefatory texts and tables. It was created in a Columban monastery in either Britain or Ireland and may have had contributions from various Columban institutions from both Britain and Ireland. It is believed to have been created about 800 CE. The text of the Gospels is largely drawn from the Vulgate, although it also includes several passages drawn from the earlier versions of the Bible known as the Vetus Latina. The Vulgate is a late-4th century Latin translation of the Bible, largely the work of Jerome who, in 382, had been commissioned by Pope Damasus I to revise the Vetus Latina (“Old Latin”) Gospels used by the Roman Church.

The Book of Kells is a masterwork of Western calligraphy and represents the pinnacle of Insular illumination. Insular illumination refers to the production of illuminated manuscripts in the monasteries of Ireland and Great Britain between the 6th and 9th centuries, as well as in monasteries under their influence on continental Europe. It is characterized by decoration strongly influenced by metalwork, the constant use of interlacing, and the importance assigned to calligraphy. The insular artistic style began after the conversion of Ireland by St Patrick in the 4th and 5th centuries CE. The new religious institutions of Celtic Christianity, mostly organized

around monasteries, ordered the creation of numerous works of art, liturgical objects and vestments, and also manuscripts. Two types of manuscripts dominated—small format gospels to be used by preachers and missionaries or in private worship, and large works reserved for the liturgical services of the monasteries, such as the Book of Kells. The Irish monks took part in the conversion of Scotland and the north of Great Britain, establishing numerous monasteries, such as Iona Abbey, founded by Columba in Scotland in 563, and Lindisfarne, founded by Aidan in Northumbria in 635. The Irish missionaries brought their art to Britain along with their religion. The scriptoria of Lindisfarne and Iona were the most prolific at the end of the 8th century.



The illustrations and ornamentation of the Book of Kells surpass that of other Insular Gospel books in extravagance and complexity. The decoration combines traditional Christian iconography with the ornate swirling motifs typical of Insular art. Figures of humans, animals and mythical beasts, together with Celtic knots and interlacing patterns in vibrant colors, enliven the manuscript's pages. Many of these minor decorative elements are imbued with Christian symbolism and so further emphasize the themes of the major illustrations.

The manuscript today comprises 340 leaves, totaling 680 pages. The leaves are high-quality calf vellum; the unprecedentedly elaborate ornamentation that covers them includes ten full-page illustrations and text pages that are vibrant with decorated initials and interlinear miniatures, marking the furthest extension of the anti-classical and energetic qualities of Insular art. The script of the text appears to be the work of at least three different scribes. The lettering is in iron gall ink, and the colors used were derived from a wide range of substances, some of which were imported from distant lands. Today, it is housed at Trinity College Library, Dublin which usually has on display at any given time two of the current four volumes, one showing a major illustration and the other showing typical text pages. A digitized version of the entire manuscript

may also be seen online [1]. The manuscript takes its name from the Abbey of Kells, which was its home for centuries.



In 563, a mission from Ireland under St. Columba founded the monastery of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, and probably began the conversion of the region to Christianity. Iona lay within the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata, on the western coast of modern Scotland, with some territory on the northern coasts of Ireland. In the late 6th and early 7th centuries, it encompassed roughly what is now Argyll and Bute and Lochaber in Scotland, and also County Antrim in Ireland. According to tradition, Columba had been exiled from his native Ireland as a result of his involvement in the Battle of Cul Dreimhne. Columba and twelve companions went into exile on Iona and founded a monastery there. The monastery was hugely successful, and played a crucial role in the conversion to Christianity of the Picts of present-day Scotland in the late 6th century, and of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria in 635. Many satellite institutions were founded, and Iona became the center of one of the most important monastic systems in Great Britain and Ireland.

Iona became a renowned center of learning, and its scriptorium produced highly important documents. The monastery is often associated with the distinctive practices and traditions known as Celtic Christianity. In particular, Iona was a major supporter of the “Celtic” system for calculating the date of Easter at the time of the Easter controversy, which pitted supporters of the Celtic system against those favoring the “Roman” system used elsewhere in Western Christianity. The controversy weakened Iona’s ties to Northumbria, which adopted the Roman system at the Synod of Whitby in 664, and to Pictland, which followed suit in the early 8th century. Iona did not adopt the Roman system until 715, according to the Anglo-Saxon historian Bede. Iona’s prominence was further diminished over the next centuries as a result of Viking raids and the rise of other powerful monasteries in the system, such as the Abbey of Kells.



The Abbey of Kells is a former monastery in Kells, 40 miles (64 km) north of Dublin, and the Book of Kells was kept there during the later medieval and early modern periods before finally leaving the abbey in the 1650s. Much of the Book of Kells may have been created there, but historians cannot be certain of the exact date and circumstances of its creation. The Abbey of Kells was reportedly founded by St. Columba ca. 554, and was re-founded from Iona, the building taking from 807 until the consecration of the church in 814. In that year, Cellach, Abbot of Iona, retired to Kells, but, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, Iona remained the main Columban house for several decades, despite the danger of Viking raids. Only in 878 were the main relics, with Columba's reliquary shrine specified in the records, moved to Ireland, with Kells becoming the new main Columban house. This might have been when the Book of Kells came to Kells.

The religion of the Picts before their conversion is supposed by the majority of writers on this subject to have been that which prevailed in the rest of Britain and in Celtic Gaul—Druidism [2]. A druid was a member of the high-ranking class in ancient Celtic cultures. Perhaps best remembered as religious leaders, they were also legal authorities, adjudicators, lore-keepers, medical professionals, and political advisors. While the druids are reported to have been literate, they are believed to have been prevented by doctrine from recording their knowledge in written form, thus they left no written accounts of themselves. Imagine the effect of seeing monks and preachers coming from Iona and Northumbria with these beautiful texts, showcasing a new religion. The new religion, Christianity, was colorfully illustrated, with pictures of the Virgin Mary with Child, the Temptation of Christ, even the Devil himself. It was a powerful tool. All through the ages, new and mysterious technology has played an important role in persuading people to new ideas. The story was told with Celtic symbols, animals and mythical beasts. While some old beliefs would have been retained, Pictish leaders like Nechtan were converted to Christianity, and the Macnachtans—sons of Nechtan—followed.



In *The Secret of Kells*, a young boy in a remote medieval outpost under siege from barbarian raids is beckoned to adventure when a celebrated master illuminator arrives with an ancient book, brimming with secret wisdom and powers [3]. While this animated feature might seem fanciful and childlike, it brims with historical verisimilitude. We get a feeling for the dedication of the scribes, the threat of the Northmen, the search for beautiful inks, the international reach of the monks—even for the Little People who belonged to the land beyond the monasteries. In 2010, this film was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Animated Feature Film of 2009, and it won numerous other awards. It was lovingly put together by an army of technicians somewhat reminiscent of the monks who labored over the Book of Kells. The IMDb website includes five trailer videos.

REFERENCES

1. Discover The Book of Kells online through Trinity College Dublin's free course: <https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/education/book-kells-online-trinity-college-course>.
2. McNaughton, Ken, "[Who Were the Picts?](#)", Clan Macnachtan Association Worldwide, 25 April 2020.
3. *The Secret of Kells* (2009) directed by Tomm Moore and Nora Twomey (co-director): https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0485601/?ref=nm_sr_srsrg_0.
4. Extensive use was made of Wikipedia to expand and explain major terms in its section on the Book of Kells.

NOTES

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