

# IRELAND'S LEGACY OF LEARNING: Epilogue

## NOTES by BOB – Words about WORDS

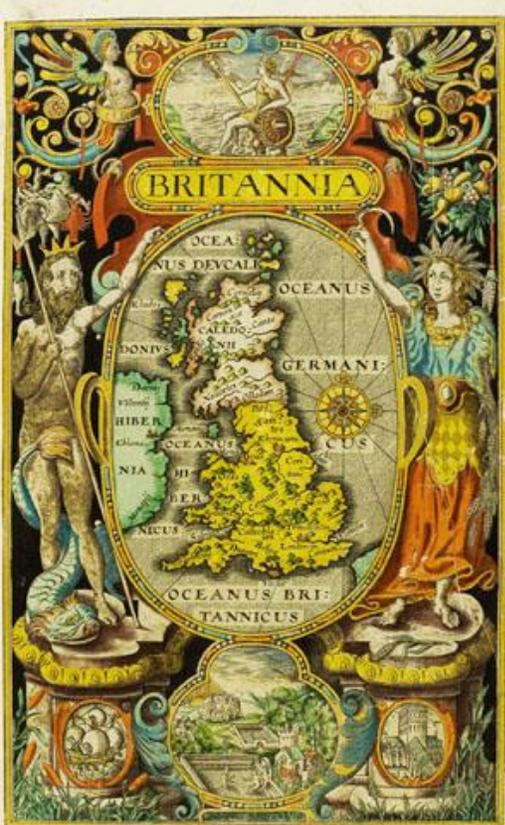
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G.K. Chesterton was wrong when he said: *"The great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad, for all their wars are merry and all their songs are sad."* The great Gaels of Ireland gave us the tools to read words and to read notes; to sing songs and to create music.

**W**e scroll through the several centuries of the middle ages when the Irish initiative contributed to the cornerstone of learning in our western civilization. The historical record documents that the Irish provided a series of intellectual leaders who guided the re-emergence of Europe from the dark ages after the Roman Empire had collapsed (5<sup>th</sup> century). The erudition in grammar, language and the classics they had acquired in their Irish monastic centers of learning show them to be as good, if not better, than anything available to the continental courts they would visit in the seventh and eighth centuries. These first scholars and missionaries after the arrival of Saint Patrick in the fifth century displayed an easy tolerance, and often an open enthusiasm, for the customs, usages, even the mythology of their pagan Irish ancestors. The boldness of leaders

like Columba and Columbanus (6<sup>th</sup> century) and their disciples not only embraced learning in all its forms from the classical pagan past to those of their new found religion, but fueled their mission to establish centers of learning in Ireland and on the Continent. Students flocked daily in great numbers to the schools "of unspeakable excellence" in Ireland.

The Irish invented new tools of separating words in writing so that all people could read (7<sup>th</sup> century). They presented their learning and sacred texts in magnificently illuminated manuscripts and books. Libraries were born.



*"Our Anglo-Saxons went at those times (6-10<sup>th</sup> centuries] to Ireland as if to a fair to purchase goods. Hence, it is frequently read in our historians of holy men: 'He was sent to Ireland to school,' or 'he went to the Irish renowned for their philosophy.' "* William Camden, BRITANNIA 1586

People's biographies are present in the sounds they make. The sounds present in Ireland's biography have been resonating for centuries. The Irish practiced and promoted song and music in the rhythms of their daily life which made possible the gift of music notation (9th century). The monks' Gregorian chant neumes would blossom into modern music notation and symphonies.

**A**lthough the artifacts from these golden ages are well preserved in the great libraries of Europe, the Irish legacy of learning is less well known or appreciated in our digitalized world. Nevertheless, every time you read the newspaper - *silently* - or turn the pages

*“By means of the Carolingian Renaissance, Western civilization survived by the skin of its teeth. Without the Irish, it would not have survived at all.”*

---Kenneth Clark, British art historian

of a book or an e-book on your Kindle at the beach, or flip through a magazine; every time you write an e-mail or tweet, or an old fashioned letter with its conveniently separated words -- hopefully with a few punctuation marks and decent grammar; every time you push a button on a digital device to play a song which someone had composed on a piece of paper

and recorded, or when you enjoy the pleasing sounds of a live orchestra playing notes from a sheet of music by some long dead composer,--all of these experiences are made possible because of the inventions, the vision and creativity of medieval educators with an Irish accent who believed that learning and literacy were vitally important for a society to liberate the human spirit.

The power of the written word and of the sound of music resonates through time--all times. There are those who might moan that the future is not what it used to be, but we would do no harm to uncover the ancient Irish perspective of learning and reconfigure it for our times.

G.K. Chesterton was wrong when he said: *“The great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad, for all their wars are merry and all their songs are sad.”* The great Gaels of Ireland gave Western civilization the tools to read and to make words and to read notes; to sing songs and to write music compositions. If the Irish did not save the Western world, we might at least agree that they certainly made an impressive effort to do so, and the imprint of their legacy is ours to enjoy to this day.

