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We Get Letters: from Bob in Kennebunkport on St. Patrick and Brexit



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Revelers stepping outside the tallest building in the Western Hemisphere to enjoy the NACE sponsored St. Patrick's Day Happy Hour on Skydeck Chicago [3-6pm] may overhear the words: "Patrick and Brexit". Buried in the bogs of Irish history, records reveal that without Saints Patrick in the 5th and Columbanus in the 6th-7th centuries, there would have been no European Union for the United Kingdom to exit - no Brexit. The bricks and mortar to rebuild Europe and England after breakup of the Western Roman Empire were trowelled by men with Irish accents and rhythms.

Patrick, born in Roman Britain, became Ireland's most influential immigrant and brought the Irish into the mainstream of Western history. But it was Columbanus who became Ireland's most influential emigrant, "the man from this country who went out to the world [and] left his imprint not just here in Ireland but throughout Europe", according to Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland.

This Irish immigrant from the edge of Europe whom James Joyce called "fiery Columbanus" was the first to voice the concept of the "whole of Europe" - [totius Europae](#) - twice in a letter to Pope Gregory the Great, 600 A.D. Columbanus expressed the [radical notion](#) that "we are all joint members of one body, whether Gauls, or Britons, or Irish, or whatever people we come from."

A great flame follows a little spark as Columbanus' monastic foundations fueled the reintroduction of classical learning to the European mainland after the Dark Ages. His two-thousand-mile odyssey established a network of monasteries throughout France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy which became "[vibrant centers](#) of religious life, hubs of economic exchange, culture and learning." A 9th century [French scholar](#) wrote: "almost the whole of Ireland, setting the obstacle of the sea at naught, is migrating to our shores with a herd of philosophers."

The famous "Boat Song" chanted by Columbanus' twelve companions journeying up the Rhine River captures the mood of adventure and robust faith that animated these Irish monks on their way to Europe: "Heave, lads, and let the echoes ring. The tempest howl, the storms dismay, But manly strength can win the day."

Five years after World War II, European statesmen and scholars gathered in Luxeuil-les-Bains, France on July 23, 1950 to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of Irish monastic founder Columbanus and to discuss Europe's future. Robert Schuman, French foreign minister and architect of today's European Union, branded Columbanus "patron saint of all those who now seek to construct a united Europe". Schuman proposed a series of supranational European institutions, beginning with a European Coal and Steel Community, which ultimately became the European Union. He drew inspiration from Columbanus (543-615), Ireland's first man of letters "who willed and achieved a spiritual union between the principal European countries of his time."

When Enda Kenny, prime minister of Ireland received the European of the Year award in 2012, he reminded German Chancellor Angela Merkel how Irish missionaries sparked "[the light of learning](#)" to Europe during the Dark Ages, thus saving Western civilization. Kenny hinted – successfully - that it was time for the EU to reciprocate with a bailout loan in gratitude for the Irish flame of learning which had reignited and re-evangelized a disintegrated Europe.

Jonas of Bobbio, biographer of Columbanus records one of the earliest poems ever written about Ireland, "[Carmen de Hiberniae insula](#)":

The island of Ireland situated at the far end of Ocean,
and there it awaits the setting of the sun, while the world is turning,
and light descends into the sea in the western shadows.
There the huge mountains of waves, wild in colour....
They strike the white foamy seashore, the final curve of the land.

In the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1819 case which ruled that the New Hampshire State Legislature had no legal right to take control of Dartmouth College, the young alumnus-lawyer Daniel Webster in his [peroration](#) before Chief Justice John Marshall concluded: "It is, Sir, as I have said, a small college. And yet there are those who love it."

Ireland is a small country. And yet there are those who love it. The Irish remain European and they desire a UK Brexit from the final curve of their land.