



HOW THE
IRISH
SAVED
CIVILIZATION

THOMAS
CAHILL

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How the Irish Saved Civilization

*The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome
to the Rise of Medieval Europe*

BY THOMAS CAHILL



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How the Irish Saved Civilization

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For information address Editor@RosettaBooks.com

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About this Title

eForeword

Thomas Cahill is a life long scholar and a student of ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew and has studied with some of America's most distinguished literary and Biblical scholars. Thomas Cahill set out to create a seven set of popular non-fiction which would convey the roots of our collective history. His achievement has been to bring these titles alive for a modern reader while basing his work on prodigious research with original sources.

The sub-title tells it all: *The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe. How the Irish Saved Civilization* is the first volume in the Hinges of History series.

From the fall of Rome to the rise of Charlemagne—the "dark ages"—learning, scholarship, and culture disappeared from the European continent. The great heritage of western civilization—from the Greek and Roman classics to Jewish and Christian works—would have been utterly lost were it not for the holy men and women of unconquered Ireland. In this delightful and illuminating look into a crucial but little-known "hinge" of history, Thomas Cahill takes us to the "island of saints and scholars," the Ireland of St. Patrick and the Book of Kells. Here, far from the barbarian despoliation of the continent, monks and scribes laboriously, lovingly, even playfully preserved the west's

written treasures. With the return of stability in Europe, these Irish scholars were instrumental in spreading learning. Thus the Irish not only were conservators of civilization, but became shapers of the medieval mind, putting their unique stamp on western culture.

RosettaBooks is proud to publish the first three titles in Thomas Cahill's planned seven volume Hinges of History collection – *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995), *The Gifts of the Jews* (1997) and *Desire of the Everlasting Hills* (1999). All three of these titles continue as bestsellers as each title in the series builds on those which precede it.

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Introduction
How Real Is History?

The word *Irish* is seldom coupled with the word *civilization*. When we think of peoples as civilized or civilizing, the Egyptians and the Greeks, the Italians and the French, the Chinese and the Jews may all come to mind. The Irish are wild, feckless, and charming, or morose, repressed, and corrupt, but not especially civilized. If we strain to think of “Irish civilization,” no image appears, no Fertile Crescent or Indus Valley, no brooding bust of Beethoven. The simplest Greek auto mechanic will name his establishment “Parthenon,” thus linking himself to an imagined ancestral culture. A semiliterate restaurateur of Sicilian origin will give pride of place to his plaster copy of Michelangelo's *David*, and so assert his presumed Renaissance ties. But an Irish businessman is far more likely to name his concern “The Breffni Bar” or “Kelly's Movers,” announcing a merely local or personal connection, unburdened by the resonances of history or civilization.

And yet...Ireland, a little island at the edge of Europe that has known neither Renaissance nor Enlightenment—in some ways, a Third World country with, as John Betjeman claimed, a Stone Age culture—had one moment of unblemished glory. For, as the Roman Empire fell, as all through Europe matted, unwashed barbarians descended on the Roman cities, looting artifacts and burning books, the Irish, who were just learning to read and write, took up the great labor of copying all of western literature—everything they could lay their hands on. These scribes then served as conduits through which the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultures were transmitted to the tribes of Europe, newly settled amid the rubble and ruined vineyards of the civilization they had over-whelmed. Without this Service of the Scribes, everything that happened subsequently would have been unthinkable. Without the Mission of the Irish Monks, who single-handedly refounded European civilization throughout the continent in the bays and valleys of their exile, the world that came after them would have been an entirely different one—a world without books. And our own world would never have come to be.

Not for a thousand years—not since the Spartan Legion had perished at the Hot Gates of Thermopylae—had western

civilization been put to such a test or faced such odds, nor would it again face extinction till in this century it devised the means of extinguishing all life. As our story opens at the beginning of the fifth century, no one could foresee the coming collapse. But to reasonable men in the second half of the century, surveying the situation of their time, the end was no longer in doubt: their world was finished. One could do nothing but, like Ausonius, retire to one's villa, write poetry, and await the inevitable. It never occurred to them that the building blocks of their world would be saved by outlandish oddities from a land so marginal that the Romans had not bothered to conquer it, by men so strange they lived in little huts on rocky outcrops and shaved half their heads and tortured themselves with fasts and chills and nettle baths. As Kenneth Clark said, "Looking back from the great civilizations of twelfth-century France or seventeenth-century Rome, it is hard to believe that for quite a long time—almost a hundred years—western Christianity survived by clinging to places like Skellig Michael, a pinnacle of rock eighteen miles from the Irish coast, rising seven hundred feet out of the sea."

Clark, who began his *Civilisation* with a chapter (called "The Skin of Our Teeth") on the precarious transition from classical to medieval, is an exception in that he gives full weight to the Irish contribution. Many historians fail to mention it entirely, and few advert to the breathtaking drama of this cultural cliffhanger. This is probably because it is easier to describe stasis (classical, *then* medieval) than movement (classical *to* medieval). It is also true that historians are generally expert in one period or the other, so that analysis of the transition falls outside their—and everyone's?—competence. At all events, I know of no single book now in print that is devoted to the subject of the transition, nor even one in which this subject plays a substantial part.

In looking to remedy this omission, we may as well ask ourselves the big question: How real is history? Is it just an enormous soup, so full of disparate ingredients that it is uncharacterizable? Is it true, as Emil Cioran has remarked, that history proves nothing because it contains everything? Is not the