

# HOW THE IRISH SAVED CIVILIZATION

by  
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## **The Hinges of History**

We normally think of history as one catastrophe after another, war followed by war, outrage by outrage—almost as if history were nothing more than all the narratives of human pain, assembled in sequence. And surely this is, often enough, an adequate description. But history is also the narratives of grace, the recountings of those blessed and inexplicable moments when someone did something for someone else, saved a life, bestowed a gift, gave something beyond what was required by circumstance.

In this series, *THE HINGES OF HISTORY*, I mean to retell the story of the Western world as the story of the great gift-givers, those who entrusted to our keeping one or another of the singular treasures that make up the patrimony of the West. This is also the story of the evolution of Western sensibility, a narration of how we became the people that we are and why we think and feel the way we do. And it is, finally, a recounting of those essential moments when everything was at stake, when the mighty stream that became Western history was in ultimate danger and might have divided into a hundred useless tributaries or frozen in death or evaporated altogether. But the great gift-givers, arriving in the moment of crisis, provided for transition, for transformation, and even for transfiguration, leaving us a world more varied and complex, more awesome and delightful, more beautiful and strong than the one they had found.

*Thomas Cahill, 1995*

# 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 [4] rubble and ruined vineyards of the civilization they had overwhelmed. 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, 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") [5] 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 reverse side of this that history can be made to say whatever we wish it to?

I think, rather, that every age writes history anew, reviewing deeds and texts of other ages from its own vantage point. Our history, the history we read in school and refer to in later life, was largely written by Protestant Englishmen and Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. Just as certain contemporary historians have been discovering that such redactors are not always reliable when it comes to the contributions of, say, women or African Americans, we should not be surprised to find that such storytellers have overlooked a tremendous contribution in the distant past that was both Celtic and Catholic, a contribution without which European civilization would have been impossible. [6]

To an educated Englishman of the last century, for instance, the Irish were by their very nature incapable of civilization. "The Irish," proclaimed Benjamin Disraeli, Queen Victoria's beloved prime minister, "hate our order, our civilization, our enterprising industry, our pure religion [Disraeli's father had abandoned Judaism for the Church of England]. This wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race have no sympathy with the English character. Their ideal of human felicity is an alternation of clannish broils and coarse idolatry [i.e., Catholicism]. Their history describes an unbroken circle of bigotry [!] and blood." The venomous racism and knuckle-headed prejudice of this characterization may be evident to us, but in the days of "dear old Dizzy," as the queen called the man who had presented her with India, it simply passed for indisputable truth.

Occasionally, of course, even the smug colonists of the little queen's empire would experience a momentary qualm: Could the conquerors possibly be responsible for the state of the colonized? But they quickly suppressed any doubt and wrapped themselves in their impervious superiority, as in this response by the historian Charles Kingsley to the famine-induced destitution he witnessed in Victorian Ireland: "I am daunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. *I don't believe they are our fault* [emphasis mine]. I believe that there are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours."

Nor can we comfort ourselves that such thinking passed [7] long ago from the scene.

As the distinguished Princeton historian Anthony Grafton wrote recently in *The New York Review of Books* of history departments at the better American universities: "Catholic culture—like most Catholics—was usually disdained, as the province of lesser breeds fit only for the legendary parochial schools where nuns told their charges never to order ravioli on a date, lest their boy friends be reminded of pillows. Stereotypes and prejudices of this kind, as nasty as anything fastened upon Jews, persisted in American universities until an uncomfortably recent date."

That date may be only the day before yesterday. Yet this is not to accuse any historian of deliberate falsification. No, the problem is more subtle than deception—and artfully described by John Henry Newman in his fable of the Man and the Lion:

The Man once invited the Lion to be his guest, and received him with princely hospitality. The Lion had the run of a magnificent palace, in which there were a vast many things to admire. There were large saloons and long corridors, richly furnished and decorated, and filled with a profusion of fine specimens of sculpture and painting, the works of the first masters in either art. The subjects represented were various; but the most prominent of them had an especial interest for the noble animal who stalked by them. It was that of the Lion himself; and as the owner of the mansion led him from one apartment into another, he did not fail to direct his attention to the indirect homage which these various groups and tableaux paid to the importance of the lion tribe.

There was, however, one remarkable feature in all of them, to which the host, silent as he was from politeness, [8] seemed not at all insensible; that diverse as were these representations, in one point they all agreed, that the man was always victorious, and the lion was always overcome.

It is not that the Lion has been excluded from the history of art, but rather that he has been presented badly—and he never wins. When the Lion had finished his tour of the mansion, continues Newman, "his entertainer asked him what he thought of the splendours it contained; and he in reply did full justice to the riches of its owner and the skill of its decorators, but he added, 'Lions would have fared better, had lions been the artists.' "

In the course of this history, we shall meet many entertainers, persons of substance who have their story to tell, some of whom may believe that their story is all there is to tell. We shall be gracious and give them a hearing without disparagement. We shall even attempt to see things from their point of view. But every once in a while we shall find ourselves entertaining lions. At which moments, it will be every reader for himself. We begin, however, not in the land of lions, but in the orderly, predictable world of Rome. For in order to appreciate the significance of the Irish contribution, we need first to take an inventory of the civilized empire of late antiquity.

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## Concluding Paragraphs, Chapter VII: *The End of the World*.

### *Is There Any Hope?*

As we, the people of the First World, the Romans of the twentieth century, look out across our Earth, we see some signs for hope, many more for despair. Technology proceeds apace, delivering the marvels that knit our world together—the conquering of diseases that plagued every age but ours and the consequent lowering of mortality rates, revolutions in crop yields that continue to feed expanding populations, the contemplated "information highway" that will soon enable all of us to retrieve information and communicate with one another in ways so instant and complete that they would dazzle those who built the Roman roads, the first great information system.

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But that road system became impassable rubble, as the empire was over-whelmed by population explosions beyond its borders. So will ours. Rome's demise instructs us in what inevitably happens when impoverished and rapidly expanding populations, whose ways and values are only dimly understood, press up against a rich and ordered society. More than a billion people in our world today survive on less than \$370 a year, while Americans, who constitute five percent of the world's population, purchase fifty percent of its cocaine. If the world's population, which has doubled in our lifetime, doubles again by the middle of the next century, how could anyone hope to escape the catastrophic consequences—the wrath to come? But we turn our backs on such unpleasantness and contemplate the happier prospects of our technological dreams.

What will be lost, and what saved, of our civilization probably lies beyond our powers to decide. No human group has ever figured out how to design its future. That future may be germinating today not in a boardroom in London or an office in Washington or a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost or other—a kindly British orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta run by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, an easygoing French medical team at the starving edge of the Sahel, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convict-mothers at a New York prison—in some unheralded corner where a great-hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way.

Perhaps history is always divided into Romans and Catholics—or, better, catholics. The Romans are the rich and powerful who run things their way and must always accrue more [*Is there any hope?*218] because they instinctively believe that there will never be enough to go around; the catholics, as their name implies, are universalists who instinctively believe that all humanity makes one family, that every human being is an equal child of God, and that God will provide. The twenty-first century, prophesied Malraux, will be spiritual or it will not be. If our civilization is to be saved—forget about our civilization, which, as Patrick would say, may pass "in a moment like a cloud or smoke that is scattered by the wind"—*if we* are to be saved, it will not be by Romans but by saints.

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