

This is How the Irish Saved Civilization

The title chosen Thomas Cahill's bestselling book—*How the Irish Saved Civilization*—was definitely a marketing triumph. Even many of those who have never read the book are now aware that the Irish were somehow involved in “saving civilization.”

On this, the eve of St. Patrick's Day, I thought it a fitting time to repeat Cahill's basis thesis for those who ask, “How *did* the Irish save civilization?”

You can find the gist of it in his Introduction:

“The word *Irish* is seldom coupled with the word *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 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.”

As is the fate of all historians today who write for popular audiences (God forbid!), Cahill's thesis has been criticized for overstatement. But his basic point that the Irish monks played a major role in preserving Western tradition is accurate, and I think it has important applications for us today.

I've argued [elsewhere](#) that we may be on the cusp of a new [Dark Age](#), not due to a lack of books this time, but to [a lack of knowledge](#) of the content of those books. As in the time of the Irish monks in the Middle Ages, what we desperately need are small communities of learners who dedicate themselves to the diligent study and passing on of those classical authors, ideas, and languages that are no longer taught in schools today.

In other words, what we once again need are people who dedicate themselves to saving civilization.

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