The Book of Kells

Back in the early centuries (says an American exchange) Ireland was so famous for the learning and piety of its ecclesiastics that it was called the Island of Saints. Among the arts which were sedulously cultivated by these Irish ecclesiastics, that of illuminating vellum reached a very high stage of perfection and resulted in little miracles of dexterity which are still the admiration and wonder of book lovers the world over. Perhaps the choicest specimen of this kind of craft is the 'Book of Kells,' now in the custody of Trinity College, Dublin, a priceless relic of illuminated vellum. This wonderful book, with other specimens of Celtic art, is described in a magnificent volume which has just been presented to the Metropolitan Museum library in New York by Mr. John D. Crimmins. This volume contains superb reproductions in color of the most noted early Irish manuscripts, a work that was executed in a limited edition by command of the late Queen Victoria.

The most perfect specimen of the handiwork of the Irish monks extant, however, is contained in the 'Book of Kells.' It is unquestionably the most superb memorial which has come down to us from those times when Ireland, under the name of Scotia, held up the torch of learning to all Europe. If evidence were needed of the important part played by Ireland in fostering and keeping alive the elements of civilisation which have since vitalized the modern world, they could be found in these quaint relics which are a store-house of erudition. St. Columba and other Irish missionaries, who founded a monastery in Meath, that of Cennasnns, or Kells, probably practised the art of illuminating, and the "Book of Kells" has often been ascribed to the hand of the saint himself. Modern research has tended, however, to throw discredit upon this theory and the origin of the famous manuscript is shrouded in obscurity.

The book itself is composed of 339 leaves, measuring 13½ by 9½ inches. The first part contains the explanations of Hebrew names, which is followed by the Eusebian tables. Then come summaries and the argument of the gospels, following mainly the version of the Vulgate, though there are several peculiar readings. There is an average of seventeen or nineteen lines to the page on the portion containing the gospels. The inks used throughout are black, red, purple, and yellow. It is notable that gold is absent in the 'Book of Kells.' It was not introduced into the Celtic art of illuminating until a decidedly later date.

The text is more copiously and more ornately illustrated than any other known copy of the gospels. One of the marvels of the work is the nice precision which characterises it throughout. Although the designs are intricate to the point of being microscopic, not even with the aid of a lens is it possible to discover any flaws or interlacings. Wherever space was afforded there are worked in conventional, grotesque and natural foliage ornaments. Figures of men, of animals, birds, horses and dogs are woven and interwoven in an elaborate and ever-changing pattern, which has constituted the marvel and the despair of modern masters of the delicate and beautiful craft of bookmaking.