

# Fisher seeks to obtain Kells facsimile

"Look more keenly at it, and you will penetrate the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all this was the work of an angel and not of a man."

By Robert Emmet Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Study of the Book of Kells might well incline the student to the melodic prose (above) with which medieval scholar Giraldus Cambrensis praised the eighth-century Celtic Scriptural masterpiece. For the book's pages embrace the very apex of illumination, a Medieval art in which a manuscript's pages and initial letters were decorated with intricate designs, figures and colors.

A monastic rendition of the New Testament, the Book of Kells is replete with hundreds upon hundreds of painted animals, humans and half-man-half-beast creatures, often shown in humorous situations. This parade of peculiar-looking figures makes its way through neighborhoods of spirals, circles and various other shapes common to Celtic, Byzantine, Coptic and Arabic art.

The work's beauty already has moved 72 Irish-Americans in the Rochester area to donate \$100-500 each to a fund established for the purchase of \$14,800 Swiss-made facsimile of the book.

Fine Art Facsimile Publishers of Switzerland made the facsimiles through a painstaking photographic and coloring process, in which each of the book's folios was individually recreated on similar parchment with the exact same coloring as the original. Experts claim the resulting books are as close to the original Book of Kells as a collector can come without buying the masterpiece itself.

When purchased, the 680-page facsimile would be displayed in St. John Fisher College's Lavery Library, according to fundraising coordinators Eileen Magin, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist in Spencerport, and Father John Cavanaugh, a professor of English at the college and chairman of the Irish American Cultural Institute, a not-for-profit public foundation that promotes Irish culture.

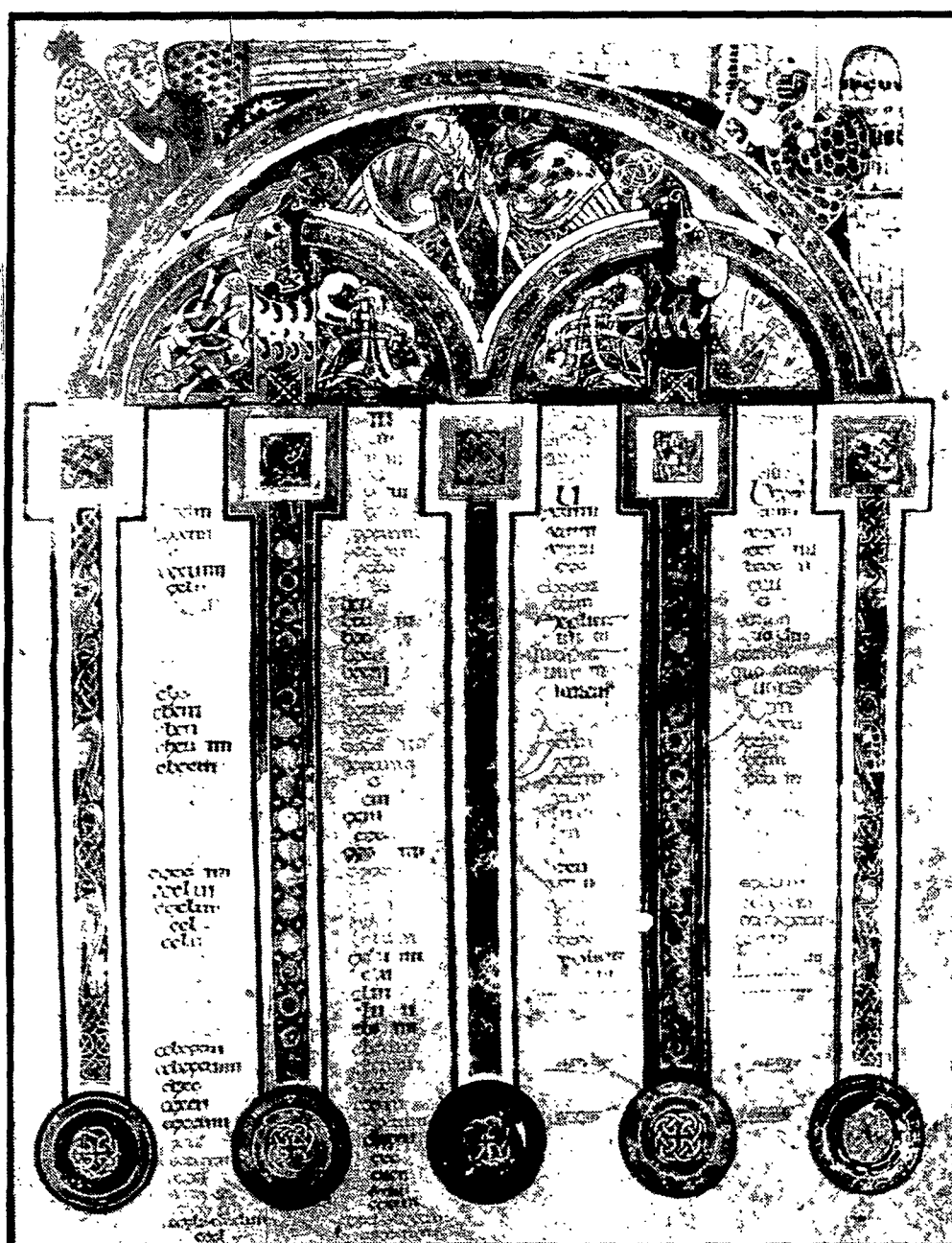
Magin traced her interest in the Book of Kells to her love of Irish history, a love rooted in memories of her immigrant father. John Cornelius Crowley left Ireland in the early 1920s, during the country's violent attempt to cast off the yoke of English rule. Although he rarely spoke of his reasons for leaving Ireland, Magin



The eagle is the symbol of St. John in the illuminated manuscript of the four Gospels.



The beginning of the Argumentum of Mark: Marcus Evangelista as it appears in a copy of the Book of Kells.



A canon table or Breves causae are summaries of the Gospels, which appear in the Preliminaries of the Book of Kells.

speculated that her father was a wanted man when he emigrated, and that he may have fought against the English.

"I don't know all of the details, but we do believe he left in a hurry," she said.

When Magin read about publication of the Kells' facsimile, her love of Irish history compelled her to think of a way of bringing a copy to Rochester. "I never had any direct interest," she remarked. "It's just that I knew that the Book of Kells was an important historic and artistic icon of Irish history."

Magin did not belong to any official Irish cultural or social associations, so she began her search for donors more than a year ago simply by calling people listed with Irish surnames in the phone book and giving them a verbal sales pitch.

She also approached Father Cavanaugh to see if the Irish American Cultural Institute would be willing to promote the facsimile acquisition. In particular, she thought Fisher would be an appropriate site

for the book's display, since it offered two Irish courses, including one on modern Irish literature taught by the Basilian priest.

Father Cavanaugh has since used the institute to sponsor the fundraising drive, which to date has raised about half the funds needed to purchase and display the book. Magin said the total cost of acquisition will be \$16-17,000, which includes the purchase price of the facsimile, as well as the cost of a plaque inscribed with the memorial names requested by donors.

In addition to the facsimile, Fine Art will also provide a display case, an ornamented presentation box and a commentary volume written by Dr. J.J.G. Alexander, a renowned art historian who teaches at the University of Manchester, England, and at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York City. Other Irish and British scholars have contributed to the book.

Magin has already made a down payment of \$2,500 to Fine Art Facsimile

Publishers. She said the company has been "lenient" in waiting for the rest of the money. She added, however, that donations have begun to drop off and speculated that "one of the problems might be people think it's too late to donate." Both fundraisers emphasized that such a belief is far from the truth.

Father Cavanaugh said that once the facsimile has been obtained, it would be available for viewing by the general public at the Lavery Library. Such a viewing situation would be unlike that awaiting visitors to Dublin's Trinity College, where the real Book of Kells is stored. At Trinity, he noted, only one folio of the book is displayed in a viewing case each day.

Even in its day, the Book of Kells was a treasure sparingly displayed to the public, historians note. Given its size — it weighs almost 20 pounds — and elaborate ornamentation, the book was probably brought out of storage only on such ceremonial occasions as a bishop's visit to the abbey.

"This is a point which cannot be overemphasized," Francoise Henry wrote in his 1974 scholarly study, *The Book of Kells*. "The fantastic lavishness of decoration and the unusually large size of the book show clearly it is an altar book ... to be used for liturgical reading and probably to be displayed open as a sumptuous ornament during ceremonies when pomp was especially required."

The creators of the Book of Kells probably were Irish and Scottish monks who began their work on the island monastery of Iona and finished at the abbey at Kells, some forty miles northwest of Dublin, after Norsemen raided the Iona monastery and forced the monks to flee.

Scholars point to the unusual number of uncorrected errors in the book as further evidence of its value as ceremonial adjunct rather than as a researcher's tool. Had its makers intended it for use in study, they would have been more concerned with correcting the mistakes in the text than with the decoration of its folios, scholars pointed out.

Henry noted that "(t)he book has the earliest representation in a Western manuscript of the Virgin and the Child: it has perhaps the earliest representations of the Temptation of Christ, of the Tree of Jesse, and of the lion as a symbol of the Resurrection."

EDITORS' NOTE — Individuals or groups wishing to contribute \$100 or more toward the purchase of the Book of Kells facsimile may call Eileen Magin, 716/352-4171, or Father John Cavanaugh, 385-1353, or write to the Irish American Cultural Institute, 3497 East Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14618.