

The Book of Fenagh 500

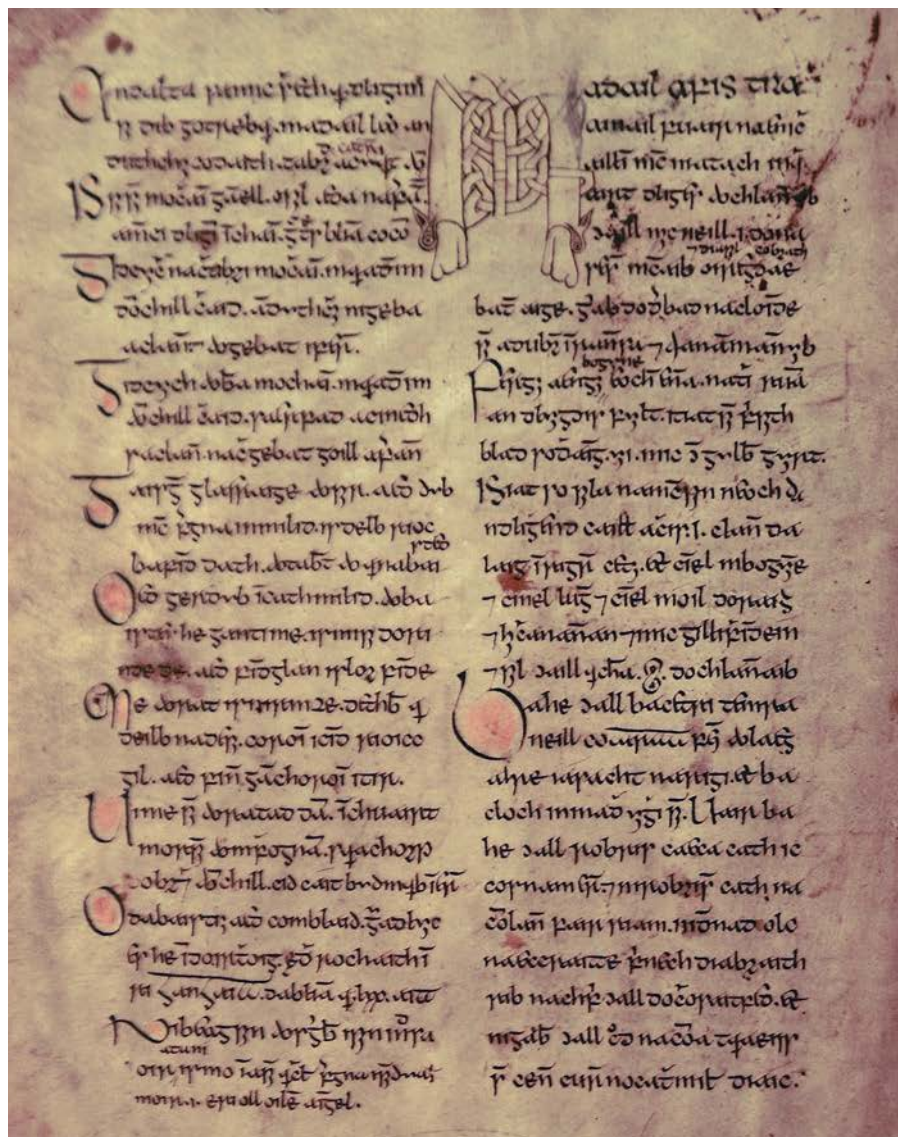
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Padraig Leyden

FIVE HUNDRED year old books are rare enough in Ireland and ones relating to Leitrim are rarer still. One such surviving manuscript is *The Book of Fenagh*, so called because of its association with St Caillin's monastic settlement close to the village.

Five hundred years ago, the abbey at Fenagh was probably coming under pressure from other religious settlements in North Leitrim, Cavan and Fermanagh. In modern terms, a promotional campaign was required to boost the waning status of Fenagh Abbey. No newspapers, radio, TV, Facebook or Twitter existed. Enter Tadhg O'Rodaighe, a much respected local figure who was also the Comharb or lay manager of Fenagh Abbey. As such he would have been a figure of significant influence and importance in the area. His position as Comharb of the Abbey meant also that he would have had a considerable vested interest in the financial affairs of the Abbey and would have been keen to see Fenagh Abbey maintain its prominent position in the monastic league table!

In 1516, the prestigious Connacht poet and scribe, Muirghas Mac Phaidín Uí Mhaoil Chonaire was commissioned by O'Rodaighe to rework, following a well tried and tested formula, an earlier book on the life of St Caillin. This older manuscript, then in the possession of Tadhg O'Rodaighe, was mostly, if not all, in verse and was probably written about two hundred and fifty years earlier. Purporting to be a life history of St Caillin, it was mainly a list of lands, privileges dues and taxes and why they should be paid to Fenagh Abbey. The new editor added prose text to the long poem and expanded it considerably with a long introductory



section and a commentary. The book was written in Irish and had the dual purpose of preserving what was probably, by this time, a fairly well-worn older manuscript as well as impressing the local and extended tribes as to the wisdom of continued financial support for Fenagh Abbey, lest St Caillin and his successors withdraw their divine intercession. It is a manuscript measuring approximately twelve inches by nine inches of at least forty one vellum folios. The

writing is in double columns with some capital letters filled in red. It is bound in leather with 'Book of Fenagh' in gilt, lettered on the spine.

This new Book of Fenagh continued in the possession of the O'Rodaighe family in the vicinity of Fenagh until the early nineteenth century when it passed to the last direct descendant of the family, Brian (Bernard) O'Rodhaighe, who was the Parish Priest of Kilonan until his death in

about 1840. This, slightly incomplete, copy was purchased in 1888 by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in Dublin where it is now preserved.

A copy of *The Book of Fenagh* was published in Irish and with an English translation in Dublin 1875. It was edited by W H Hennessy and D H Kelly and was dedicated to Lady Louisa Tennyson from Kilronan, who contributed to the cost of translating and publishing the book. This 1875 *Book of Fenagh* contains photographs of Fenagh Dolmen and Fenagh Abbey which were taken by her husband, Edward King Tennyson, who was an MP for Leitrim and a gifted photographer. This book was further reproduced by The Stationery Office, Dublin, in 1939 at the behest of the Irish Manuscripts Commission.

The Book of Fenagh is a very important historical manuscript, not just for Fenagh and for Country Leitrim but for the whole country. According to Ms Bernadette Cunningham of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) The Book of



Fenagh is 'one of the greatest surviving treasures of Leitrim's medieval past'. As the book will be 500 years old in 2016, its quincentenary will be celebrated by the RIA. A preliminary lecture took place in Dublin in October 2013 and it is proposed that the RIA will, during 2016, host an exhibition and a series of lectures which will examine the context and significance of the Book of Fenagh. These will be held in

both Dublin and Fenagh and will be published in book format.

To further develop the Fenagh connection, a local committee has been set up with the aim of promoting the quincentenary which will, hopefully, become a focus for local interest. Keep up to date on Facebook (Book of Fenagh 500) and see how ancient and modern technology can coexist, complement and enhance each other.

SHORT STORY

Girl Dressed in Red

Fiachra Gallagher Lawson,
Aged 16, 4th year, Sligo Grammar School

SHE STOOD there, just waiting. The rain was bouncing off the cobblestones underfoot. The mist hung like the sadness of a recent widow. Her face was lit from the blood moon piercing through the parting clouds. She wore all red as it was an important night, a night that would differ from all the others. The sirens still ringing loud and clear. Yet she was not afraid.

She was stronger than the others. This night differed. She was to become engaged. Engaged to the man of her dreams. Mr. Right. The crowds were running as fast as they could, taking what they could. Her calmness made life seem as if had stopped. She stood there looking, studying each face as if she was solving a puzzle. The night started off badly but she knew it was to get better. Her Mr. Right was to pick her up from the hotel at

eight pm. However, a late meeting delayed him and he was now to meet her at the restaurant with the others. She wondered why they were running. She knew it was too late anyway; their time was up, their destiny was decided and their fortune told.

Even though the cab was expensive and the service was crap, she was glad Mr Right was late. It gave her time to think. She thought about the whole marriage thing. When she finally came to a conclusion she had arrived at the restaurant. She wondered if now she was making a bad decision. She stood there for a while, not moving, letting her red clothes absorb the rain and mist. The horror around her didn't bother her. The conversation bothered her. The same way as when she walked into the restaurant to find her parents already eating, even though it was the only time in her life something was about her. She got into an argument with her father about his patience.

She heard the first lot of screams coming from about one hundred meters in front of

her. She heard the first building fall. She heard the first wave crash. After nearly telling her father to leave, she was glad to see Mr.

Right standing on the left of her. But she was not prepared for the

conversation to come. Her Mr. Right had another meeting and he was to leave immediately. What about her night, all dressed in red? She was ready to answer the question, to become the future Mrs. Right.

She saw the building fall. She saw the wave crash. The waves were huge, higher than the buildings. People were being consumed by the wall of water. Yet they still ran. Closer it came. Close, like she came to leaving him. Her parents were trying to intervene but it was too late. She was gone. Mr. Right had to choose her or the job. As danger approached she heard her name. Coming from the one person she wanted to see. Mr. Right chose her not the job. Even though it was too late for everyone else, it was not too late for them. She turned. He grabbed her. Then splash...