



## The Importance of *The Book of Fenagh*

*The Book of Fenagh* was written in 1516 and its importance has many dimensions.

Today we are surrounded by books - our school books as students, books in the home, books in our local newsagents and bookshops and thousands of books in our local library. But in 1516 books were extremely rare. Each book had to be handwritten and this took a considerable length of time. Sometimes a few copies might be made of a book by rewriting completely by hand but these were usually very few in number. It was also extremely costly as they were written on vellum-calf skin. Many calves had to be killed to provide the vellum for one book. For example, in *The Book of Fenagh*, there are imperfections in pages including holes in some pages. These imperfections were caused by having to use slightly flawed leather or a piece at the edge of the skin that was a bit short in size. So we may conclude resources were scarce.

Of course, the writing of a book required literary skills and knowledge, at a time when only a tiny proportion of the population could read or write. Thus a book was a symbol of wealth and knowledge and above all was a status symbol of power and position. So while today we tend to think of a book simply in terms of its content, a book in 1516 also tells us an enormous amount about its owner, be it a monastery or individual and the area in which it was produced. Even the level of ornamentation in the writing or the quality of vellum can tell us a lot about the circumstances in which the book was written.

Ireland, among European countries, has a very rich inheritance of these medieval (5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century) handwritten manuscripts and *The Book of Fenagh* is one of these.

We have no idea how many books were in the monastery of Fenagh or held by local important people but even twenty or thirty books in a monastery would have been a real richness of books. An individual owning a book would have been a rarity.

Books written in medieval times are not always factually correct and this applies to the *Book of Fenagh*. They were sometimes written to ascertain entitlements of rents or for local political maneuvering etc. For example, the proof of rent entitlements was usually shown by way of a long history of entitlement which was not always true. Of course when the claimed entitlements were written in a book, this gave them real substance against anyone who would dispute them. However, few were in a position to dispute the 'facts' as no one had an alternative book with different 'facts'. This was part of the reason why *The Book of Fenagh* was written. Tadhg O'Roddy, who commissioned the writing, was the local Comharb or 'Lay Superior' of the monastery. He wanted to prove, among other things, that he was entitled to rents etc. and that Fenagh was a place of great historical importance, connections and a place to be taken seriously.

As part of his proof, a tale of entitlement was woven interspersed with ancient history including most importantly connections with many Saints, some real and some we now know to have been purely mythological. Part of this history was drawn from an earlier Book of Fenagh. This is sometimes referred to as The Old Book of Fenagh, which no longer exists. Thus another reason that *The Book of Fenagh* is important is that it draws on an earlier manuscript and its contents.

Other reasons for its importance lie in what it tells us about local politics at the time. At that time local chieftains ruled Ireland and there was little or no central administration of any kind. The power of chieftains was continually changing through local wars and skirmishes, changing alliances and the military skill of a chieftain at any point in time. However, a key part of the local power structures related to the number of monasteries in a chieftain's territory and the preferences or favours the chieftain gave to a particular monastery.

In 1516, the O'Rourkes were the local chieftains but in 1508 the O'Rourkes invited the Franciscans to establish a monastery at Creevelea, beside Dromahair. It was a very substantial edifice, much larger than Fenagh and it required considerable expense to construct. The Fenagh monastery became alarmed at this development, as they feared Fenagh was falling out of favour. Thus part of the reason for writing *The Book of Fenagh* was to establish an impeccable proof of historic lineage, entitlement and importance. A book like *The Book of Fenagh*, in the possession of an individual, was still a powerful symbol of position. To use a modern analogy, it was a bit like waving the Sam Maguire to show you were the best in the field.

So how do we know that not everything in *The Book of Fenagh* is true? We know this by checking it or cross-referencing it against other manuscripts from the period with their information. Just as other books are useful for testing *The Book of Fenagh*, so too, the *The Book of Fenagh* can be used to check out what is written in other books.

With all this in mind, *The Book of Fenagh* is not just Leitrim's most important manuscript, but forms part of the rich heritage of Irish manuscripts of the period. With careful study and comparisons, a manuscript like *The Book of Fenagh* can help historians draw more accurate conclusions about monastic activity, the role of an individual monastery and the power plays and politics of the period in a local area which were part of the power plays in the fabric of Ireland generally at the time.