

The Book of Fenagh 500

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. Caillín'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, Muirgheas 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. Caillín. 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. Caillín, 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. Caillín 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.

The Book of Fenagh 500

Patrick Lynch

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 Kilronan 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 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.

