Recording the Past:

The Annals of Inisfallen

Making of Irish History

Large print text – please return after use

Exhibition Introduction

The *Annals of Inisfallen* is one of the most important surviving records of medieval Ireland containing accounts of kings, monasteries, conflicts and events that shaped the medieval past across Munster. The manuscript is associated with Emly, Lismore and and the island of Innisfallen in Killarney.

This exhibition brings together the manuscript, the island where it was created, and the wider world in which it was written and read. Through original artefacts, archaeology, sound, film, digital technology and interactive displays, visitors can explore the lives, landscapes and ideas that formed the cultural environment of the *Annals of Inisfallen*.

By placing the *Annals of Inisfallen* alongside archaeological discoveries and global events of the same period, the exhibition reveals the manuscript as a window into a

connected world whose legacy continues to inspire research, learning and creativity today.

Small Sisk – Focus on the Annals of Inisfallen

Panels

Panel 1

Annals are written records of notable annual events kept by monastic scholars. In their basic form they recorded in Latin the deaths of prominent churchmen, native and foreign (in Inisfallen, for example, Bede (735) or [Saint] Francis (1226)). As time moved on, secular events began to feature with greater frequency, until eventually they dominated the records. In the Annals of Inisfallen the Irish language comes to prominence more and more from the 7th century onwards.

Panel 2

Most of our surviving Annals are copies and anthologies made from original books, most of which are now lost. Although the early part of the Annals

of Inisfallen was copied by a single scribe from an ancient and now lost chronicle, the continuation from 1093 to 1450 is contemporary with the events recorded. Writing on leaves of calfskin, almost thirty individual scribes contributed to this contemporary record. These are our earliest surviving set of contemporary annals.

Panel 3

57 calfskin leaves from this manuscript survive today. Drawing for the early period on material originally created in Clonmacnoise, and later in Emly, the Annals of Inisfallen are thought to have been begun in Lismore, in the Déise, and taken to west Munster early in the 12th century, to the monastery of Inisfallen in Lough Leane, Killarney.

Panel 4

The Annals of Inisfallen are a unique eye-witness account of a tumultuous time in Irish history. They record the

rivalries of the Munster kingships of Desmond and Thomond. They document the great era of the reform of the Irish Church, as in its customs and practices it was brought increasingly under the control of Rome. And they bear witness to the upheaval caused by the arrival of the Normans in Ireland from 1169 onwards. In so doing, the book itself becomes a physical memorial to the early assimilation of Norman culture when the script changes from Gaelic to Anglo-Norman in the second half of the 13th century.

This book is one of the few surviving manuscripts containing a substantial amount of non-literary Irish to survive from the period prior to the 14th century. The handful of other manuscripts written in Irish from that time are anthologies of religious and secular literature. The manuscript of the Annals of Inisfallen, on display here, is our earliest history book – a priceless treasure of medieval Gaelic Ireland.

Captions for Manuscript Open Folio

Two scribes

These two pages contain entries from 1172 (part) to 1178 (part). They are written by two scribes: the first ends on the 5th line of the second column on the left-hand page; the second scribe begins on the next line.

Other occasional scribes contributed additional material in the margins. A note in the lower margin on the left-hand page records (inter alia) the death of Blessed Thomas [of Canterbury], wrongly referencing 1174. In the lower margin of the right-hand page, a scribe writing Irish in an Anglo-Norman script has added material that includes a verse of poetry concerning Cormac Mac Carthaigh who was assassinated in 1176.

Layout

These pages are laid out in two columns. This style was popular in vellum manuscripts as it involved short lines that

allowed the scribes greater control over the presentation of the text.

In the first column of the left-hand page the obituaries of three bishops are marked with crosses in the margin. On the second column the next scribe announces the beginning of his work with heavy inking of the first two lines (lines 6–7).

Dates

In order to save space on the valuable vellum, abbreviated forms of common words were often used. Entries for each year begin with ‘K’ or ‘Kl’, the abbreviation for the first day of January, ‘Kalendae’ or ‘Kalendae Ianuarii’, ‘Kalendae Eanair’ in the entries in the section open here. In the Annals of Inisfallen this is regularly followed by the day of the week (the *feria*) on which the year began, and then by the age of the moon (the *epact*) on that day. From this data the Anno Domini could be computed: the AD years visible in the margins here are later

additions and not always accurate. The first complete entry on the first column of the left-hand page here begins: ‘Kalendae Eanair for Luan agus xiii fuirri’ (‘The first day of January on a Monday and [the moon has] 13 [days] on it’). The small roman numeral that precedes some of the Kalendae indicates the number of years since the last leap year (‘bissextile’).

Subject-matter

Apart from the obituaries of the bishops, these two pages are occupied with records of widespread death and destruction across Munster. Internecine warfare was nothing new, and to this was added the high mortality caused by a great pestilence in 1173, and the ongoing hostility of the Normans. Their defeat and the loss of upwards of 700 at the hands of Domhnall Ua Briain at the Battle of Thurles in 1174 is recorded on the left-hand page at the end of the first column and the top of the second. Much of the

right-hand page is occupied with the war between Thomond and Desmond in 1177, and with raids on Cork and Waterford.

Turning the Pages – Accessible on a screen

f. 1r

As with many other medieval Irish manuscripts, the Annals of Inisfallen did not receive a permanent binding until the modern period, in this case the 17th century. The vellum leaves therefore bear all the marks of exposure to the elements. Two opening leaves have been lost, and what remains at the beginning and end is much damaged, further leaves have been lost from the interior of the book.

The text begins in a section dealing with Old-Testament history. The supposed Biblical ancestry of the Irish was important for the medieval scholars, and is incorporated here in the annalistic scheme.

The text is written by a single scribe, working probably at the Monastery of Lismore, who writes the first 57 pages of the manuscript, down to the middle of the year 1092.

Along the bottom margin of this page the final three verses of a poem by one Fiangal have been written; presumably the rest of the poem was in the margins of some of the missing pages.

f. 11v

The Annals of Inisfallen is a functional book, where decoration is understated. The many who contributed to it were all accomplished scribes. The section of the manuscript written at Lismore is particularly calligraphic in its presentation. On the page shown here, the bowl of the *Kl* abbreviation has been coloured with varieties of red pigment, now much degraded.

K and *Kl* stand for 'Kalendae Ianuairii' – the Kalends (or the first day) of January. Borrowed into

Irish, today in survives in the modern language as ‘Lá Caille’– New Year’s Day; in English (through Latin *calendarium*) it appears in *calendar*.

f. 14v

Beginning at the close of the 8th century, the raids of the Vikings (called *geinte* ‘heathens’) are frequently recorded in the annals. On line 15 of the third column here begins a record (also found in other annals) of the plundering of the Scellig in AD 824, and the abduction of Étgal, a member of the community, who subsequently died of starvation. The fragment of a poem in the margin of f. 1r refers to the torment of Étgal.

f. 23r

This page affords us a good view of aspects of the layout of the manuscript text. The columns have been ruled vertically and horizontally in dry-point – using a stylus. The minute prickings in the upper and lower margins

that ensured the straightness of the vertical or ‘bounding’ lines are particularly evident. In line 25 of the third column may be seen a return-sign resembling a reversed-S, which allows the accommodation of text running over from the line beneath. This was a common space-saving device that is present in our earliest books, and in both prose and poetry, and continued as a practice until vellum ceased to be used in the early 17th century.

Along the bottom margin is a line of text that the scribe omitted by mistake. The mark that precedes this line – three dots and a round bracket – is a correction mark (*signe de renvoi*) which is matched by an identical mark, with a box around it, at line fifteen of the second column, indicating where the omitted text is to be inserted.

f. 32v

In addition to noting obituaries, conflicts, and plagues, annalists kept

records of wonderous events. Two such are recorded for 1105 in the first column (lines 12–23) here: the gift of a camel by the king of Scotland to Muircheartach Ó Briain, high-king of Ireland; and the catching of a fish ‘of unheard-of size’, 15 feet long, in Limerick harbour.

f. 36v

The annals also record Ireland’s earliest meteorological data. Extremes of cold and heat, rain, wind and snow, are all noted. For instance, the entry for 1221 records ‘in gaethach mór’ the big wind of that year that destroyed houses, churches and woods, and sank many ships.

At the end of the middle column on this page is a record of the deadly heat of the summer of 1129: ‘A hot summer this year, and the waters of Ireland dried up, and there was great mortality of beasts and cattle.’

f. 39v

As the contemporary annals proceed, some entries become longer and more narrative in style, as in this record of the plundering of Inisfallen Island in 1180:

There was committed in this year a deed which greatly vexed the clergy of all Ireland, namely, the plundering of Inis Faithlinn by Mael Dúin, son of Domnall Ua Donnchada, and the carrying off by him of all the worldly wealth therein, which was under the protection of its saints, clerics, and consecrated churches. He collected, indeed, the gold, silver, trappings(?), mantles, and cloaks of West Munster, without any respect for God or man, but the mercy of God did not allow him to kill people or to strip this paradise of church furnishings or books.

f. 40v

A moment of levity in the monastic scriptorium. As one scribe ends his work, he leaves a message for the scribe who will complete the annal for the year 1193. It is a cryptic – presumably ironic – Latin comment, concealed in ogham script, implying that poverty is of doubtful merit: ‘Numus honoratur sine numo nullus amatur’ (‘Money is honoured, without money no-one is loved’).

The next scribe continues with the record of the death of the Bishop of West Munster, Domhnall Úa Connairchi. He marks this obit with a cross placed beside the entry. In the next column he similarly marks the records of the deaths of the King of Munster, Domhnall Ó Briain (1194), and the Bishop of Killaloe, Ó Conuinc (1195). Such marks are common in the Annals of Inisfallen.

f. 44v

This page contains a rare example of direct speech in the annals, reporting the rejection by Ó Néill in 1210 of King John's emissaries: *And he said: 'Depart, foreigners,' said he. 'I will give you no hostages at all at this time,' said he. The foreigners departed and he gave no hostages to the king,*

Most vellum manuscripts bear marks of the preparation of the calfskin prior to writing. Among the commonest are holes of varying sizes caused by damage to the skin either at the time of flaying or when the skin was being scraped during dehairing and fleshing. Small tears or perforations on the skin opened up when stretched on the frame. Even highly decorative books such as those of Durrow and Kells bear holes that were caused in this way. When these holes occurred in the writing space the scribe simply wrote around them, as in the first column on this page where there are four holes.

In the second column, note the insertion of details from the lower margin using two corresponding correction marks, including an early example of a pointing hand (manicule) in an Irish manuscript. (Early use of the hyphen for word division can be seen at the ends of lines in the first column. This feature of the Annals of Inisfallen begins under the year 1174.)

f. 47r

In 1933 Dr R.I. Best distinguished the work of 39 scribes in the manuscript, not including later additions extending to the 16th century. Irish language written in Anglo-Norman script and orthography is a feature of ff. 47–51r, which deals with the years 1252 to 1300, two or three generations after the beginning of Norman settlement, illustrating how quick had been the pace of cultural assimilation.

A news item for 1259 (second column, lines 13–16) is the spread of Galar na Placóidi, a cough that affected both humans and horses.

Large Sisk – Wider context and visitor engagement

Explore the Annals' Wider World

The Annals of Inisfallen tells a remarkable story of medieval Ireland and this space explores the wider world of the manuscript.

Through archaeological objects, sound and digital technology, visitors can encounter traces of everyday and spiritual life at Innisfallen island. A film combines immersive imagery and sound to evoke the island environment, while recordings in Irish and English bring the words of the manuscript to life. Archaeological discoveries and 3D models reveal objects that were used by people living and working at the monastery during the same period that the annals were being written.

The audio piece is comprised of environmental recordings of birdsong and water gathered from Innisfallen, combined with recordings of Pádraig Ó Macháin reading from the Annals,

accompanied by the subtle sound of writing, suggesting the presence of a Monk composing the Annals.

The timeline places the manuscript within a broader international context, highlighting significant events that shaped the medieval world but were not recorded in the annals themselves. Visitors can also explore books on manuscripts and medieval culture, offering opportunities for furth er discovery and research.

The gallery concludes with an invitation to become part of the manuscript tradition. Inspired by the work of medieval scribes, visitors can create their own short annal and share their responses to the stories, people and places encountered throughout the exhibition.

Together, these displays reveal the Annals of Inisfallen as part of a vibrant intellectual, cultural and environmental world whose legacy continues to resonate today.

Hear the Manuscripts

Listen to the Annals Prof Pádraig Ó Macháin read an excerpt from the Annals and to Cáit Pléimionn read the translation of the same excerpt.

3D Printed Models

3D printed model of the Hiberno-Romanesque Oratory on Innisfallen island in Lough Leane, Co Kerry. The 3D printed model was created by photogrammetry from photographs and video footage captured on the island with 360 camera, dslr and drone and rendered in Meshroom .

3D printed model of a Ringed Cross. The early stone ringed cross was recovered from Lough Leane and now stands in the centre of the oratory on Innisfallen island. The 3D printed model was created by photogrammetry from photographs

and video footage captured on the island with 360 camera, dslr and drone and rendered in Meshroom.

3D printed model of the door in the Hiberno-Romanesque Oratory on Innisfallen island in Lough Leane, Co Kerry. The 3D printed model was created by photogrammetry from photographs and video footage captured on the island with 360 camera, DSLR and drone, and rendered in Meshroom.

Provenance

Nothing is known of the manuscript's history after its time at the monastery on Innisfallen island until it came into the possession of Sir James Ware (1594-1666). Ware was an Irish historian, politician and manuscript collector and he worked with Irish scholars, including Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh (1600-1671), to build

his collection. Ware had the manuscript rebound. The manuscript later passed through several owners before reaching the English antiquary Richard Rawlinson (1690-1755). Rawlinson bequeathed his extensive collection of books and manuscripts to the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The manuscript has the Bodleian reference MS. Rawlinson B. 503.

The *Annals of Inisfallen* were first reproduced in facsimile by the Royal Irish Academy in 1933, with an introduction by R. I. Best and Eóin Mac Neill. The most detailed description to date is by the late Professor Brian Ó Cuív in his catalogue of the Irish language manuscripts at Oxford, published by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 2001. Since 2015 a complete high-resolution digital facsimile has been made freely available through the *Digital Bodleian* platform (digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk). Digital access helps preserve the manuscript while making it

available worldwide for learning, teaching, research and the enjoyment of all.

Captions for objects from the National Museum of Ireland

The crozier dates to the late 11th century. It is likely it was commissioned as a staff of office for a senior clergyman. In 1867 the crozier was discovered in the bed of the River Laune, near the Lakes of Killarney but is associated with Aghadoe and the island of Innisfallen. The crozier is the most complete early medieval crozier in Ireland and is one of the most lavishly decorated objects from early medieval Ireland. Dr Griffin Murray notes as the crozier is broadly contemporary with the earliest stone church on the island it demonstrates the wealth and investment in the monastery at the time.

This print of the 1:1 scale water colour of the River Laune crozier is drawn from the original crozier by Sister Margaret Cousins, Art School, Presentation Convent, Tralee. Cousins

completed two water colours: one for Kensington Museum, London and the other for the National Museum, Dublin.” - Watercolour, Innisfallen crozier (River Laune, near Innisfallen or Inisfallen, Co. Kerry).

Drawn from the original Crozier by Sister Margaret Cousins, Art School, Presentation Convent. Tralee. 2017C1:108

“The disc dates from the early medieval period. There is a strong resemblance between the interlace border of this mount and the circular element of the ‘P’ on the Peccavimus page of the 9th-century St. Gallen manuscript Cod. Sang. 1395. The disc was found at the monastic site on Innisfallen island during 19th-century excavations in the church nave.”

Copper alloy disc-shaped mount, Innisfallen, RIA1899:21, National Museum of Ireland.

“The body of this mount is carved from bone and could represent a bird or fish with circular recesses for the eyes which would likely have been glass or amber. The surface is decorated with Hiberno-Urnes motifs. The splayed tail is cast bronze. A central hole allows the object to be mounted on a bronze shaft. It is likely to been a decorative component on another liturgical object. The mount is dated to the twelfth century and was found behind the altar at Innisfallen Abbey.”

Zoomorphic bronze and bone mount, Innisfallen, 1894:11, National Museum of Ireland.

Film

The video piece is a view from a window in the oratory on Innisfallen, it depicts the soft movement of trees and water, suggesting a contemplative distance where the Annals were composed.

Book Corner

Deep dive into the world of manuscripts to learn more about scribes, calligraphy and Celtic design and script.

Timeline

The Annals record events that were important to the people who lived in Ireland yet while these entries were being written, the wider world was undergoing its own dramatic changes. This timeline places key events from around the world alongside the dates recorded in the Annals. Although the majority of these moments do not appear in the Annals themselves, they remind us that Ireland's history unfolded as part of a much larger human story, connecting local experiences to global developments.

- 79: Mt Vesuvius erupts destroying and burying the wealthy Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum
- 105: Papermaking invented during the Han dynasty
- 122: Construction of Hadrian's Wall
- 301: Trying to halt rampant inflation Roman Emperor Diocletian issues the *Edict on Maximum Prices*
- 313: Emperor Constantine the Great legalises Christianity throughout the Roman Empire
- 563: St Columba founds a monastery on Iona, Scotland
- 622: Muhammad migrates from Mecca to Medina - year used as start of Islamic calendar
- 735: Death of Bede, father of English history
- 793: Vikings attacks in Britain begin with attack on Lindisfarne
- c.800: *Book of Kells*, illustrated manuscript and Celtic Gospel book in Latin created

- 830: The House of Wisdom, a library and translation institute established in Baghdad
- 950: Beginning of the Medieval Warm period in the North Atlantic region.
- 974: Fountain pen invented at the request of al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah.
- 1001: Norseman including Leif Erikson settle briefly at Vinland now L'Anse aux Meadows, present-day Newfoundland
- 1021: Japanese author Murasaki Shikibu writes the world's first novel *The Tale of Genji*
- 1025: Persian polymath Avicenna writes the encyclopedia *The Canon of Medicine* - the standard for medical textbooks through 18th century Europe.
- 1066: The Norman William the Conqueror invades England and ends Anglo-Saxon rule.
- 1088: Movable type invented in Song dynasty

- 1106: *Lebor na hUidhre*, the oldest extant manuscript in Irish created
- 1117: University of Oxford is founded
- 1209: Saint Francis founds the Franciscan Order
- 1298: The Travels of Marco Polo dictated, abridged version present in 15th century *Book of Lismore*
- 1325: The Mexica found the city of Tenochtitlan, later centre of the Aztec Empire
- 1347: First occurrence of the Black Death in Europe killing 1/3 of Europe's population.
- 1439: Printing press invented in the West by Johannes Gutenberg

Create your own annal

Annals are written records of notable annual events kept by monastic scholars and entries begin with ‘K.’ Write your own annal responding to the exhibition and using events most meaningful to you in 2026.

Title page of *Focalóir póca sagsbhéurla agus Gáedhilge* (1890) by Cork scribe
Pádraig Ó Standúin. Ls 202, UCC Library

Friedlander Proverb: Working draft of a bookmark design (1960s) by Elizabeth
Friedlander depicting an Irish proverb based in a style inspired by *The Book of Kells*. Friedlander Collection, UCC Library

Book of Lismore f49v (initial E): The Book of Lismore contains a miscellany of texts, religious and secular, native and European, reflecting the literary taste of a learned Irish aristocrat
of the late medieval period.

Life of St Finnchua Bri Gobunn from the Book of Lismore c.1856, scribe Seosamh Ó Longáin. Ls 90, UCC Library. (Two images)

Seanuid na mban, scribe Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (1821). Ls 206, UCC Library.

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in safeguarding its exceptional natural, archaeological and cultural heritage. Killarney National Park is renowned for its outstanding landscapes, biodiversity and a rich cultural and ecclesiastical history. At the heart of that story are the park's early monastic traditions, of which Inisfallen remains one of the most important and evocative sites.

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