

## The Book of Kells

For the time between Ascension and Whitsun

Written on August 17, 1958

### Cast

COLUMCILLE	brown monk's habit with green stole, white girdle; cap like a beehive, made of raffia
BRENDAN	dark green monk's habit, broad red girdle
IMIRE, an old shepherd	
LION	red garment, light red wings
ANGEL	light blue garment, dark blue wings
EAGLE	violet garment, orange-coloured wings
BULL	light red garment, yellow wings
MOTHER ITA	covered by a white veil



*The stage is a room shaped like a beehive. In the centre is a rough-hewn table, at which COLUMCILLE is sitting. On the table lie sheets of parchment, little bowls with liquid dyes, brushes and quills.*

*The four Cherubimic beings are arranged in angel-like appearance around him as in the drawing. On Columcille's right the LION, a little raised the ANGEL, uppermost, far above COLUMCILLE, as though inspiring him, the EAGLE. On the other side, half raised, the BULL. The wings of the Four Angelic Beasts are in continuous movement, up and down, but also in other directions. The whole space is as though filled with their presence.*

COLUMCILLE [*holding a brush in his hand, as though to himself*]:

So it says:

In the beginning was the Word.

How shall I understand

What is meant with this Word?

And yet I divine

That the Word's power

Imbues the nature of all existence.

How else could I know

That every being is

What its name implies?

And that by the very name

I know it as such

And cognise it!

Cognise – oh, this word!

Cognition, re-cognition

Self-cognition!

This is the answer to the Word

By which it was created.

Yes, so it is:

In what it has created

The Word finds itself

Again as self-cognition.

And it therefore knows:



This O binds  
 With its ring,  
 Bearing human hearts  
 In a row upon its circle,  
 The order of godly creation.  
 Thus can the deeds of stars  
 Work  
 Into human existence.

*[From below the room on the stage, the mooing of a cow sounds persistently several times in succession. Each time and on each further occasion, the FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS bow their heads and beat their wings in greeting.]*

COLUMCILLE: And that is the U.

I thank you, my good beast,  
 That at this very moment  
 You brought yourself to mind.  
 You admonished me again  
 About earthly life.  
 Because U is the doom of man,  
 It is his tomb,  
 His gloom,  
 It is also the womb  
 Which gave him life.  
 It is his rune,  
 His rule, his food.  
 And now I write:  
 In the beginning was the Word,  
 And move from A through E and I  
 And O to U.  
 In the U stands Colum,  
 Who is allowed to write this down.

*[During these last words repeated barking from the space under the room as well as loud human steps and words can be heard.]*

*As if in answer, the FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS sit down on their steps covering their faces with their crossed wings, giving the impression of sleep. COLUMCILLE rises, steps back and listens to the sounds from below.]*

COLUMCILLE *[turning downwards]*:

Who is disturbing the monk of Kells?  
 Who is asking after Columcille  
 When he is struggling for the word?  
 Visitors are only  
 Let in at midnight.  
 Who is it  
 Wanting to confuse me  
 At the holy time of noon  
 The high time of the Sun?

*[Again the dog starts up loudly and a voice tries to calm it down. The cow lows.]*

BRENDAN *[calling from below]*: It is Brendan,  
 Brother Columcille.  
 Allow me to disturb you,  
 For I bring tidings.

COLUMCILLE *[speaking downwards]*: Can you not wait,  
 Brother,  
 Until the shining of the Sun  
 Has gone  
 And enlightens us  
 From within?

BRENDAN *[calling from below]*: Before that happens,  
 I must again  
 Become a wanderer.

COLUMCILLE: Then come up and be my guest  
 In the realm of the Word.

*[He opens up the hatch leading below, takes off his head covering and waits for his visitor. BRENDAN pushes himself through the hatch.]*

*He has some trouble, because in contrast to Columcille, he is broadly built. He then pulls his knees through and at last stands panting and laughing in front of Columcille.]*

BRENDAN: Greetings to you,  
My brother Columcille.  
To reach you means  
Squeezing oneself  
Through the door which otherwise only  
Sucklings pass through.  
I feel as if I had  
Risen  
From the gate of birth.

COLUMCILLE: I thank you,  
My brother.  
But you are mistaken,  
If you think  
You have passed through  
The gate of birth.  
It was the other way round,  
For you have returned  
Into the motherly womb  
Of cosmic forces.  
When you abide  
In my house  
You are in the cosmic uterus.

BRENDAN: However that may be,  
I came to speak to you  
And convey to you  
The instructions  
Brought to me  
By my journey to the west.

COLUMCILLE: Then let us both sit down, Brother.  
I am listening to what  
You have to tell me.

And should the light of thought  
Be kindled in my mind  
I shall try  
To transform it into sounding words.

*[COLUMCILLE fetches two stools, which he places at the two narrow sides of the table. Both men sit down opposite each other. The FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS rise up and again spread their wings.]*

BRENDAN: A few days ago,  
I reached our homeland again.  
Erin's gentleness  
Shone towards me in emerald green.  
Sacred beauty here holds sway,  
The sanctuary of beauty  
Was revealed to me.  
You know that I was  
In Atalanta  
On behalf of the holy Council of Fathers  
Who preside over our cloisters.  
They sent me with a band  
Of physicians  
To investigate forms of illness  
Found only over there.  
It was the second time  
I was allowed to tread  
The soil of Atalanta.  
We wandered through wide stretches  
Of that country.  
We crossed rivers, passed  
By lakes  
Almost as large as our seas.  
We encountered herds of buffalo, aurochs,  
Enormous snakes, little horses,  
And dwelt in the wigwams  
Of our brothers there.

They met us with friendliness  
 And gave us  
 What we needed.  
 They asked what prompted us  
 To visit them.  
 We answered openly  
 And spoke of the Great Mother  
 Who sends her forces into our  
 Bodily limbs.  
 They could tell us  
 Much about this.  
 Some of them we saw  
 Dying  
 And others taking the path  
 Into earthly life.  
 The gates of birth and of passing away  
 Are wider, brighter and more open over there  
 Than they are in our homeland.  
 Yet the tremendous creative force  
 Of the World Mother streams  
 In such abundance from  
 Below the Earth  
 That already in childhood  
 Men are ripe for procreation,  
 Women ready to give birth.  
 Thus the subterranean force  
 Thrusts  
 The generative power of knowledge  
 Too soon into human bodies.  
 Man becomes creative  
 But loses his cognition.  
 He becomes a man,  
 Because the earthly woman  
 Imbues him  
 With her power.

COLUMCILLE: So the vessel is  
 Stronger than the content?  
 The husk does not let the kernel  
 Ripen?  
 BRENDAN: You say rightly –  
 And to me it was evident  
 That we  
 Must shield Europe from these forces,  
 If it should continue  
 On its path  
 Of inner ripening  
 In centuries to come.  
 COLUMCILLE: What do you intend to do?  
 Do you want to beat the sea  
 With chains  
 So that it engulfs the ships  
 Which set out to the west?  
 BRENDAN: O brother,  
 Do not mock.  
 The cosmic hour  
 When we must understand this  
 Is fraught with  
 Earnestness by  
 Decisions to be taken here.  
 The Council of Fathers  
 Has resolved  
 That of Atalanta  
 We may know no more.  
 Cast out into the night  
 Of the dark part in our soul  
 It sinks down and is forgotten.  
 [*BRENDAN rises.*]  
 Acheron  
 The river of the Underworld  
 Streams over it, thundering onward.

We close up our knowledge  
 By the sacrifice of renunciation.  
 Within us Atalanta dies.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: May the renouncing decision  
 Of human hearts  
 Live in light-filled cosmic heights  
 As a gift of grace.  
 May the knowing relinquishment  
 Of human souls  
 Shine in dark ground of the earth  
 As an offering of knowledge.

[*BRENDAN, hearing the Four Angelic Beasts speaking, turns around and at the sight of their presence falls to his knees.*]

COLUMCILLE [*with inclined head*]: I told you, my brother,  
 That here you  
 Find yourself  
 In the womb of cosmic powers.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: We bear  
 The decision of men,  
 We guide  
 The sacrifice of souls,  
 We lead  
 The renunciation of spirit  
 Upwards.

COLUMCILLE: Now are the walls erected,  
 Roused by the trumpet-sound  
 Of the spirit-voice.  
 From the motherly floods  
 Rises an ether defence,  
 A rampart of spirit  
 Is built.  
 From now onwards  
 Only the blasting horn of intellect  
 As it must awaken

In coming centuries  
 Will tear down  
 The ether defence  
 Of the motherly floods,  
 The spirit rampart  
 Which is now built.

[*COLUMCILLE stands up while speaking. He bows down before the Four Angelic Beasts and then strokes Brendan's head in a brotherly fashion. The latter is still sunk down on his knees and shaken.*]

COLUMCILLE: Wake up, brother,  
 Let us still exchange  
 Human words.  
 You came from the west  
 And I am preparing myself  
 To penetrate the east.  
 We want to celebrate our earthly parting.

[*BRENDAN and COLUMCILLE rise and return to their stools at the ends of the table, with their backs to the Four Angelic Beasts.*]

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: Past decision  
 Engenders  
 Deeds of the future.  
 Hear  
 What the present demands.

[*During these words, Brendan's old teacher, MOTHER ITA suddenly appears out of nothing on Columcille's chair behind the table.*]

MOTHER ITA: Columcille,  
 Brendan,  
 Sons,  
 Do you hear me?

BRENDAN: Who is calling us?

COLUMCILLE: Is it you, Mother,  
 Wanting to instruct us?

MOTHER ITA: I am not your mother,  
 Columcille;  
 I am the mother  
 Who taught you, Brendan,  
 When you were a child.  
 Do you now hear me?

BRENDAN: Yes, Mother Ita,  
 I hear you  
 And still hear your warning  
 To cast Atalanta  
 From my mind.

MOTHER ITA: When against my advice  
 You departed from Erin,  
 I left Erin as well.  
 My heart longed like yours  
 For the Kingdom of Heaven.  
 In the vessel of my earthly deeds  
 Which like a swift coracle  
 Bore my liberated soul  
 Through the ether ocean,  
 I followed you to Atalanta.  
 In that country  
 I accompanied you and your brothers.  
 And always when your heart  
 Thought about me,  
 It was I myself  
 Who made it resound.

BRENDAN: Yes, Mother Ita,  
 I was blind and did not see you.  
 Forgive the obduracy  
 Which blinded the eyes of my soul.

MOTHER ITA: That is not why I came.  
 In this world hour  
 There is something else  
 Which both of you must know.

*[She rises, and a pale lilac light gleams around her. The  
 FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS beat their wings in great motion.]*

MOTHER ITA: In the east,  
 Where lies the counter-island  
 To our Erin,  
 Arabia, dark and great,  
 Queen of the night,  
 There the enemies of the gods are preparing  
 New onslaughts.  
 Once, in bygone days,  
 When friends came  
 From Miletus to Erin,  
 To prepare here  
 The soil  
 From which you, my sons,  
 Have sprung –  
 You both and the other ten  
 Of Finnian's apostles –  
 Long ago, when that took place,  
 Men also went from Miletus  
 To Arabia.  
 There too the fruit is now ripening  
 On its tree.  
 A great and mighty Prophet  
 Will be born there  
 And hundreds of thousands will  
 Confess themselves to him.  
 Fire and sword will be his weapons.  
 With ravaging and slaying will his disciples  
 Move across the lands.  
 Europe is their goal.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: There, where the human spirit  
 Wakens to itself,  
 Shall he bear the fetters  
 Of dead thinking.

MOTHER ITA: If you must forget  
 The west,  
 If you turn your gaze  
 Away from Atalanta,  
 There is then the need  
 To Christianise the east.

BRENDAN *and* COLUMCILLE [*rising*]:  
 Tell us, Mother Ita,  
 Does that mean we must  
 Leave our homeland Erin?

MOTHER ITA: Inbreeding may no longer  
 Rule in your cloisters.  
 You were long, all too long  
 Sufficient unto yourselves.  
 Arise, to Europe  
 Must your sons wander,  
 Your pupils make their way.  
 There shall light  
 Be kindled  
 In the Order's settlements:  
 The light of Erin,  
 Which can withstand  
 The darkness  
 Driving from Arabia  
 With fire and sword  
 Towards Europe.  
 The longer it will shine there,  
 The brighter it radiates,  
 The warmer it  
 Keeps in human hearts,  
 The more powerless  
 Will be that Prophet  
 In the East.

COLUMCILLE: I see an image  
 Opening up

As a tremendous revelation  
 To my spirit's eye.  
 [*He points forward.*]  
 I gaze into the depths of the Earth –  
 Streams of power are rising up  
 From its innermost core! O Mother Earth,  
 Terrible depths do you hide  
 And we step blindly  
 Over them.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS: Cover up the image,  
 Do not behold  
 What shall  
 For centuries yet  
 Remain a secret.  
 [*COLUMCILLE sits down on his stool  
 and covers his eyes.*]

BRENDAN: I am bewildered  
 By everything  
 Happening here.  
 How shall I grasp  
 What is to become of us?  
 O Mother Ita,  
 Can you help  
 And explain to me  
 The meaning  
 Of what we have here experienced?  
 [*As he turns towards her, he notices  
 that her chair is vacant.*]  
 She has vanished;  
 Brother Columcille, say,  
 What was all that?  
 [*The FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS have again settled down  
 on their seats and covered themselves with their wings.*]

COLUMCILLE: A time will come when men  
 From Arabia

Will in Atalanta  
 Desire to destroy  
 The course of the universe  
 With telluric forces, which they  
 Draw upwards  
 From below the Earth.  
 Other men will resist  
 This behaviour  
 By so bearing in them  
 The light of the spirit  
 That it shine not for themselves  
 But for their brothers.  
 Now I understand  
 And know  
 What has been given us to do  
 And bring about.

*[There is very audible knocking at the hatch. From below the lowing of the cow and the soft barking of a dog are heard.]*

COLUMCILLE: Who is it  
 Wanting again to disturb us?

IMIRE: It is me, little son,  
 I am bringing  
 Supper for you  
 And your brother Brendan.

COLUMCILLE: Then come, old man,  
 Lead us back to the Earth.

*[The hatch opens and a jug with two bowls is placed on the floor.]*

IMIRE *[pushing his head out of the hatch]*: God bless  
 Your food, Master.  
 Mother Earth  
 Has prepared it for us.  
 The Spirit Father  
 Has accepted it.

In the name of Christ  
 We now desire  
 To enjoy it.

COLUMCILLE: Imire, many thanks

For your grace.

That was

What

Set us right again,

Into the light of the earthly day.

*[IMIRE exits. COLUMCILLE takes the jug and the two bowls, places them on the table and pours them full. From a recess in the wall he takes a loaf of bread, cuts off a piece and gives it to Brendan. He also has a piece himself.]*

BRENDAN: So let us eat, brother.

We thereby appease

Those forces from the depths of soul

Which come out of the Earth

And want to destroy us.

COLUMCILLE: The Word has become flesh,  
 Brother Brendan.

Do you know what that means?

In a presentiment

I am beginning

To grasp it.

BRENDAN: The Word dies

Into the womb of Mother Earth,

So as to rise again

In the human spirit.

FOUR ANGELIC BEASTS *[rising and spreading their wings]*:

Yea, so it is.

*[Slowly the stage darkens, while Columcille and Brendan chew their bread and drink their milk.]*