

# 1 the cat and the tower

Brendan held his breath. He didn't dare make a sound, didn't dare move, trapped as he was in the little passage beneath the Abbot's cell. Through the gap in the stones he could see the two figures; one very tall, wearing a dark red cloak; the other smaller and white haired. The tall figure was his uncle, the Abbot of Kells, the smaller one was a new arrival to the monastery, Brother Aidan of Iona. Aidan was the owner of the white cat who was digging her claws into his chest. Brendan was terrified that she would make a noise. If she did, he would be discovered by his uncle. Then there would be trouble. He was in enough trouble already. He was always in trouble with his uncle, the Abbot.

And it was not really his fault. Brendan had not

meant to eavesdrop. It had all been because of the cat, Pangur Bán. She had not been pleased at being left in his charge and had run away from him. So he had had to follow her, all the way up the stairs of the Abbot's tower. He had almost caught her when she had disappeared through a gap in the great blocks of stone. He had wriggled in after her and so had found his way into the little passageway hidden beneath the floor. Now Pangur looked at him, in a superior catlike way, as he held her tight, afraid to breathe in case the two monks heard him.

At least his uncle had his back to him. He was standing in front of the wall where his great plan was drawn, the plan for the defence of Kells. Every detail of the monastery had been carefully filled in. Abbot Cellach had a ruler in his hand and was pointing out the different parts of the drawing.

'This circle,' he said, giving a wide sweep of the ruler, 'is the enclosure of the monastery. All the wooden fences are being replaced by a stone wall. As you can imagine, it is a huge job.' He sighed, and Brendan knew he was thinking of all the work

still to be done. Then he continued, 'In the centre is the Church. It is dedicated to St Colmcille. And beside it here is the Round Tower.'

Now he was smiling. 'I don't think you have those in Scotland. It's a new idea, building them. The Tower is an excellent refuge from attack. It stands over eighty-eight feet high, and has only one door, about six and a half feet up the wall. The look-out windows face out in five directions. That's my idea; there are usually only four, but five gives a much broader view. It means we will have good warning of when the enemy attacks. If there is an attack, we can bring the villagers in here and take refuge, pulling up the ladder. And here you can see the monks' huts, the Dining-Hall, the Guest House and of course the Scriptorium.'

Aidan interrupted, 'Ah, the Scriptorium, where the books are made. That is what I wanted to talk to you about ...'

The Abbot looked annoyed. He hated to be interrupted in the middle of his lecture. Brendan knew the lecture by heart. He had heard it so many times that he usually didn't listen any more.

The Abbot said abruptly, 'We don't have time at the moment to be making books. Building the walls is the important work now. The walls will protect all of us from the attacks of the Northmen. And it will protect the refugees that come to us now; the pagans and Crom worshippers. Through the strength of our walls they will come to trust the strength of our faith.'

Now the Abbot was pointing out the various weak points in the wall that needed work, explaining his plan to his companion. It seemed to Brendan that Brother Aidan was not really interested in the wall.

'Brother Cellach,' he said, 'you must know that all the walls in the world will not be able to keep them out. Nothing can stop them. There are too many of them. Our work should be to make something that will outlast us, something that will still be there when all the walls are down, and all of us long gone. That will turn the darkness into light. That is why the Book is so important.'

'I don't want to hear about the Book!' The Abbot spoke quietly. Brendan's uncle never raised his

voice. He never had to. All he had to do was give you a look from his steely grey eyes, and you immediately did just what you had been told to do.

Brendan's problem was that he so often forgot what it was that he had been told to do. He would happily begin to do the task he had been set. But then his attention would be caught by something: the way a spider spun its web in the sunlight, a beetle carrying a crumb home to its family or the call of a cuckoo coming from the forest beyond the walls of the monastery ...

That was what had happened that morning. He had been on his way to the Scriptorium to collect some plans for the Abbot. All of a sudden, he had heard a great fuss behind him and he had been nearly knocked over by a large goose flying past. Brother Leonardo was hot on its heels. The goose was honking madly, and Brother Leonardo had honked too, 'Catch her, Brendan!' He had called as he ran: 'Don't let her get away!'

As the chase continued, half the monks in the monastery, glad of an excuse to stop lifting stones for the wall, had joined Brendan and Leonardo.

Finally, after Brother Leonardo had fallen in the pigpen and the goose had disrupted a game of hurling, they had caught her, all of them falling over with laughter ... and taken five of her tail feathers to use as pens in the Scriptorium. But this escapade had meant that Brendan had been late bringing the plans to his uncle, who had not been at all pleased.

‘Brendan,’ Abbot Cellach had said, ‘how am I to trust you with responsibility when you continue to disappoint me? One day you will take control of this abbey, yet it takes you several hours to fulfil a simple task. What will happen when you have to take on responsibility for Kells? Responsibility for all the brothers and all the villagers and all the people who have come to us, begging us to keep them safe behind these walls? You must learn to concentrate!’

Luckily, this particular lecture – which Brendan also knew by heart – had been interrupted by the arrival of Brother Aidan at the gates of the monastery. Brother Aidan, who had come all the way from Iona, far across the sea.

What Brendan needed to concentrate on at the moment was not sneezing. The smell of old damp stone was catching in his throat. He shut his eyes tight and just about managed to keep the sneeze in. The cat was staring into Brendan's eyes. She was a strange creature. Her own eyes were odd coloured, one blue, one green. Aidan was still trying to argue with Abbot Cellach.

'Ah, but if you would only take a look at the Book, Cellach. It is a masterpiece, as fine as anything ever created on Iona, even by Colmcille himself. Indeed, it was Colmcille who began it. It was put into my keeping when Iona was destroyed and I promised to bring it here, to your monastery where it would be safe.'

The Abbot, as always, was not listening. Now he continued, 'You are not the first refugee from the Northmen that we have had here, Aidan. And you will not be the last. There are streams of people seeking refuge, new ones almost every week. That means that the enemy is coming closer to this place every day. They have burned Rathlin and Lambay and many others. They have stolen the treasures,

the gold and the jewels. They have killed and wounded all who cross their path. And then they take their great boats and go back across the sea with our treasures and our cattle and our children, our children, Aidan, made into slaves. And they sit quiet for a while and plan the next bloody raid on our peaceful island. I know my duty. It is to look after those who seek refuge in this monastery from the slaughterers, from the curse of the Northmen – not to make books, no matter how beautiful.’

Aidan quietly interrupted him. His voice was very sad when he spoke. ‘I know all too well what the Northmen do when they attack, Cellach. I was in Iona when they arrived. I saw my brothers’ blood stain the grey rocks red. There was nothing left when they had finished with us but a smoking ruin and the smell of death, and the black crows coming down from the skies ... I was lucky that I had a hiding place, and legs that would carry me away. And something was saved from all the horror. Look ...’

He picked up the worn leather satchel that he kept close by him.

‘Let me show you the Book ...’

Cellach interrupted him again, ‘If you have seen all those terrible things, I do not know why you cannot see why we need this wall!’

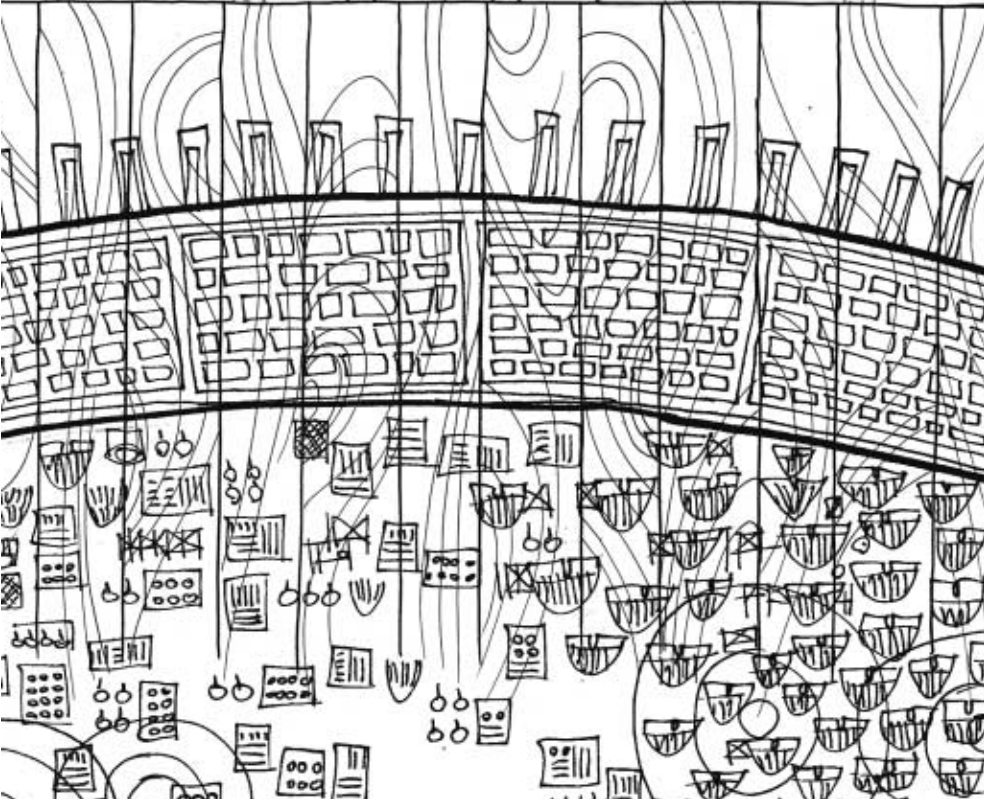
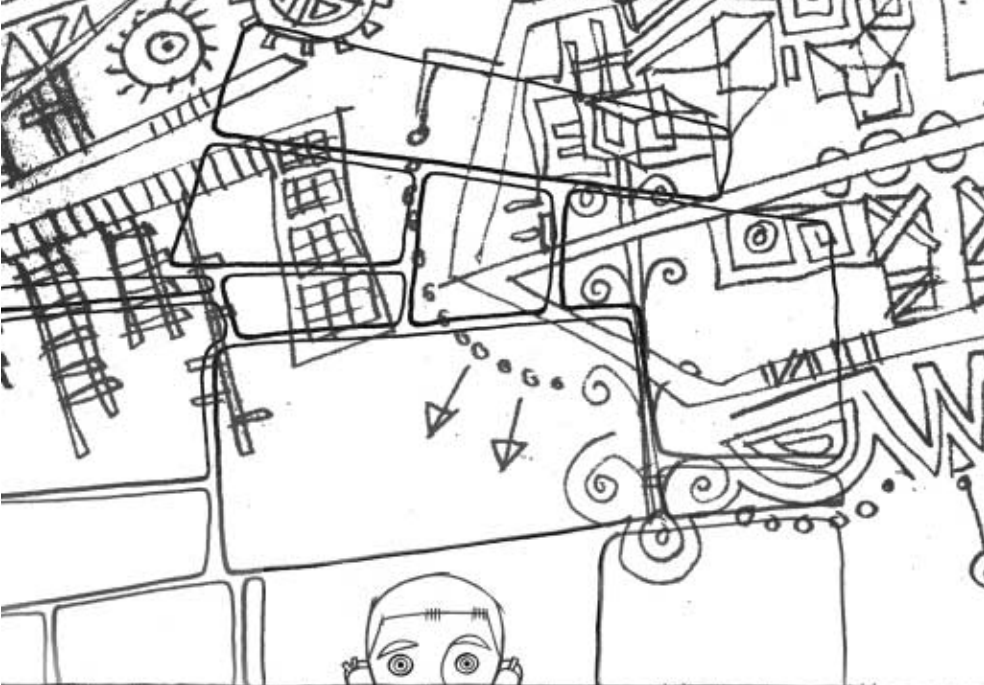
‘And I do not know why you cannot see how we need the Book ...’ Aidan spoke quietly, and turned to leave the Abbot’s cell. But then he stopped, and looked down. Brendan’s heart almost stopped too. Had he seen Brendan and Pangur?

‘Abbot Cellach,’ he said, turning back, ‘one last thing. Tell me about the boy, Brendan. He’s your sister’s child, isn’t he? He has a real look of her.’

‘Yes, he’s my poor sister’s child alright. I found him after the Northmen had come down the river and attacked his people. He was only a tiny baby. I took him up, wrapped him in my cloak and brought him here. He has been here since. He knows of no world apart from the monastery.’

‘It’s a sad story. I’m sorry to hear it,’ said Aidan. He paused. ‘But he seems a good lad.’

The Abbot snorted. ‘He’s a good lad when he keeps his mind on things, which isn’t as often as it



should be. He likes to spend too much time in the Scriptorium.'

'You used to love to spend time in the Scriptorium too. You were no mean hand at the old illustration yourself, once upon a time, Cellach,' said Aidan.

Cellach's face became hard again. 'I have no time for such things now. And nor has anyone else in this monastery.'

'You mean there is only time for your wall,' said Aidan.

'Not my wall, Aidan, a wall to save civilisation! A wall to save your book! Now we should go. I have many things to do.'

The two monks made their way to the door. But as Aidan walked past the gap in the wall Brendan was almost sure he looked down and winked at Brendan.