



## **Fiannaíocht – The First Round Tower**

---

### **Leaders Note**

This is an original story based on the era of Saints & Scholars in Ireland.

*This story has been specially written for macaoimh and it can be read directly.*

### **The Story of the First Round Tower**

By Ann Connell

Long, long ago in a village somewhere on the southeast coast of Ireland, there lived a widow with her two children Kevin and Maura. They made a living by picking periwinkles on the rocky strand by their home. Twice a week the children would take their bucket-loads of shellfish to the market. They always sold enough to buy good food and to keep them warm, happy, and healthy. Whenever they had periwinkles left over from the market, they would call into the local monastery and give them to the monks. The monks always looked forward to visits from Kevin and Maura - and not just because that meant periwinkles for supper.

All of the monks were very fond of the children and the children were very interested in the work of the monks. Brother Sean would take them to his study and show them the Bible he was working on. He was a scribe and it was his job to write out stories from the Bible, or hymns or prayers. But it wasn't just a matter of taking out a copy and a biro - because in those days they didn't have copies or bios or even pencils. Brother Sean wrote with a pared goose feather called a quill. Instead of paper, he used vellum, which was made from the hide of a calf. He also had to make inks himself. If he needed reds or purples, he'd make a blackberry ink. Oranges and yellows could be got by boiling onion-skins and he knew which leaves would give the nicest shades of green and blue. Normally no one saw Brother Sean's work until it was finished - but Kevin and Maura were always an exception.

One particular day he was working on a manuscript of the parable of the loaves and fishes. When the children arrived he had already written out the first page in black ink and was ready to add pictures and colour to his already magnificent piece of work. Some letters were turned into strange creatures, others into

the most beautiful designs and then with slow accurate strokes of his quill he began to add colour. The children were so fascinated watching him that they didn't realise how quickly time passed by. Before they had realised it, the sun was fading away over the distant mountains. The children had to run home as fast as they could to get there before darkness fell. Their mother was very cross with them - but secretly they both felt that watching Brother Sean at work was well worth a scolding.

On other days they watched Brother Michael, the Goldsmith, forging a chalice. It took him weeks to complete it, but when it was finished it was incredibly beautiful. Brother Michael said he was using his talents to thank God for his gifts of life and love. You could see from the way he hammered the warm gold into place and set rubies and emeralds around the rim and the base that he really had a very strong love of God. Brother Colm was an old man who tended the monastery gardens with kindness. He often gave the children vegetables to take home to their mother.

Another monk who always made time for the children was Brother Liam. Brother Liam was an odd-job man, he didn't seem to be as talented as the others, but he was such a gentle and friendly man that both Maura and Kevin loved spending time with him. The great thing about being with Brother Liam was that they could actually help him at his work, while there was no way they'd be able to help illuminate a manuscript or craft chalice. Now one day when the children visited the monastery Brother Liam was knocking down the old stone barns. The other monks told the children that Liam had had a very, very strange idea - he wanted to erect a round building. The monks were arguing about what to do. Brother Sean thought that Liam was going mad. Michael suggested that they ask why he was building it, but old Brother Colin disagreed. "Let him be", he said, "Liam is a good man - this is God's work." And so Brother Liam continued his work.

Over the next couple of months Kevin and Maura worked with him. They chipped the corners of stones so that they would fit together in a circular form. It was very hard and tiring work, but Liam stopped only to eat, sleep and pray. Most evenings the two children went home with sore backs but not once did they complain. Liam explained to them exactly what kind of building it would be. Well, obviously it was



## **Fiannaíocht – The First Round Tower**

---

going to be round, which was the first strange thing about it. The other unusual thing was that the door would not be at the ground. Liam wanted to build steps to the door. He wanted enough steps so that he could say one prayer from the Rosary on each of the steps. That meant there would be sixty steps leading to the door - so the door had to be fairly high up on the building. Inside the door there would be a stairs going up and a stairs going down. The children thought this was very odd indeed, but as Brother Colin often said, "The Lord works in strange ways".

After about six months the round tower was almost finished. One evening the children arrived home very excited. "Mam, Mam," exclaimed Maura, the tower is nearly finished - we'll be starting the outside steps tomorrow. Everything else is done." The children were so excited they couldn't get to sleep even though they tried. Their mother suggested that they go for a walk along the rocks with her and that the sea breeze would tire them out fairly soon. It was a beautiful night even though there was a crisp frost. A crescent moon glowed in the black sky and thousands of stars twinkled down on them. After a while they sat down on the cliff-top and just stared out to sea. It seemed so peaceful and quiet, but ...

"What's that out there?", asked Maura. "What?" Kevin asked in reply, "I can't see anything." Maura pointed, "Look, out there, I never noticed rocks there before, did you Mam?" Their mother hadn't, and neither had Kevin. They couldn't possibly be rocks, rocks didn't move, and yes, whatever it was certainly moving. The children and their mother stared and stared. It took them quite a while to make out the shapes, but after a while they all agreed that without a doubt there were five ships a few miles off the coast - and they seemed to be coming in their direction. Ships coming at night were not a good sign. For years now villages along the coast had been plundered by Viking raiders. Many parents had been slaughtered as they slept and children were kidnapped to be sold as slaves. When the children and their mother saw the ships, they were gripped with fear.

"What will we do? We'll have to do something.", whispered the mother. "Well have to raise the alarm quickly." "Let you go to the monastery, Mam," suggested Kevin, and we'll go to the village." ?

"I'll tell Brother Colm to ring his bell and that will wake more people up." his mother added. Off they went as quickly as they could. The children ran ahead to the village. They knocked at every door and shouted aloud, "Vikings, Vikings! We saw ships off the coast." Soon all the villagers were gathered in the square to hear what the children had to say. "Let's go to the monastery," Maura suggested. "Brother Calm will know what to do." Everyone nodded in agreement. Before long, they arrived at the monastery. Brother Colm and the children's mother met them at the gate. Even Brother Colm didn't know how to escape five longboats of Viking raiders.

The villagers were just about to panic when Brother Liam's voice was heard in the distance. "My tower will save us.", he shouted. "Quickly, quickly, we don't have much time." The door of the tower was way out of reach and there were no steps to climb, but it was their only hope. Suddenly the other monks arrived with the long ladder Liam and the children had used when they were working on the inside of the tower. Brother Liam led a long procession of people into his tower. When everyone was safely inside the ladder was pulled up and a great cheer echoed around the stone walls of the tower.

Fairly soon, though, their joy was interrupted when smoke was seen rising from the village. The Vikings had arrived and were burning down all the houses in the village, everything they owned would be destroyed. They stood there in dismay, tears trickled down many a face. Some people became anxious, would the Vikings come after them, their tracks would be easy to follow. Some people began to get hysterical, others became very quiet and others joined the monks in prayer. And all the time Brother Liam stood at his doorway smiling. Well, it wasn't long before the Vikings did make their way to the monastery. They looked terrifyingly fierce in their horned helmets and armoured leather clothes. They were tall and strong. All the villagers were extremely frightened but Brother Liam was still smiling, in fact, by this time he was almost laughing.

The Viking leader approached the base of the tower. "Surrender to us now. We may be merciful.", he shouted at Brother Liam. "Never!" answered Liam, "I am God's workman, I have built this tower to protect His people. You can't get at us, so you might as well leave." Inside the tower the villagers were speechless.



## **Fiannaíocht – The First Round Tower**

---

They had thought Liam was a little insane but now they saw how clever and courageous he actually was. Outside the tower the Vikings were furious. They had traveled hundreds of miles, they were not in the humour for dealing with a situation like this. "Burn them out, burn this place to the ground." yelled their leader. "Try if you like," laughed Liam, "but I will protect us in our tower." Fairly soon the rest of the monastery was in flames, but no matter how hard they tried, the raiders couldn't even singe the base of the tower. "You are indeed brave," said the Viking leader, "and your God is powerful. We will leave you now, but we will leave you with nothing. All your belongings, your houses and homes are gone. You have nothing." "You are mistaken," Liam began softly, "we have our lives, we have our families and we have the love of God. And with His help we can rebuild our village in days. We have everything we need: it is you who have nothing."

The Vikings became so angry that they turned on their heels and stormed off. Three cheers went up for Brother Liam and his round tower. Kevin and Maura were not forgotten, all the villagers thanked them and their mother for raising the alarm; and Liam was quick to point out that if it hadn't been for the children's help the tower might not have been ready to save them all. Vikings never dared venture near that village again, and as the word spread, copies of Liam's round tower began shooting up all over Ireland. Of course, everyone agreed it was far better to forget about the outside steps!

