

The Emperor of Russia sends a gift to Maynooth

Late in August 1864, the President of Maynooth College, Dr Charles Russell, returned at the end of the vacation to find four books waiting for him, sent by Alexander II, Emperor of Russia. These splendid volumes, printed in 1862, reproduced a substantial part of one of the most important books in the world, the Codex Sinaiticus or 'the Sinai book', one of the two earliest manuscripts of the Bible, including the earliest complete New Testament in existence. The original 1600-year old hand-written text, written in Greek on parchment or animal skin, had lain in the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai until 1844 when, as the leading German Biblical scholar Konstantin von Tischendorf writes, he found a few leaves of it in a basket there. He later persuaded the monks to present a substantial part of the Codex to the Emperor of Russia who in turn had it published in St Petersburg in 1862, at his own expense and in facsimile – with the text as it appeared in the original.

Russell badly wanted a copy for Maynooth College, but times were hard, and the College Trustees had had to cut back on the cost of meals for the College's 500 clerical students (they were considering having bread without butter for breakfast). Russell took up his pen and wrote to the Russian ambassador in London, Philipp Count von Brunnow, asking if the Emperor in his magnanimity would consider presenting a copy of the four-volume *Codex* to Maynooth. The Emperor's gift together with Russell's draft letter of thanks is on display in the Russell Library at NUI Maynooth.

In 1933, Stalin's government sold Russia's part of the original Codex to the British Museum for £100,000 (the money to be spent on purchasing English-made machinery). Such was the interest in the Codex that more than half the cost was raised through gifts from the general public, despite the severe economic depression which prevailed. The London *Times* of 23 December 1933 reported the imminent arrival of the manuscript, on Christmas Eve. Three days later, throngs awaited its arrival under police escort at the British Museum.

Today there is an exciting international project in progress involving scholars, conservators and curators, digitising, conserving and analysing the surviving parts of the Codex. A major conference was held in the British Library in July 2009. For conservators it is fascinating as one of the earliest examples of the transition from papyrus roll to book. For the scholars, there is the early Greek text with absorbing corrections added over the centuries. Part of the Old Testament was never retrieved but what survives is now split between four separate locations, London, Leipzig, St Petersburg and Sinai. This project re-unites them at last, electronically.

For more on the Codex project see <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org>
For the Russell Library, <http://library.nuim.ie/russell>

For further information on the history of the manuscript and its extraordinary travels and travails see Scott McKendrick, *In a monastery library: preserving Codex Sinaiticus and the Greek written heritage* (London, 2006). Tischendorf gives his own account of his three visits to Mount Sinai and his work on the manuscript in *Where were our Gospels written?* (London, 1866)

Penelope Woods
Russell Library

