

## THOUGHTS WE DARE NOT THINK?

A Book Review by Bob Keidel

This winter I read a provocative little book by Thomas Cahill entitled "How the Irish Saved Civilization". I highly recommend it. (Anchor Books, Doubleday).

It begins in the year 407 AD, the year the Rhine River froze, permitting the Germanic hordes to surprise and overwhelm the Roman garrisons on the west bank, leading to the sack of Rome in 410. In the process nearly all the centers of civilization and culture in the western Roman world were sacked and destroyed, including the libraries.

Enter Patricius, son of a British Roman family, captured by Irish invaders, enslaved for six years in Ireland, escaping to the continent to a monastery in the south of France where he eventually became a priest and a bishop. Returning to Ireland to minister to those wild tribes, the force of his personality succeeded in bringing Christianity to them. They were violent pagan people who still practised human sacrifice to appease their gods. Patricius, whom we know as St. Patrick, persuaded them that such sacrifice was no longer necessary. It had already been done, five hundred years earlier on a hill in Judea.

Over the next 100 years, many Irish converts became monks, built monasteries, made excursions to the continent, sought out whatever remnants of Graeco-Roman literature could be found, and spent the next centuries painstakingly copying these works, which later helped rebuild civilization in the western world. Hence the title of this volume. (This is a massive oversimplification, but you can get the drift.).

Much has been written about the fall of the Roman empire. This author points out that it was not a single event at one particular time. It followed many centuries of conquest and exploitive rule over most of their known world, the accumulation of wealth, a sense of invulnerability, self indulgence and an erosion of spirit and purpose, while the impoverished hordes beyond their borders were multiplying and desperately trying to survive. Gibbons calls it "— the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness."

At the end of the final chapter of the book, which is entitled "The End of the World. Is there any Hope?", are a few paragraphs (\*) which prompted the heading of this review. They read as follows:

"As we, the people of the first world, the Romans of the twentieth century, look out across our Earth, we see some signs for hope, many more for despair. Technology proceeds apace, delivering the marvels that knit our world together— the conquering of diseases that plagued every age but ours and the consequent lowering of mortality rates, revolutions in crop yields that continue to feed expanding populations, the contemplated "information highway" that will soon enable all of us to retrieve information and communicate with one another in ways so instant and complete that they would dazzle those who built the Roman roads, the first great information system.

"But that road system became impassable rubble, as the empire was overwhelmed by population explosions beyond its borders.. So will ours. Rome's demise instructs us in what inevitably happens when impoverished and rapidly expanding populations, whose ways and values are only dimly understood, press up against a rich and ordered society. More than a billion people in our world today survive on less than \$370 a year, while Americans, who constitute five percent of the world's population, purchase fifty percent of its cocaine. If the world's population, which has doubled in our lifetime, doubles again by the middle of the next century, how could anyone hope to escape the catastrophic consequences — the wrath to come? But we turn our backs on such unpleasantness and contemplate the happier prospects of our technological dreams.

"What will be lost, and what saved, of our civilization probably lies beyond our powers to decide. No human group has ever figured out how to design its future. The future may be germinating today not in a boardroom in London or an office in Washington or a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost or other — a kindly British orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta run by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, an easygoing

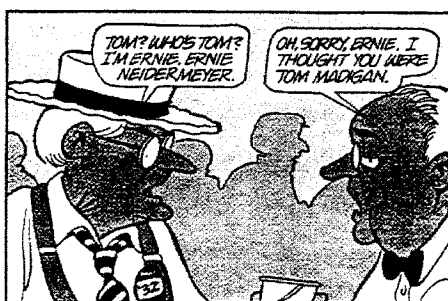
French medical team at the starving edge of the Sahel, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convict-mothers at a New York prison — in some unheralded corner where a great-hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way.

“Perhaps history is always divided into Romans and Catholics — or, better, catholics. The Romans are the rich and powerful who run things their way and must always accrue more because they instinctively believe that there will never be enough to go around;

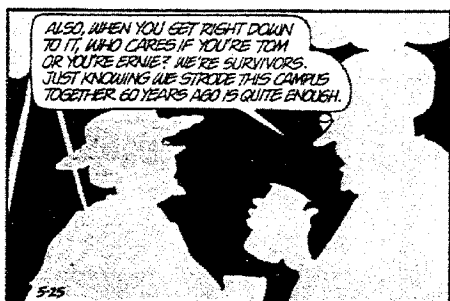
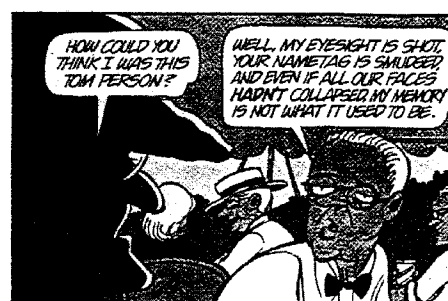
the catholics, as their name implies, are universalists who instinctively believe that all humanity makes one family, that every human being is an equal child of God, and that God will provide. The twenty-first century, prophesied Malraux, will be spiritual or it will not be. If our civilization is to be saved — forget about our civilization, which, as Patrick would say, may pass “in a moment like a cloud or smoke scattered by the wind” — if we are to be saved, it will not be by Romans but by saints.”

(\*) pp 216-218.

## DOONESBURY



## BY GARRY TRUDEAU



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