The Quarrel At Movilla
One of the best-known stories about Colm Cille concerns his role in the great Battle of Cuil Dreimne, which was fought between the forces of the Northern Uí Neill, Colm Cille’s clan, against those of the High King of Erin. Legend has it that Colm Cille, for all his reputation as a man of peace, started the war.

And it all began so well...
Colm Cille visits his old friend and master, Finnian of Movilla. It is a beautiful part of the country, but it is an area steeped in the dark rituals of the pagan druids, and ruled with a firm hand by Dairmaid mac Cearuill, the High King of Erin.
Finnian and Colm Cille haven’t seen each other in years. The two men catch up on all the news and relive old memories.

Suddenly Finnian shuts up. He has remembered something he has been dying to show Colm Cille for months. Something that, he knows, will impress Colm Cille.
There it is. Finnian’s pride and joy: a Book of Psalms brought back from Rome. It is truly beautiful - the colours and contours of each page are like the country where the book was made: sparkling sea-blue and green swirls merge into the earthy oranges and deep reds of Mediterranean Italy. It is a glorious, abstract work of art.
It is truly a wondrous sight to behold in cold and damp Ireland. Colm Cille is dumbstruck.

“What is a piece of art as beautiful as this doing in such a God-forsaken place as Movilla? This book will not reach its full potential unless I can take it back to Derry and display it in my church,” he thinks to himself. “I could re-decorate. I could re-do the vestry to match the cover. People would come from miles.” He looks at Finnian’s grinning face. He looks very pleased with himself. Very smug.

No doubt about it. Colm Cille is envious.

That night Colm Cille can’t sleep.

Every time he looks at the night sky beyond his window he thinks of the bright yellow half-moon shapes in the Book of Psalms. And each time he closes his eyes he can picture the delicate cover and the intricate designs inside. He tosses and turns. He tries to count sheep to get himself off to sleep, but the sheep keep turning into the Book of Psalms, hopping and skipping their glided way up to Derry.

Then he has a plan...
...If he can’t have the book, Colm Cille will have the next best thing.

Sitting by his guest room table Colm begins to make a copy of the Book of Psalms. Page by page, verse by verse, word for word. He spends sleepless nights perfecting the shapes and swirls of each page, mixing colours until they are just right, steadying his hand to draw each flowing line exactly as it is in the original.

Finally it is finished.
Colm Cille jumps as he hears footsteps behind him. Before he can cover his work, a candle appears, followed by Finnian. He has seen the light in his guest’s bedroom and he wants to know what Colm Cille is doing so late at night. As he reaches the table, he finds out. He looks horrified. There on the table, in front of his old friend Colm Cille, is an exact copy of his Book of Psalms.

“Traitor!” he flicks through the pages Colm Cille has drawn. “I can’t believe you have spent the last six days under my roof, stealing my book!”

Colm Cille is indignant. “I am not stealing. I am copying.”

“Humph!”
The top of Finnian’s head has turned quite pink with rage. Colm’s quill begins to shake. He feels about ten inches tall.

“I’m taking this,” Finnian grabs his book, “and this,” he takes Colm’s copy, “and I’m taking this matter right to the top – I’m going to the High King of Ireland to sort this out.”
“Wait a minute,” cries Colm Cille as the door slams, “you’re taking my book!”

Diarmaid mac Cearuill, the High King of Erin, stands between Finnian, still pink with rage, and a sulking Colm Cille. He looks from one book to the other. They are both identical.

The King pauses. Then he makes his decision.
“To every cow belongs her calf. To every book its copy. Colm Cille is in the wrong – he has stolen your book. The copy that Colm made belongs to you, Finnian.”

“Told you,” says Finnian, smug again.

The King knows he has made a dangerous decision. Colm Cille has a fierce temper and with royal blood in his veins he has powerful friends. But Dairmaid can live with it – He doesn’t like Christians and he doesn’t like northerners. He is pleased to be able to annoy one of the best known of them.

It is Colm Cille who now turns red with rage.
Colm Cille heads straight for Tir Conaill, the land of his own people. He is insulted and appalled at the lack of respect from the king for his position. He is a man of God, a holy man who should be deferred to. His honesty should never have been questioned. He wastes no time in letting his countrymen know of his humiliation at the hands of the High King.

They demand revenge against the pagan kingdom of the south and King Aodh of Ulster is more than willing to oblige. The northern tribes, Ulster and Connacht, join together in revenge against the southern forces of Tara.
The Battle of Cuil Dreimne begins. The fighting is fierce and bloody. Swords smash against sword, against shield, against human flesh. The face-to-face contact leaves no-one on the battlefield unscarred.

Finally, after three days of ferocious battle, the forces of Tara flee the battleground. The north is victorious. It has avenged the slight to its beloved off-spring, Colm Cille, and rung the deathknell for paganism in Ireland. But the victory has been won at a price.
Thousands lie dead. Colm Cille thinks of all the families back home that from this moment are torn apart: fathers, sons and brothers who will never return home lie dead on the battlefield.

The enormity of what has happened slowly dawns on Colm Cille. It is because of him, and his pride, and his temper, that the lives of so many have been ruined or changed forever. If only he hadn’t been so envious of Finnian’s book. If only he hadn’t made that copy. If only he didn’t have such a mean temper. If only...
Colm kneels in prayer, truly regretting what has happened. People are beginning to blame him for the destruction of the last three days. Colm Cille hates to be unpopular and he hates to be the cause of so much misery.

His thoughts turn toward a pilgrimage abroad – he could redeem himself by building a new monastery and carrying out missionary work. Just before he was born his mother had a vision that her son would influence events in Ireland and Scotland. Colm Cille has always wanted to go to Scotland. Perhaps he could build his new monastery there?