

March 17 St Patrick's Day

Patrick was born between the Clyde and the Severn, a child of the Romano-British empire. His father was a Roman civil servant, his grandfather a priest. He was carried off by raiders to serve as a slave to Ireland where he was put to work as a herdsman. After escaping six years later, he studied for the priesthood and was called to Ireland to preach the gospel of Christ. He earned his reputation as a man of power by confronting the pagan magic of Ireland with his Christian magic, kindling the Paschal fire on the Hill of Slane and silencing the Druids in debates. Near the end of his life, he made a forty-day retreat on the top of Croagh Patrick. [Atwater]

The story of his dispelling the snakes from Ireland illustrates this shift in power, since the snakes probably represented the old oracle cults tended by snake priestesses. It is interesting that the snake handlers of Italy gather snakes on March 19th, when the snakes first wake from their winter lethargy and emerge. [Field] Helen Farias pointed out that Patrick acquired many of the qualities of Lugh, the ancient Celtic god of light, particularly his association with high places.

No, Patrick never chased the snakes out of Ireland. Nor do we really know whether he used the shamrock to teach converts about the Trinity. But what we do know about St. Patrick is far more interesting than many of the legends that grew up around him.

And the fact that we know anything about him at all is as great a miracle as any that later traditions ascribe to him. For Patrick is literally the only individual we know from fifth-century Ireland or England. Not only do no other written records from Britain or Ireland exist from that century, but also there are simply no written records at all from Ireland prior to Patrick's.

Surprisingly enough, however, scholarly debate about the authenticity of what Patrick left us is almost nonexistent. The chronology of his life is very confused. Indeed, we can't even identify for sure when he was born, ordained a bishop or died! Experts agree, however, that the two examples of his writing that we have are clearly written by the same man, the man we know as Patrick.

These two brief documents, Patrick's *Confession* and his "Letter to Coroticus," are the basis for all we know of the historical Patrick. The *Confession*, because its purpose was to recount his own call to convert the Irish and to justify his mission to an apparently unsympathetic audience in Britain, is not a traditional biography.

And the "Letter to Coroticus," apparently an Irish warlord whom Patrick was forced to excommunicate, is a wonderful illustration of Patrick's prowess as a preacher but modern Catholics might have a hard time reconciling the portrait of the rugged individualist that Cahill describes with the current notion of a mystic. Yet O'Donoghue says that in the *Confession*, "the main lines of Patrick's spiritual development show through, and they are unmistakably the lines of a mystical journey." In fact, his biography of Patrick is the first in a series of works edited by Michael Glazier called "The Way of the Christian Mystics."

So what makes Patrick a mystic?

First, as recounted in the *Confession*, most of the major events in Patrick's life are preceded by a dream or vision. The visions were usually simple—almost self-explanatory—but they were also very vivid and carried enormous emotional impact with Patrick.

The first vision, which he received after six years of servitude in Ireland, came by way of a mysterious voice, heard in his sleep. "Your hungers are rewarded: You are going home," the voice said. "Look, your ship is ready." Indeed, some 200 miles away, there it was. (Patrick was nothing if not tenacious.) The second vision—the one that came to him after he'd returned home and that called him back to Ireland—was equally straightforward. Victoricus, a man Patrick knew in Ireland, appeared to him in this dream, holding countless letters, one of which he handed to Patrick. The letter was entitled "The Voice of the Irish." Upon reading just the title, he heard a multitude of voices crying out to him: "Holy boy, we beg you to come and walk among us once more." He was so moved by this that he was unable to read further and woke up.

But the dream recurred again and again. Eventually Patrick tells his dismayed family of his plans to return to evangelize Ireland and soon begins his preparations for the priesthood. What is interesting about this dream calling Patrick to his lifelong mission to the Irish is that it comes not as a directive from God, but as a plea from the Irish.

By the time of his death, or shortly thereafter, "the Irish stopped slave trading and they never took it up again." Human sacrifice had become unthinkable. And although the Irish never stopped warring on one another, "war became much more confined and limited by what we might call the 'rules of warfare.' Second, by converting the Irish pagans to Christianity without making any attempt to romanize them as well, he founded a new kind of Church, one that was both Catholic and primitive.

Patrick was quite successful at winning converts. And this fact upset the Celtic Druids. Patrick was arrested several times, but escaped each time. He traveled throughout Ireland, establishing monasteries across the country. He also set up schools and churches, which would aid him in his conversion of the Irish country to Christianity.

In any case, it is certain that he was in Auxerre in 431, when St. Germanus selected Palladius, a contemporary of Patrick's, to head the first Irish mission. Palladius was sent, with full Papal authority, as the first Bishop of Ireland, but his mission was short-lived. According to the memoirs of Tirechan, a cleric in Meath about 690 AD, Palladius was martyred within the year. Patrick was assigned to replace him in 432, and if the reported fate of the former mission be true, then Patrick's showed considerable courage in accepting. Working to his advantage was the fact that he knew Irish customs and language from his years in captivity, and the fact that he was a Celt. Patrick never condemned the Irish as idolatrous pagans, but appealed to their pride. He addressed them on their terms, explained their traditions in terms of Christianity, and was eventually accepted as one of their own. He converted key people among the nobility, and recruited a native clergy.

In the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, his feast is considered the first day of Spring. In the Hebrides they expect a south wind this morning bringing him to his parishioners and a north wind in the evening to take him back to Ireland.

On the high day of Patrick,
every fold will have a cow-calf
and every pool a salmon.

In Ireland, St Patrick's Day used to be a Church holiday. No pubs were open and everyone went to church, and then ate a traditional meal of colcannon and Irish soda bread. But now, although it is a holiday when schools and businesses close, the pubs stay open. According to one of my readers, Suzanne who lives in Dublin, "they are usually full by 3pm, with Guinness and *craic agus ceol* (great fun and music) flowing!" Dublin also hosts a three-day long festival with a parade with massive floats depicting swans and the Children of Lir and people dressed as monsters, witches, saints and sinners. Suzanne also writes "the traditional meal of colcannon & soda bread is usually replaced by traditional fish 'n' chips from the chipper!"

In America, St. Patrick's Day is usually celebrated with conspicuous consumption of alcohol. The Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle sponsors a prayer service for peace in Ireland every year on St Patrick's Day, which seems like the start of a new and useful tradition.

Sweet pea seeds sown before sunrise on St. Patrick's Day will produce unusually large and fragrant flowers.

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