

The Story of St. Patrick

Not too long ago, during one of the Jeopardy university competitions, Alex Tribeck asked the question, "When was Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, canonized? No one correctly answered the question. The answer which had to be given in the form of a question is actually, "What is never?" Not only was Patrick sainted by the holiness of his life and the intensity and success of his ministry, he is also sainted by the acclaim of the people of Ireland. His sanctity was never an issue, and was ultimately accepted by the universal Church, though there is no Roman or Vatican document that authorizes or certifies his sanctity.

This raises a lot of questions. Did Patrick ever really exist or is he part of a mythology, no different than the leprechauns? Is there any historical evidence? Do we know anything about him? Did he really accomplish the conversion of Ireland?

The answer is, Yes, to everything. However, history does not easily yield the answers to the essential questions. Patrick left only a fragment of personal writing, known as the *Confessions*. There were no scribes following him around to record his deeds. Geographically, Ireland was the last stop before the end of the world according to the cosmology of the day. Few Europeans knew of its existence and those who did had little interest in it.

There were few port settlements in Ireland and those, including Dublin and Wicklow, were only on the east coast, nearer to England. There was a High King who ruled from Tara, a hill not far from Dublin. His role was to consolidate the power of all the lesser kings. Key to doing this was the role of the kings of each of the four provinces, or regional kings. Finally, each neighborhood had a king and there were more than one hundred of these underkings who were actually tribal leaders. The local king was a neighborhood bully and became king because he was the meanest person in the neighborhood. When I was a boy, my mother told me that our ancestors lived in the courts of the Irish kings. In truth, every Irishman is descended from those who roamed the courts of Irish kings. There was nowhere else to roam. None of them were quite like Camelot or Versailles.

Ireland was a very hostile environment since every tribal king was constantly at war with every other tribal king. Frequently, the regional kings had to intervene and this meant consolidating tribes to make war on the belligerents. Only once in the long history of Irish royalty was there a true consolidation of the kings and that was a brief and uneasy peace under the rule of the High King, Brian Boru, in the ninth century. Belligerence was almost recreation and it was the only game in the land.

Patrick in Ireland

This was the world that a young Roman citizen of Britain grew up in. Patrick was born in approximately 389 AD. His father was Calpurnius, a Christian deacon and his grandfather, Potitus, a presbyter. Calpurnius was a middle class landowner and a member

of the Decurion, the municipal council of a Roman town on the west coast of Britain called Bannaventa. In his sixteenth year, Patrick was captured and kidnapped by marauding Irishmen led by Niall, the High King, and brought to Ireland, to the “ultimate places of the earth” as described by Patrick himself. He was brought across the island to the province of Connaught, to the furthest part of the ultimate land near the western sea.

He served a master named Miluce, a tribal king, and lived near the mountain subsequently called Crough Patrick in County Mayo. The relationship does not appear to be hostile although it was never less nor more than master – slave. Patrick’s duties were apparently those of a shepherd. The hardship was that he missed his own family, the land of his birth, and experienced periods of intense loneliness.

On the positive side, the long hours of aloneness gave him the opportunity for growth and self discovery. He must have had interaction with local people because he learned to love the Irish, learned their language and customs. He became acquainted with their religious values through the Druid priests. He heard the stories and legends of the Irish people through the wandering storytellers, minstrels, and balladeers who would certainly be called on to entertain the household of the tribal king.. It is hard for us to imagine this because of the amount of distraction and entertainment we experience. In an age in Ireland on the edge of prehistoric, there were no distractions and when one focused on something, they remembered everything. It was easy to become subsumed into the culture. Patrick lived in this atmosphere for six years.

Patrick was a Christian. Being Christian made as much of an impression on him as it does any sixteen year old boy. However, he was born into a family of clergymen and he couldn’t help being part of a Christian culture. His Christianity was part of his persona and certainly a part of his reflections on the long lonely nights while he was tending his sheep. He remembered his prayers from boyhood and spent a great deal of time in prayer. His years of bondage, especially the later years became years of conversion. After much thought and prayer, he decided to make his way back to the east coast of Ireland, approximately 180 miles on foot. He was now 22 years of age.

There were no ports on the west coast. One thinks of Galway City or Donegal Town, relatively close to Miluce’s dun. These ports may not have existed at that time. Foreign ships may not have ventured out into the western sea simply because they faced an infinity of water. There might not have been that kind of fear in the Irish fishermen. St. Brendan reported finding an Irish community when he arrived at Iceland, not too long after the death of Patrick.

Patrick did get his ship. sailing from Wicklow and arriving in southern Gaul, probably at the port of Bordeaux.

Preparation for Ministry

This part of the story is a summary of about twenty years. It took Patrick about three days to cross the channel to southern Gaul. It took three additional years to reach his British home. He was sidelined by being part of a monastery at Lerins in southern France where he was brought under the spell of the monastic ideal. His future ministry was in the active world of the people, but monasticism became a principal and indispensable element of his idea of a Christian Church. Ireland did not have villages or cities. Patrick founded monastic type communities that subsequently became the villages and cities of Ireland. .

Although he found his way back to Britain and to his hometown, there is no evidence that he had a burning desire to return to Ireland. Nor was there any indication that he had an interest in converting the heathen. All of this came into new light as the result of a dream where an old friend had handed him a handful of letters from the people of Ireland begging him to come back. The seed of his vocation had been planted and now needed nourishment in order to bloom.

He returned to Gaul and studied theology at a Gallic university called Auxerre. Patrick came under the influence of Germanus, possibly the rector of Auxerre, who mentored him during his academic years. Patrick was ordained with two other men who were to help spread Christianity in Ireland, one named Fith, a native of southern Ireland who took the name, Iserninus. The name of the other man was Auxilius, but the Irish call him Ausaille. Fourteen years passed from the day of ordination to the day he set out for Ireland.

Patrick was not the first Christian in Ireland. There is evidence of small Christian communities located close to the ports of Ireland. There was at least some trade from England and the mainland of Europe and certainly there were Christians among the traders. Everyone was a Roman citizen and Rome and the church were aligned. Also a Bishop, Palladius, by name, was ordained by Pope Clement and sent to Ireland with a large entourage as the Pope's emissary with a primary mission to help maintain the faith of Christians already resident there and organize the communities along the lines of the Church of Rome. Palladius died within a year and that opened the way for Patrick. He was ordained a Bishop by his mentor, Germanus of Auxerre, and began his ministry in Ireland in 431.

The Mission in Ireland

Patrick's missionary focus, different from that of Palladius, was to convert the heathen. Within thirty years, Patrick had converted most of Ireland to Christianity. During that time, probably in the year 442, Patrick went to Rome and met with Pope Leo the Great. He had great things to report but this is the first time that the Church in Ireland was aligned with the lead Church of Christendom at Rome.

How did he do this? Again, the demands of space require that we summarize. The details are buried within the hundreds legends about Patrick's work. In the last analysis, though,

we have to say that Patrick's success was due to the sheer strength of his personality. His holiness is an obvious factor. He must have had incredible negotiating skills because he converted many kings and consecrated bishops to keep at least the strongest of the kings in check. The kings who did not convert held Patrick in great esteem, a tribute to his human relations skills. Once the kings converted, the tribes they ruled were more likely to open themselves to Patrick's preaching. Most of the tribespeople ultimately converted.

He must have had incredible charm, the kind of Irish charm that could tell you to go to hades, and have you look forward to the trip. His success with the kings and with the people was such that within his lifetime, the slave trade came to a halt. Intertribal warfare, assassination and other forms of violence decreased. He built monastic communities and convents for contemplatives but communities of the laity lived within the security of these monasteries and developed residential and service industries that eventually became the cities and villages of Ireland. Now they had jobs such as blacksmithing, markets for food produce and animal husbandry, weavers, clothiers and so on. Their work was producing something and there was now a form of remuneration. This was the social structure of church and community that he learned during his stay at Lerins and as he observed during his studies and ministry in Gaul. The monks and the sisters reminded the Irish laity who joined them that the virtues of lifelong fidelity, courage, and generosity were the real core of life and that the sword was not the only instrument for structuring a society. Each monastery became a faith community.

Patrick died in 481. He is buried at Armagh. However, his legacy lives. His preaching depended on Christ rather than himself. People die, but their spirit lives on. Patrick's does and impacts Ireland to this very day. His feast day has always been honored as March 17th, the date of his death. In 900 the Irish began to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.

I leave you with his own prayer. Use it as a mantra to keep you in touch with God all day long.

Christ, as a light, illumine and guide me.
Christ, as a shield, overshadow and cover me.
Christ, be under me; Christ be over me,
Christ, be beside me on left hand and right.
Christ, be before me, behind me, about me.
Christ, this day, be within and without me.
Christ the lowly, Christ the meek,
Christ, the all powerful,
Be in the heart of each with whom I speak.
On the lips of each who speak to me,
In all who draw near me, or see me, or hear me
(From the Breastplate of St. Patrick)

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