

ST. PATRICK, BISHOP OF ARMAGH, AND ENLIGHTENER OF IRELAND



Outline of Talk on St. Patrick

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St. Pat III

If a visitor from another planet were to land almost anywhere on earth this weekend, she or he would be totally baffled by all the hullabaloo. This little paper attempts to explain how we have come to this point.

Patrick of Ireland: Fifth Century Saint

[St. Patrick, Bishop of Armagh and Enlightener of Ireland: a 5th-century saint, b. ca. 387– d. ca. 460]

I. Life and Legend

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains something of a mystery. One scholar, Baring-Gould, finds that events traditionally associated with St. Patrick should actually be attributed to five different Patricks who have been united into one, but most modern scholars accept the O'Rahilly "Two Patricks" theory. The idea in both instances is that many of the traditions later associated with Saint Patrick in fact relate to Palladius and other early clerics who were sent to suppress the Pelagian heresy among Christians already present in Ireland. These theories contradict the widely held notion that St. Patrick alone introduced Christianity to Ireland; instead, it was an immense mission that took many evangelists and several generations to accomplish.

Only two authentic letters from St. Patrick have survived: the "Confession," and the "Letter to the Soldiers," which contain the few generally accepted details of his life. He was born and raised Christian in Roman Britain, perhaps in a community in NW England. His father was a town councilor and a deacon, his grandfather a priest. When he was about 16, he was captured by pagan raiders and taken as a slave to Ireland, where he worked as a herdsman. He writes that his faith grew in captivity, and he prayed daily. After six years, he heard a voice telling him that he would soon go home, and that his ship was ready. He escaped, travelled on foot to a port two hundred miles away, and after various adventures, reached his family. He eventually received some form of training for the priesthood, including study of the Latin Bible; but it was not a "higher education," which he regretted, and for which he was criticized; his writings were judged as inelegant or rustic. He records a vision in which he heard the voice of the Irish, crying out as one voice, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." In Ireland he baptized thousands of people, set up territorial sees, ordained priests to lead the new Christian communities, and converted wealthy women, some of whom became nuns in the face of family opposition. He ultimately was appointed Bishop of Armagh in the northern region of Ireland. St. Patrick's position as a foreigner was not an easy one. Legally he was without protection, and on one occasion he was beaten, robbed of all he had, and put in chains, perhaps awaiting execution. What stands out in his writings, according to translators, is St. Patrick's sense of being called by God to the work he had undertaken, and his determination and modesty in carrying it out: "I, Patrick, a sinner, am the most ignorant and of least account among the faithful, despised by many . . . I owe it to God's grace that so many people should through me be born again to him."

II. Signs and Symbols

Familiar with the Irish language and culture, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their Druid gods in this fashion. He also imposed the sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now known as the Celtic cross [see image on handout], enabling veneration of the symbol to seem more familiar to followers of the nature-based pagan religion.

Legend credits St. Patrick with teaching the Irish about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by showing people the shamrock, a three-leafed plant that could illustrate the Christian teaching of three persons in one God. For this reason, shamrocks are a central symbol for St. Patrick's Day. The shamrock was sacred in pre-Christian days in Ireland--because of its green color and overall shape, it symbolized to the Celts the rebirth of spring. By the seventeenth century, as the English began to seize Irish land and prohibited the use of the Irish language and the practice of Catholicism, many Irish began to wear a sprig of shamrock as a symbol of pride in their heritage and displeasure with English rule

The absence of snakes in Ireland gave rise to the legend that they had all been banished by St. Patrick, chasing them into the sea after they attacked him during a 40-day fast he was undertaking on the top of a hill that is now a pilgrimage site. However, all evidence suggests that post-glacial Ireland never had snakes, nor does insular New Zealand, Iceland, Greenland and Antarctica. One suggestion is that "snakes" refer to the serpent symbolism of the Druids at that time, as evidenced by coins minted in Gaul. The "banishing of the snakes" was really a metaphor for the eradication of pagan ideology from Ireland and the triumph of Christianity.

Finally, the leprechaun. Belief in leprechauns probably stems from Celtic belief in fairies, tiny men and women who used their magical powers to serve good or evil. In this folklore, leprechauns were cranky souls, known for their trickery, which they often used to protect their fabled pots of gold. Leprechauns had nothing to do with St. Patrick or the celebration of St. Patrick's Day, which was, and is, observed in Ireland as a Christian holy day. Then, in 1959 Walt Disney released a film called *Darby O'Gill & the Little People*, which invented and introduced to Americans a very different sort of leprechaun, one who was cheerful and friendly; it quickly evolved into an easily recognized symbol of both St. Patrick's Day and Ireland in general. The changing concept of "leprechaun" is an interesting example of how a folktale can be refashioned and popularized for modern taste.

III. St. Patrick's Day in America: the case study of New Haven (based on newspaper research by Neil Hogan, covering from 1842-1992—150 years)

St. Patrick's Day as a public festival first got underway in New Haven in the mid nineteenth century, but had begun earlier in private, when Irish workers in the local iron foundry celebrated in their cottages with fiddle and dance. Public displays were not yet made, because it was dangerous for Irishmen to march through the streets of New Haven. As one newspaper description states, "Trees were disfigured with effigies of the good saint bearing around his neck bags of potatoes, stumps of cabbage and other similar tokens of derision, both of the saint and the race." Acceptance of the Irish in New England came

gradually, and slowly the Irish increased their expressions of pride, joy, patriotism, conviviality and homesickness in the parades, the banquets, and the parties, as well as in traditional liturgical services.

Discrimination did not completely end. In 1905, three children were dismissed from Seymour High School by the principal for refusing to remove the large green ribbons they were wearing in celebration of the day. Railroad workers were ordered to take down Irish flags from the car shops of the Consolidated Railroad; most workers complied, although the boilermakers refused. But by 1957, the pastor of the Grand Avenue Congregational Church could heap praise on the apostle of Ireland, saying, “[Patrick] achieved three great results—he organized Ireland into churches; converted the remaining non-Christians into Christianity; and united Ireland to the Roman Empire and to the Christian Church. Judged by what he actually accomplished, he must be placed along with the most efficient of those who took part in spreading the Christian faith beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire.” This sermon by a Congregational minister summarizes well the main reasons why Patrick was venerated as a saint in America by branches of the Christian church that included the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran denominations, though he was never formally canonized by the Catholic church [see Orthodox icon on handout].

Visible evidence of the growing celebration can be measured by steamers arriving in New Haven from Ireland with boxes of shamrocks, first by the hundreds then by the thousands, and the thousands of postcards and greeting cards handled by the local post office. By the 1930s, St. Patrick’s Day was steadily being celebrated even by non-Irish groups. Irish music was featured at the annual dance of the New Haven Druggists Association, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars held a Patrick’s Day party. In 1956, all the Irish societies showed up for the parade, along with a large group of men, women, and children from New Haven’s Ukrainian community, marching behind a large banner proclaiming “Ukrainians Honor St. Patrick.” By 1964, the feast day was celebrated with one of the longest parades in New Haven’s history: 35,000 spectators watched a parade of more than 150 units that took more than two hours to pass the reviewing stand.

In 1969, the constitutionality of the St. Patrick’s Day parade was challenged by a New Haven resident, John Curran. He sought an injunction banning it, and filed a petition contending it was a religious procession and thus violated the U.S. Constitution’s provision separating church and state. He challenged the city’s appropriation of \$1,000 to defray costs of the parade and sought an injunction against any future parades. In the hearing, he said the purpose of the parade was to propagandize Roman Catholicism to the city’s population. The archbishop of Hartford and other bishops appeared on the reviewing stand, which was erected by city workers. He argued, “It is one more encroachment of the Roman Catholic Church’s agents, who have strived for centuries to corrupt and undermine.” Curran’s request, however, was denied. The court stated that “Regardless of its probable religious origin, the present purpose and primary effect of the parade are secular and festive. . . The parade has not been shown to inhibit or advance any religious cause in violation of the establishment clause or free exercise clause of the first amendment. Even assuming that the appropriation by the Board of Alderman exceeded the scope of their legislative powers, the proper remedy is not an injunction against the parade. The first amendment rights of the parade’s participants must be protected. The city’s actions in presenting a small gift, which subsidizes the parade to a very small degree, cannot be used as a basis for

effectively destroying these rights. The harm caused by issuing a restraining order would far outweigh any conceivable harm to the plaintiff caused by denying it." So, by 1969 the parade in New Haven had won (1) widespread social acceptance and (2) legal definition as a secular event. The grounds for the expansion of St. Patrick's Day had been set in New Haven, and most likely around that time, in other American locations as well.

IV. World-Wide Expansion

By 1983, the New Haven parade was beginning to be a celebration for all nationalities, as is evidenced in comments by some among the 50,000 spectators. One woman of French and English descent pointed to five generations of her family watching the festivities from the back of a pick-up truck, saying, we have made this parade a family gathering for the past five years." In a similar vein, a young student from Korea, studying political science at Yale, suggested, "There ought to be a day like this to celebrate all nationalities. It's great. In Korea, there's no such thing as this because everyone is only Korean. It's been the same for 5,000 years. But perhaps I'll be able to take some changes back."

The cult of St. Patrick had spread from Ireland to the United States, Canada, and Australia by immigrants fleeing poverty and starvation on the island during the years of the potato famine in the 1830s and 40s, flourishing in families and churches of Irish origin. Observed on March 17th, traditionally believed to be the date of his death, it has come to be celebrated both inside and outside Ireland as both a liturgical and non-liturgical holiday. The practices of St. Patrick's Day have been appropriated by other countries as well. In the 19th century, nationalism (along with liberalism) were movements that spread throughout Europe, helping to form the nation-states of Italy and Germany, and eventually other countries, by uniting warring kingdoms, duchies and independent cities. Nationalism competed or combined with traditional religious beliefs by calling for loyalty on the part of citizens within its new borders. Practices of St. Patrick's Day were employed to demonstrate love of country, whether one had Irish or Catholic ancestry or not.

Its observance is now a world-wide phenomenon, although recent events are primarily commercially motivated, promoted by savvy business people. One travel agency executive states the event is a major coup for Irish tourism, but adds that this year an ancient wonder of the world—the Pyramids of Giza—and a modern wonder of the world—the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro—are set to go green with lights for the first time ever on St. Patrick's Day. Other new additions are the "Welcome" sign in Las Vegas and the iconic Little Mermaid statue in Copenhagen. They will join Dubai's awesome hotel, Burj Al Arab, and other old favorites, including the Sydney Opera House, Niagara Falls, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Palace of Monaco, Table Mountain in South Africa, and the Empire State Building in New York. The Chicago and San Antonio Rivers, and the taxis of London, Birmingham, Glasgow and Manchester will also go green. The travel agent concludes that over 70 million people around the world claim links with the island of Ireland in some way, and St. Patrick's Day, in his words, is "a truly unique opportunity to reconnect them with their heritage." It is only a small step to say next, "On St. Patrick's Day, everyone is Irish." In most locations, it is celebrated with parades, parties, and pub crawls; and dinners of corned beef and cabbage washed down with green beer or black Guinness stout, all with much fun and laughter. Everyone, it seems, is wild about St. Patrick's Day!

A final point, in the form of a question, please answer yes or no, and you will have the last word:

Have we lost sight COMPLETELY of the 5th century saint, who, like the apostle Paul, had a vision calling him to come over to foreign lands, despite the hardships and dangers he would face, and preach the gospel message?

Yes, or No?

Thank you.