

# Patrick: a very human saint

by Bernard MacDonell

Next Monday is the feast of Saint Patrick—beloved spiritual father of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic. While in the culture of this continent the day is most popularly known for its ale-soaked, night-long paddywackery\*, the feast remains an important event in the calendar of the Church. Indeed, despite the Vatican's recent efforts to de-mythologize the historical Patrick from the legends which have grown round him, the Patrick of the **Confessions** show him to be no less vital a Christian figure than the heroic renderings of the ancient Irish sagas. As seen through his writings, Patrick's abiding faith in the God who loved him remains fresh, compelling and deeply human—even in the eyes of modern men. In keeping with the tradition of the **Gazette's** chronicles of the saints, let us look into the life of this great Apostle of Ireland.

Much to the chagrin of the Patrick cult and legend which began to emerge in the sixth century, the latest scholarly work shows quite convincingly that Patrick was not, in fact, Irish. While it is not clear just where he was raised on the island of Britain, his **Confessions** put him somewhere near the west coast in a Romanized village which Patrick calls **Bonnavem Taburniae**. Some argue that this place was near present-day Dumbarton in Scotland, but a more probable conjecture puts it in the south of Wales or the English Westcountry near the estuary of the Severn.

But while Patrick was not Irish neither was he a fully Romanized Briton (nor, God forbid, an early Angle or Saxon). As the **Confessions** show, and as their author is the first to admit, Patrick never developed proper fluency in Latin. It seems quite evident, therefore, that his native tongue was one of the Celtic languages of the west of Britain. The fact that it took him some years to fully master Irish Gaelic is a testament to the diversity of Celtic culture in Western Europe during this late stage of Celtic prominence.

## Young Patrick Goes to Ireland

As it happens, the imperial forces of Rome were facing considerable military problems on the continent in the late fourth century from barbarians (read: non-Romans). This led to the withdrawal of a vast number of troops from Britain leaving the western reaches of the province largely unprotected. In this vacuum, Neill of the Nine Hostages, "High King" of Ireland, is believed to have sent a series of large raiding parties to the west of Britain in search of plunder and slaves. In one of these raids, sixteen year-old Patrick was



Patrick and the unlikely serpents of Ireland: myth as a metaphor of God's power.

pirated away to Ireland along with many thousands of captives from his native district.

The earliest writers submit that Patrick spent his six years of slavery in Antrim; and although the **Confessions** do not verify this, his later work suggests very strongly that it was somewhere in the north of Ireland. Labouring as a herdsman for most of this period, Patrick tells us that he had to endure much physical suffering and was left alone for long periods in remote hill country. In his loneliness, he began to pray in a way his previously nominal Christianity had never moved him to do.

*Many times a day I used to pray (and as he prayed, his love and fear of God increased. . . . Before daybreak I used to be roused up to pray, and I felt no harm whether there was snow, frost or rain, nor was there any sluggishness in me, because, as I see, the Spirit was then glowing within me (Conf. 16).*

Having thus been uplifted out of the dark despair of his situation, Patrick began to long for his home in Britain. After some time—we do not know how much—he received a dream in which a heavenly voice told him that a ship waited in a distant port which would take him over the water to his own people. Armed with a spear and a long knife,

he received the modicum of education he appears to have gained during his middle or late twenties. Some have him going off to a monastery in Gaul (presently France) for studies, while others suggest he remained in the west of Britain where monastic communities were just beginning to root themselves.

## Patrick's Second Dream

At length, in any case, Patrick received another sacred dream. A messenger arrived from Ireland with many letters, one of which he extended to Patrick. Instead of commencing with the name of the sender, as was the custom in fifth century letters, Patrick saw before him *The Voice of the Irish*. Reading further, in his dream, he heard the Irish nation calling out to him in unison: "Come, we beseech thee, holy boy, and walk amongst us once again". He was so moved that he could go no further and awoke at once. Perplexing dreams followed on subsequent nights. Patrick could not understand why God should want to send him back amongst people who had treated him so badly during his captivity. Yet:

*Another night they (the Irish) called me most unmistakably with words which I heard but could not understand, except that at the end of the prayer He spoke thus: "He that has laid down his life for thee, it is He that speaketh to thee".*

In the end, Patrick overcame his uncertainties and returned across the western sea to Erin.

The sixth century Patrick cult, which we mentioned earlier, has done much to confuse Patrick's contribution to the conversion of the Irish. While it has been claimed by these early writers that Patrick was responsible for the evangelization of the whole of Ireland, most scholars agree that there were Christians in the south before his ministry. Much recent work, in fact, tentatively suggests that he went no further south than Dublin in the east and Sligo in the west. Nevertheless, the lands in between these two centers and all the way north comprise very nearly half of Ireland.

The extent of Patrick's ministry, then, was great indeed. In later life, when reflecting on his mission years in the **Confessions**, he is overwhelmed at God's success while working through him. "Patricus peccator, sutticissimus et minimus omnium fidelium". Patrick, a sinner, quite illiterate, and the least of the faithful. It was this figure which God delivered out of captivity and saved from the hands of the Druids on twelve very tense occasions. Such was the power of the Spirit that even from the stuff of poor Patrick great deeds could be drawn forth.

But while he marvelled at the providence of the Lord, Patrick's understanding of providence was not one which saw God always working a miracle for him in a tight situation. He realized that God's history might be such as to render misfortune to him in many respects while always assuring the Good in the end. Thus, his trust in God was unqualified. He would do what the Spirit instructed but could not be sure what this would mean for him, as an individual, walking on troubled Earth. One thing was certain, however: he would walk with God; and this, as with Plato's commitment to justice, meant everything.

Such a reckoning of God and the world has a tremendously modern thrust about it. Patrick's piety was not of the crude magic-ridden variety that one tends to associate with the beginnings of the Dark Ages. Indeed, in the whole of his writings, Patrick does not offer a single miracle along classic medieval lines. While unmistakably a man of deep religious experience, he was an individual with all the qualities, passions—and even a few of the frailties—we see about us today. His saintliness resides precisely in that feature of his personality which he most humbly saw as central to his own very complete human experience, namely, his unbounded love of God. In the bloom of that love what works of beauty and wonder have arisen! From the depths of our souls, Patrick, the modern Celts and the whole Church thank you for your most blessed faith.

Criost liom  
Criost romham  
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\* in English: tomfoolery