

FROM SLAVE TO SAINT

The Story of Patrick

by

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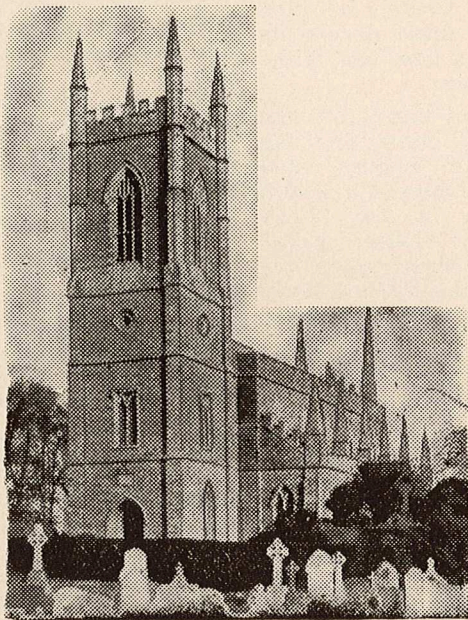


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Foremost amongst the evangelists of Ireland stands the figure of St. Patrick. On the whole we have more certain knowledge concerning his life and work than we have of St. David of Wales, and a great deal more than we possess concerning George of England.

The authenticity of Patrick's "Confessions" and his "Letter against Coroticus" is almost universally accepted. Bury is disposed to give a large degree of credence to the "Sayings of St. Patrick" and even looks with some favour on the Canons purporting to be written by him. Others regard these documents as products of a later age, without real authority.

We need not enter into the vexed question concerning the status of "The Sayings" and the "Canons". There is a wealth of information in the "Confession" and the "Letter against Coroticus," enabling us to reconstruct Patrick's life in a fairly ample manner.

BIRTHPLACE AND PARENTAGE

Patrick tells us he was born at Bannaventa. Beyond the fact that it was a part of Britain and not far from the sea, we have no reliable means of identifying the place where the little country house was located which sheltered the young Patrick.

An eleventh century commentator on the "Hymn of Fiacc," a poem recounting the life and exploits of Patrick, places Bannaventa at Dumbarton on the Clyde and this view has been very widely accepted. It lacks any serious evidence. Bury inclines strongly to the opinion that some place on the Severn or in the Bristol Channel more suitably fulfils all the conditions.

Apparently we are now induced to put Patrick's early home in Glamorganshire. The Welsh have good grounds for wresting the honour from the Scots. But the important and indisputable facts which interest us most lies in a two-fold description of his father's condition. He was a deacon in the Church and a decurion in the Roman State. Patrick adds the information that his grandfather was Potitus, a priest, who also held the office of decurion. Patrick evidently held that matrimony was "an honourable estate," open without blame to those who had devoted their lives to the sacred ministry. A digression may here be pardoned. We have not only the testimony of Patrick, which is our immediate concern, but we can point to a long line of successors to Patrick in the early Irish Church, who claimed as parents men whose names are honoured in the register of the Clergy. In Ireland, at the period under review, there existed a system of succession known as Tanistry. According to this principle it was customary to elect on the death of any chief lord or captain the next to him in blood, who was deemed most worthy of the office. It might be the son or the next brother or next cousin of the former occupant of the office. It did not necessarily mean the eldest son, who might be only a minor at the time of his father's death. It was also customary, in order to secure the succession, to appoint during the life-time of the lord or captain a blood

relative who was called a Tanist and was recognised as the legitimate successor. This principle was carried into the Church. We read of Tanist Abbots in "The Annals of the Four Masters."

Thus the relatives of a particular Abbot or Bishop held office successively for a very long period. We read that Gorman Abbot of Louth was the father of Torbach, Prelate of Armagh. Egan, the son of Torbach, succeeded Torbach. Egan had a son, Owen the Anchorite, who had a son, Luchairen, whose son, Egertach, became erenach or holder of the temporalities of an ecclesiastical establishment. This line in Tanistry, involving as we have seen the marriage of men in Holy Orders, extended from 753 to 1059. This sheds an important light on Patrick's statement that his grandfather was a priest. Unless we are to assume that a total change of thought came over the authorities of the Irish Church within three hundred years, we must recognise that Patrick assented to the principle of the marriage of priests. This does not involve his acceptance of the principle of Tanistry and especially its extension to offices held by ordained men. But in the ninth century, if we accept the date given by Bury as the extreme limit for "The Tripartite Life," this practice was declared to be inaugurated by the express decision of Saint Patrick himself. Whatever decision may be reached on this point, there can be no doubt that St. Patrick was the descendant of men in Holy Orders and that the Church of Ireland had a long succession of married priests and abbots. The practice evoked the wrath of Bernard of Clairvaux, who denounced the system as "a most atrocious practice" and calmly assigned men who were honoured in the Irish Church to perdition. The four Masters write:

"Murtoogh, successor of St. Patrick, died penitent — yea triumphant." Bernard on the contrary, "Murtoogh no bishop, but a tyrant, an ecclesiastical adulterer, went from this world to be damned: yet still, to live in an heir, provided for the purpose of adding to his deeds of damnation." Thus the fact is established that up to the twelfth century a married clergy and married bishops formed the rule and not the exception in Ireland. Indeed, notwithstanding the zealous labours of Malachy and the encouragement he received from Bernard, the practice continued until well into the sixteenth century. Tradition overcame legislation as frequently happens. But to return to Patrick. He informs us that his father and grandfather, although in Holy Orders, were decurions. The decurion was a municipal officer upon whom rested the burden of collecting the requisite amount of Taxes in a given area. He had to assess the amount payable by each individual landowner and make his own contribution according to scale. Calpurnius and Potitus discharged their office as tax-gatherers and tax-payers while also executing the sacred duties of the ministry. One of the qualifications for office as a decurion was the possession of sixteen acres of land at least.

EARLY LIFE AND COMMISSION AS MISSIONARY

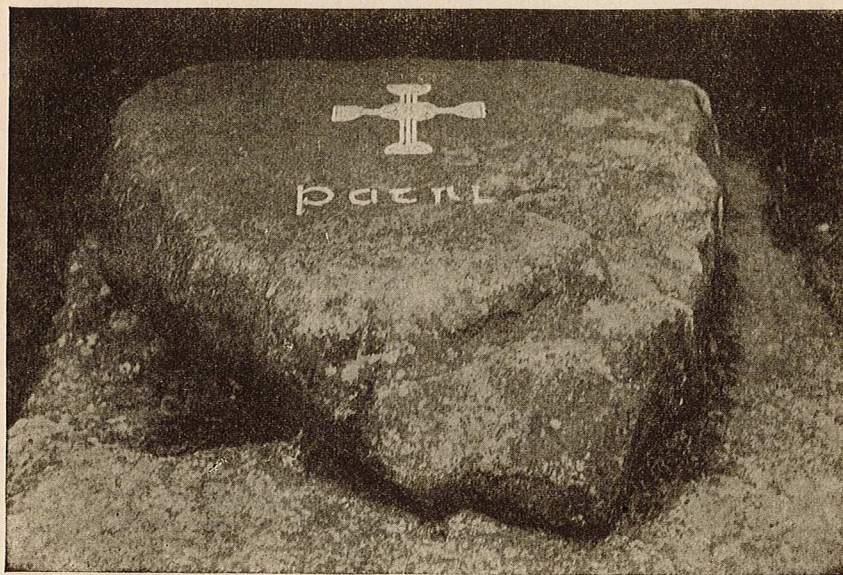
Patrick tells us little about his early life beyond the facts already recorded. He indicates, however, very clearly that, notwithstanding his upbringing in a Christian home, he and many others of his countrymen "had gone back from God and had not kept His commandments and were not obedient to our priests, who used to warn us for our



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salvation." At the age of sixteen Patrick was seized by a company of freebooters who raided the English coast. The raiders probably belonged to the band of Niall of the Nine Hostages, who was High King of Ireland about this period. There is no actual certainty to be had on this point. The one fact that is certain is that Patrick was carried away with hundreds of others to what he calls Hiberio and describes as "the ultimate places of the earth." At least so Bury will have it. He regards the

Bury's poetic description of the language of the "Confession." There is a simpler method of interpreting the words. They may readily be a relic of Patrick's Bible reading. Patrick says: "The Lord brought upon us the wrath of His displeasure, and scattered us among many nations, even unto the ends of the earth." The reference may well be general. British legions were hurrying to the defence of Empire abroad. Captives had been taken by the victorious Franks. The whole tone of the passage



St. Patrick's Grave

words as a touchingly Roman characteristic of Patrick's geographical view. "The Roman Empire was the world and all outside its fringe was in darkness, the ultimate places of the earth." No doubt whatever, Patrick was passionately devoted to his Roman citizenship. That fact appears in his "Letter against Coroticus" where he insists on his birth as a Roman citizen. But we may doubt the justice of

suggests that it is a description of the judgment of God on the irreligious Britons rather than a reference to Hiberio. It has its origin possibly in Deut., xxiii : 17 : — "His horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth." Patrick did not confuse his geography, but expanded his experience in the light of current events which were sufficiently startling to

justify his strong language. It would be a natural association with Lev., xxvi : 33 which read in the Latin Text: "But you will I scatter among the nations"; the very quotation that precedes immediately the reference to "the ultimate places of the earth." Patrick tells us he was sold into slavery and remained a slave in Ireland for a period of six years. Like everything else in the Saint's life legend has been busy with the name of his master and with the location where he served as slave. A mountain in Antrim, Slemish, claims the honour, but shares it, in the judgment of historians, with Croagh Patrick in Mayo. He tells us himself that he was taken captive and that during his captivity the Lord opened his sense of unbelief and that he was converted with his whole heart unto the Lord his God. He bore faithful testimony to those with whom he was associated in the years of his captivity. Be he was a captive. The captive yearns for freedom. Patrick dreamt of liberty while he was in the toils of slavery. At last his dream came true. He heard a voice calling him saying: "Thy fasting is well; thou shalt soon return to thy country." After some time, in a second dream he heard the voice calling: "Behold, thy ship is ready." Patrick took a wearisome journey across Ireland. He does not mention with any precision the place from which he started, nor does he identify the port at which he found the ship waiting for him. Conjecture has named Bantry Bay, assuming that Patrick travelled from Antrim and not from Mayo. Another conjecture makes it Wicklow Harbour or Inver-Dea at the mouth of the Vartry. If we assume that Patrick was in captivity by the shores of the Western Sea and that the Slemish story arose from his later missionary activity in the North of

Ireland, we have yet another and simpler explanation of "the ultimate places of the earth" to which he refers. Patrick's geography would be no different from the geography that prevailed in the time of Columbus. To him the swelling Atlantic would mark the bounds of the world. His imagination would readily connect this, as we have already suggested, with the scripture passages denouncing God's wrath against sinners. He does not anywhere write with precision concerning places and we are left to conjecture.

Interesting and perplexing as are the details of St. Patrick's early life and his captivity in Ireland, the most important fact regarding his life-work is his decision to return to Ireland. He tells us he journeyed with the traders who were in the ship with him for a considerable period. Apparently he journeyed with them through Gaul and maybe he reached the shores of Italy. At length he escaped, exactly how or when he does not tell us, and returned home to his kinsfolk. But the call of the heathen Irish sounded still in his ears. He heard in his dreams their solicitation: "Come holy youth and walk amongst us." The call to missionary activity triumphed. Patrick went back to Ireland.

Later stories of his life credit him with a stay at the monastery of Lerins and with receiving ordination at the hands of Germanus, one of the most illustrious of the Bishops of Gaul. Another account attributes the act of ordination to Amathorex who has been identified with Amator of Auxerre. The confusion is sought to be remedied by the suggestion that Amator ordained Patrick priest and Germanus consecrated him Bishop to the Irish. Patrick himself is silent as to the source of his commis-

sion. His "Confession" is a defence of his action in becoming a missionary against the criticism of certain "seniors" who evidently lived in England. He admits he was unworthy, a sinner and unlearned. These admissions, incidentally, cast doubt on the later detailed accounts of long residence in the monastery of Lerins and continued instruction in the school of Germanus. Patrick is content to claim that his call came from God. "God knows," he writes, "if it were man who had spoken to me I would perhaps have been silent for the love of Christ." At no time does he claim high ecclesiastical authority for his venture. God called him and that was sufficient. The later theory that Patrick received his consecration directly at the hands of Pope Celestine must be rejected. Prosper Aquitanus wrote his "Church Annals" some twenty years or more after Patrick's entry upon his labours. He records with detail the effort of Celestine in sending Palladius to the Irish believing in Christ. The mission of Palladius terminated quickly within a year and was a complete failure. Prosper makes no reference to the mission of Patrick, nor yet Bede, nor does Platina, the later official biographer of the Papacy. Even if it is contended that the mission of Palladius was not a failure, that he intended to return to Ireland after his recorded visit to the Picts of North Britain, it is still contrary to the practice of the historians mentioned to record a short mission and to ignore a successful lengthy enterprise. The only ground which can be urged to account for the preference of Palladius over Patrick is the fact that Palladius had a direct papal authority which Patrick lacked. We may add to this contemporary discrimination the fact that Augustine's coming from Rome

only 136 years after the death of Patrick, was strongly resented by the British Christians. The independence of the two churches, the British and the Irish, which had close connection through the missionary activity carried on from Iona, is thus definitely established. If Patrick could claim the authority of Rome for his mission it is inconceivable that he would not have urged the claim against his detractors. He relied on the command of God solely and based his action on that command alone. The independence here asserted continued in Irish circles until the twelfth century and as we have seen, provoked the wrath of Bernard at the time that Malachy sought to secure the unification of the Church of Ireland with the Church of Rome. It may prove of interest that in 1674 Archbishop Talbot of Dublin in endeavouring to prove that Dublin had primacy over Armagh points out that the use of the pall, which is the mark of jurisdiction conferred by the Pope, was wanting to Armagh and had been wanting from the beginning. (Primatus Dublinensis). Thus in the seventeenth century the tradition of the independence of the Irish Church was asserted, not to support its dignity but to depreciate its claims. The testimony is too well-established to be lightly overthrown.

MISSIONARY LABOURS AND DOCTRINE

Like Palladius it would appear that Patrick landed on the coast of Wicklow, perhaps taking refuge for a brief period on one of the small islets which still bears his name, Inis Patrick. But the records are silent concerning his experiences in Leinster. The scene of his labours is rapidly transported to Ulidia. In Strangford Lough he began serious missionary labours. He im-

pressed the chieftain Dichu who gave him a barn to serve as a church in the spot that still commemorates the circumstances by the name Saul, which in its Irish form means "barn." Ulidia comprises what is now known as Antrim and Down, although in another use it referred to the whole of Northern Ireland. It is believed that the Gaels drove the Picts and Scots eastward and they took refuge in the two counties of Antrim and Down. The Picts had affinities with the inhabitants of Scotland and the Scots were more closely connected with the Irish. Ireland claims that she gave a name and the bagpipes to the land of the heather. It was here with an extension into the land of Oriel, now known as Armagh, that Patrick's greatest triumphs were achieved. The submission of the Chieftain Dichu to the Christian faith evidently resulted in the acceptance of Patrick's message by the whole tribe. Not only did he win the esteem and support of Dichu but he enlisted the aid of Daire, king of Oriel. The story of Patrick's relation to Daire is embellished with legend. He is credited with remonstrating with a squire of the king, who drove his horse to feed in a field of grass belonging to the monastery at the foot of Ard Macha, a small holding, the first granted by Daire to Patrick. The squire paid no attention to Patrick's complaint but when he returned to the field on the morrow, the horse was dead. Daire was informed that Patrick had killed his squire's horse. He gave instructions to his men to go and kill Patrick. When they were about to proceed on their errand, Daire suddenly fell seriously ill. His wife begged him to send to Patrick and ask his blessing, stopping the men who were sent to kill him. Patrick gave the messengers consecrated water and Daire recovered. He also

sprinkled water on the horse and the horse came to life. There is a further amusing story that king Daire went to pay his respects and presented Patrick with a large cauldron. The only acknowledgment he received was the words in Latin: "I thank thee." The king did not understand and on his return sent some messengers to recover the cauldron. Patrick handed it back with the same formula meaning: "I thank thee." The king was so impressed that he gave back the cauldron and gave also the land at the summit of the hill Macha and so Armagh came into its place of pre-eminence. The stories are fanciful, but the fact remains that Patrick gave his name and authority to the Cathedral Church that has ever since occupied the place in Irish thought that Canterbury does in England. The challenge to Loigaire, High King of Ireland, and the conflict with the Druids on the hill of Tara, are even more richly embellished with fanciful art than the record of the founding of Armagh. But they are based on the solid fact that in Royal Meath and in Armagh Patrick won converts and founded on a sure base the Christian Church. He is the one outstanding figure to whom all do honour. Every aspect of Christian thought in Ireland looks back to him. Every Christian Irishman can say: "He is the father of us all." We can smile at the stories. We can regretfully acknowledge that the illustration of the Shamrock leaves, to enforce the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, is too late to deserve any credence. And yet Patrick remains and the church which he established on God's holy Word still commands our allegiance. The rivalry of his days when his seniors bitterly reproached him for his presumption in setting forth as a missionary, is reflected also in later

times. The very place of his burial has become the centre of a prolonged conflict. Downpatrick has been honoured for centuries as the place where Patrick was at length laid to rest. Bury, the historian to whom we have frequently referred, unhesitatingly casts his vote for Saul. Saul, the spot where Dichu gave his barn, becomes the place of rest for Patrick's mortal remains. The two spots are in very close proximity, and that may lend a measure of verisimilitude to the old stories. But the cold criticism of the professional historian cannot wholly remove from us the thrill of the ancient conflicts. Malachy in the twelfth century insisted that during the Danish invasions the remains of Brigit, the Abbess of Kildare, and those of St. Columba, the founder of Iona, were removed from their earlier resting places and laid beside the bones of St. Patrick. Malachy was led by a beam of light to the spot where the three were buried and afterwards got the consent of Pope Urban III in response to his entreaty, supported by DeCourcey Lord of Down, to translate the relics to a more suitable burial place. Dr. O'Donovan, however, in his notes on "The Annals of the Four Masters," contends that this narrative was a device of the English party in order to add dignity to Down. Not to be outdone the Irish Party had their own version, different from the above record found in Giraldus Cambrensis. They attribute the revelation to Nicholas Mac Molissa, Primate of Armagh, who in 1289 unearthed the remains of the three saints from their grave in Saul and placed them honourably in a shrine again.

PATRICK'S MESSAGE

It may not be out of place to conclude this short sketch with an enquiry into the essential elements of Patrick's preaching.

Here as elsewhere the evidence is not as complete as we could wish. But there are very definite indications which it is well to bear in mind. We have already alluded to the fact that Patrick was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest and as a consequence left the tradition of a married clergy in the Church which he founded, a tradition which persisted down the centuries. In very many other respects his teaching reflects a much simpler character than the later medieval form which was thrust upon the Church by the English influence of later times. Malachy introduced, according to Bernard, "Roman laws and ecclesiastical customs" into Ireland.

Before the twelfth century the Irish Church was self-contained and self governed. This did not mean that she was cut off from all association with Christians in other lands, but it meant that while she maintained the truth embodied in the creeds of Christendom she had a large measure of autonomy in matters of Government. Independence of thought and action was freely countenanced in the old Irish Church. The life of Columba, who was born probably sixty years after Patrick's death, offers much evidence of this independence. Columbanus, the missionary on the Continent of Europe, goes much further, even claiming that circumstances might justify churches in withdrawing from communion with the Roman See. Writing to the distinguished Gregory the Great, Columbanus said: "For I confess to you plainly that the man who contradicts the authority of St. Jerome will be looked upon as a heretic, and rejected with scorn by the Churches of the West." That this is not a forced deduction may be established by the fact that M. Languéal, the distinguished Jesuit historian of the



Interior of Down Cathedral

French Church, has the following comment: "This is saying plainly enough that he would not submit to the decision he asked for (from Pope Gregory) unless it agreed with his own prejudices." (Hist. de l'Eglise Gal. LIV, 9, tome III, p. 371.)

Patrick's own message was a simple one. He gives a short outline in the "Confessions." He declares his faith in the one God Who was unbegotten, in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord "in an ineffable manner begotten, before all beginning; Who was made man and overcame death and shall return to judge the quick and the dead." "Jesus Christ has poured on us the gift of the Holy Ghost Who makes the faithful and obedient sons of God and joint heirs with Christ." He speaks of one God in the Trinity of the Sacred Name. In his letter against Coroticus he mentions the fact that his converts and himself received one baptism and had one God, our Father. He also speaks in the "Confessions" of the fact that in captivity he remembered his sins and was converted with his whole heart unto the Lord.

Commenting on those who had been slain by the soldiers of Coroticus he writes: "Thanks be to God, O ye believers and baptised, ye have gone from this world to paradise." He quotes extensively from the scriptures, which is in marked contrast to his silence on such topics as the authority of the Church. Patrick knows nothing of the later beliefs which were fostered in the tenth and eleventh centuries. There is no mention of Purgatory, no reference to the sacrifice of the Mass, there is not even a mention of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, though it is certain Patrick observed it. The opinions concerning the sacred Feast which obtained in the days of Aquinas and later had not yet been a feature of the early Irish

Teaching. There is a passage which has led some to think that Patrick accepted the practice of the Invocation of Saints but it will not bear the weight sought to be placed upon it. Patrick in a dream, feeling oppressed by a great burden called out: "Helias! Helias!" He adds: "The brightness of the sun fell upon me and straightway removed all the weight. And I am persuaded that I was relieved by Christ my Lord, and that His Spirit then cried out for me." Immediately before he had said: "How it came into my mind to call out 'Helias' I know not, but at that moment I saw the sun rising in the heavens." There are difficulties about identifying the name Helias. Some regard it as the Greek word Helios, the sun, others think it was a recollection of our Lord's cry: "Eli! Eli!" At any rate Patrick attributes no power or efficacy to his cry or to the person, if it were a person, who is invoked. Elias was never invoked as a saint. The very festival of Elias on Mount Carmel cannot be traced earlier than about the tenth century. There is no appeal to the Blessed Virgin, which would be remarkable had Patrick taught the modern doctrine. We can confidently assert that Patrick reflects a primitive message in which the great truths of God's Being and character and the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ our Lord; the need of repentance, faith and obedience on the part of man and the blessed hope of everlasting life are the prominent features. So we repeat Patrick is the father of us all. Every Christian who loves the Bible and accepts the simple creed with Patrick records can look back with thankfulness to this intrepid missionary and revere his memory which made Ireland "the island of Saints and land of Scholars."

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