

Who was the real St. Patrick?

By Baron Sir Paul de Marseilles

"I am Patrick-a sinner-the most unsophisticated and unworthy among all the faithful of God. Indeed to many, I am the most despised."

These haunting words come to us from a man who is celebrated all over the world on March 17 of each year. They are the words of St. Patrick, the patron Saint of Ireland. Ask any ten people about him and most will tell you that he was Irish or even that he was the first Bishop of Ireland. Neither of these statements is true. He was a Roman, a former slave, and a missionary. Despite his immense popularity, we know very little about him and most of what we do know about the historical Patrick can be fit into 20 pages of single space text. There are only two documents authored by Patrick which have survived through the centuries. One is his "Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus", an excommunication of a Roman warlord and his band of slaving mercenaries and the other is his "Confessio", a defense of his work in Ireland.

The Legends of St. Patrick

There are numerous legends about St. Patrick. One legend has Patrick single handedly converting the entirety of Ireland. In another legend, a Druid attempts to poison Patrick with a magically enchanted cup. Patrick blesses the cup which freezes all of the liquid except for the poison which he simply pours out. In still another legend, the Irish saints, St. Ailbe, Declan, Ciaran and Ibar, are arguing among themselves whether or not to recognize Patrick's authority in Ireland. In this legend, Ailbe eventually gives in but Ibar states that he will never yield Ireland to a British born foreigner. The debate becomes so heated that an Angel is forced to mediate and stop Ibar and Patrick from coming to blows. Still another legend has a leper asking to come to Ireland with Patrick on a boat. The other passengers angrily refuse to have him on board. Patrick has a stone alter which had been given to him for his work in Ireland. He ties a rope to it and throws it into the sea where it miraculously floats. At Patrick's request, the leper climbs on the alter and rides his way across the sea to Ireland. Each of these legends shares certain common elements. They demonstrate humor and Patrick's deep compassion for those who are less fortunate. While they tell us about his myth, they shed little light on the actual man.

The World of St. Patrick

Patrick (or Patricius) was born a Roman in Bannaventa Burniae, a small Roman Settlement in Southwest Britain around 389 A.D. The exact location of this town has long been lost. It was likely located on the west part of Britain near the sea. Calpurnius, his father, was a Decurion, a city councilor who collected Imperial taxes. The position was hereditary and Patricius was destined for a life of privilege in Roman society. Potitus, his grandfather, was a deacon in the Catholic Church, one of the lower ranked members of the clergy. According to his "Letter", Patricius's family was relatively prosperous and owned slaves.

Patricius grew up speaking Latin and British, a language distantly related to modern day Welsh. He never completed his formal education, a failure which haunted him throughout his life. He always struggled with Latin, the language of education and government. Despite his family's background and his own education, he cared very little for religion as a child. Young Patricius was rebellious and an atheist at heart. At age 15, he committed an act that he was forever haunted by. Even years later, he felt compelled to confess it to his best friend. We will likely never know the exact nature of the act. However, it was sufficiently horrendous that the British Bishops wanted to put him on trial after a lifetime of service in Ireland and strip him of his rank. The only "sins" capable of this type of outrage in the early Church were sexual immorality, murder, or idolatry. Based on his writings, we know that the act was committed in a single hour in a single afternoon.

Britain had been a part of the Roman Empire for over 300 years. It saw the Roman Legions of Julius Cesar in 55 B.C. In 43 A.D., the armies of Imperial Rome returned under the command of Emperor Claudius. Despite the revolt by Queen Boudicca of the Iceni and the continued resistance of the Picts, Roman influence eventually stretched from present day England and into Scotland before finally retreating behind the border of Hadrian's Wall. British born soldiers became a mainstay of the Legions and Britain became a northern outpost of the Roman Empire. Christianity spread slowly throughout the Empire. It experienced intense persecution during its early years until Constantine the Great adopted it in 312 and made it an official state religion. It reached Britain by the end of the 3rd century and flourished among the British elite by the 4th century. There is strong evidence that Christianity had made inroads into Ireland before Patrick's arrival.

By 400-410, Rome was pulling her armies home to fight the barbarian incursions in Europe. Emperor Honorius warned the Britons to look towards their own defense. On August 24, 410, the German Visigoths sacked Rome. Rome was no longer able to pay attention to the security of her own citizens on the margins of the Empire.

The Kidnapping of Patrick

The Irish became bolder in conducting raids on isolated farms for both slaves and plunder as Rome continued to pull away from her former borders. In 405, Patrick was kidnapped from his family villa and taken to Ireland. He was 16 years old and would spend the next six years of his life as a slave.

Ancient Ireland was a rural society of farmers and herders. There were no towns or cities. There were perhaps 100 "tuatha" or tribes throughout the island which were ruled by a petty King. Some of these tribes had thousands of members while others had only a few hundred. There were only three types of individuals who had free passage from one tuatha to another: Kings, Druids and Bards/Poets. Everyone had a rank in early Irish culture and legal rights were dependent upon social status. At the top of this social structure were the Kings, followed by Nobles, landed Tenants, paying Tenants and finally slaves. Slaves had little to no rights, were rarely freed, and generally couldn't buy their way out of slavery.

There is no historical evidence as to where Patrick lived during his slavery. Some historians point to the County Mayo while others point to Conneught or Antrim. During his six years in slavery, Patrick

learned the Irish language as well as Irish customs. He also experienced a profound spiritual awakening. In 411, Patrick had visions and dreams telling him that his ship was ready to take him home. He had neither compass nor map nor money. He traveled nearly 185 miles by foot across Ireland as a fugitive slave. Under Irish law, anyone who found him had to return him to his master or simply kill him outright. Despite the impossibility of his escape, he found a trading vessel readying to debark for Europe when he reached the sea. He was first turned away by the ship's captain but the crew finally agreed to take him aboard. They probably thought he could turn a good profit selling Patrick back into slavery after working him as a hired hand. The voyage lasted three days and the ship probably landed somewhere in Gaul shortly after a raid by the Germanic tribes.

According to Patrick, he and the crew wandered for days trying to find food, people or shelter. The crew taunted Patrick about his "powerful" deity who could not even provide food. Patrick simply answered that his God would provide for those who believed in him. Patrick states that a herd of pigs suddenly appeared and everyone feasted upon the pork. Patrick continued to have "visions" during his journey. He and the crew were finally able to find a settlement and Patrick was on his way home.

Patrick's Return Home

He eventually arrived back in Bannaventa Burniae in 412. He was now in twenties and a very different young man. His experiences had scarred and changed him. After his homecoming, Patrick again had a series of disturbing visions. He met a man named Victorinus in a dream who delivered a series of letters addressed to "the Voice of the Irish". These letters begged him to return to Ireland and walk among the Irish.

He had just returned home after six years of slavery and an impossible escape. Despite his family's pleas, Patrick chose to become a priest and return to Ireland to work among the people who had once enslaved him. He spent the next several years of his life studying theology under either Bishop Germanus at Auxerre in Gaul or under one of the British Bishops as a result of his family connections. In any event, he was eventually ordained as a Deacon and, ultimately, as a Bishop.

Patrick in Ireland

Patrick operated primarily in Northern Ireland and worked among Kings as well as slaves and the down trodden. Ireland was considered by many to be at the end of the world. Patrick was not the first missionary in Ireland nor was he even its first Bishop. According to Prosper of Aquitaine in his "Chronicon", a listing of events in the early Church, Palladius was appointed in 431 by Pope Celestine to serve in Ireland and it is highly likely that Patrick accompanied him on this mission since he knew Ireland's language and customs. According to Muirchu, the author of "Vita Patricii", a 7th Century biography of St. Patrick which argued in favor of Patrick's Sainthood, Palladius died within a year and Patrick was conducting his work in Ireland by 432.

Patrick converted chieftain Dichu in Ulster and was given a wooden barn for a place of worship. The barn would eventually be known as Saul or Sabhall (from the Latin "Stabulum" or stable). In fact, Patrick converted thousands during his lifetime in Leinster and Connaught, two of the provinces of

Ireland. He founded monasteries and convents for both men and women in Ireland. He ordained other clergy. According to some historians, he met with Pope Leo I (440-461) who approved a See in Ireland which Patrick established in 444 on a hill named Ardd Macha in Ulster. This See would later become the City of Armagh.

Throughout his adult life, Patrick worked unceasingly among the Irish people at personal risk and in occasional defiance of the leadership of the Church. He was always under the threat of death and always on the move. The Irish regularly warred against each other. They liked outsiders even less than members of rival tribes. He was attacked and beaten on several occasions and was enslaved at least one more time during his adult life. Many of the Irish Kings wanted nothing to do with either him or his strange religion. The Irish lived in a land of many gods and goddesses. It was a land where the dead roamed at night and the supernatural in the form of the Sidhe were, at times, less than a hand length away. Patrick brought with him humility, a willingness to defy secular authority, intense courage and a bull dog determination in his travels. These were traits that the Irish could relate to.

As the Roman army pulled out of Britain, life grew harsh. The Picts threatened from the North and the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians attacked the South and Eastern portions of the island. Many established settlements and threatened what remained of Roman Britain. New warlords such as Vortigern, Coroticus and Ambrosius Aurelianus began to dominate Roman towns and settlements. Coroticus authorized a retaliatory raid into Ireland to gather slaves. Patrick had just finished baptizing a group of people who were promptly killed and/or captured and then sold into slavery in Britain. Patrick wrote his "Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus" in response to this attack. The letter was sent not only to Coroticus but to the Church leaders in Britain who allowed the raid. After being a slave himself, Patrick had little tolerance for slavery in his former homeland. The letter was an excommunication of Coroticus from the Church.

The letter enraged the leaders of the British church. Tradition demanded that neither priest nor Bishop interfere with congregations of another Bishop. Patrick knew these prohibitions but strove to protect the Irish from the brutality and slavery of the Britons. The Church leadership in Britain demanded that Patrick return to face charges of malfeasance, misappropriation of funds and allegations of corruption. Church leaders also charged him with being unfit to be a priest and wanted to replace Patrick with a better educated and well born churchman who would be more compliant in the new prosperous Church which was forming in Ireland. Patrick's "Confessio" or "Confession" was a rebuttal to these charges as well as a defense of his work among the Irish. It was the plea of an old man simply desiring to finish his life's work.

There is no evidence that Patrick ever left Ireland for trial. In 457, Benignus, a friend, took over his post at Armagh and Patrick retired to Saul. No one knows when Patrick died but the traditionally accepted date is March 17. He had devoted the majority of his adult life to the Irish. In one of the last paragraphs of "Confessio", Patrick wrote,

"If I have ever done anything worthwhile for the God I love, I ask that I might be allowed to die here for his name with these converts and slaves-even if it means

that I won't have a marked grave or that my body is torn apart piece by piece by dogs or wild animals or that I serve as a meal for the birds of the air . . . "

His wish appears to have been granted. He died in Ireland and his exact burial place, if any, is unknown.

Patrick's Legacy

Patrick, and others like him, left a lasting legacy. They brought Ireland into the Catholic Church. However, it was a different type of Christianity which embraced the Irish culture. Literacy became virtually a second religion among the Irish and the Irish monasteries became the repository of Greek and Latin as well as Irish and Celtic tales. The golden age of Irish monastic scholarship occurred during the sixth to ninth centuries. The Book of Kells is an example of this work. The legends of St. Patrick spread throughout Ireland and other parts of Europe by 700 A.D. to 800 A.D. through the works of Muirchu and Bishop Tirechan, the author of "Collectanea", a collection of saying of St. Patrick. His legends were carried by the various Irish monks and priests who left Ireland to travel to the Continent. Many of these Irish monks such as Fursa, Columba, and Columcille founded schools and monasteries all over Scotland and Europe. Their work can be traced to a single Roman boy who was once a slave and returned as a man to work among the people who had enslaved him.

SOURCES: J.B. Bury and Jon M. Sweeney, *Ireland's Saint: The Essential Biography of St. Patrick* (Paraclete Press, 2008); Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (Double Day, 1995); Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland* (Simon and Schuster, 2004); Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Saints* (Checkmark Books, 2001); Thomas O'Loughlin, *Discovering St. Patrick* (Paulist Press, 2005); Jonathan Rogers, *Saint Patrick* (Thomas Nelson, 2010); and E.A. Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick?* (Boydell Press, 1985).