



SAINT PATRICK

Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was probably born about the year A.D. 389. He was the son of a deacon, Calpurnius, and the grandson of a presbyter (priest) named Potitus. His father was a middle-class landed proprietor and a decurion, who is represented as living at a place called Bannauenta. The only place of this name we know is Daventry, but it seems more probable that Patrick's home is to be sought near the Severn.

The British name of the future apostle was Sucat, to which Modern Welsh *hygad*, "warlike," corresponds. His Roman name has also survived in a hibernicized form, Cothrige, with the common substitution of Irish for Brythonic. Patrick was

doubtless educated as a Christian and was imbued with reverence for the Roman Empire.

When Patrick was about sixteen years of age he was carried off by a band of Irish marauders. The latter were possibly taking part in the raid of the Irish king Niall Noigiallach, who met with his end in Britain in A.D. 405. Irish tradition represents the future apostle as tending the herds of a chieftain of the name of Miliucc (Milchu), near the mountain called Slemish in county Antrim, but others believe that the scene of his captivity was Connaught, perhaps in the neighborhood of Croagh Patrick.

His bondage lasted for six years. During this time he became subject to religious emotion and beheld visions which encouraged him to effect his escape. He fled, in all probability to the coast of Wicklow, and encountered a vessel which was engaged in the export of Irish wolf-dogs. After three days at sea the traders landed, possibly on the west coast of Gaul (modern day France), and journeyed for twenty-eight days through a wilderness. At the end of two months Patrick parted from his companions and betook himself to the monastery of Lerins, where he probably spent a few years.

On leaving the Mediterranean he seems to have returned home. It was doubtless during this stay in Roman Britain that the idea of missionary enterprise in Ireland came to him. In a dream he saw a man named Victorious bearing innumerable epistles, one of which he received and read; the beginning of it contained the words "The Voice of the Irish"; whilst repeating these words he says, "I imagined that I heard in my mind the voice of those who were near the wood of Foclut (Fochlad), which is near the western sea, and thus they cried: ` We pray thee, holy youth, to come and walk again amongst us as before.'" The forest of Fochlad was in the neighborhood of Killala Bay, but it is possible that it extended considerably to the south.

Despite his natural diffidence, and opposition on the part of his relatives, Patrick resolved to return to Gaul in order to prepare himself for his mission. He proceeded to Auxerre - a place which seems to have had a close connexion with Britain and Ireland - and was ordained deacon by Bishop Amator, along with two others who were afterwards associated with him in spreading the faith in Ireland. The one was an Irishman called Fith, better known as Iserninus, the other Auxilius. Patrick must have spent at least fourteen years at Auxerre.

It seems not unlikely that Pelagianism had taken root among the Christian communities of Ireland, and it was found necessary to send a bishop to combat the heresy. Pope Celestine's choice fell on the deacon Palladius, who had taken a prominent part in refuting the Pelagian doctrine in Britain. The mission of Palladius (431-432), is obscure. Tradition associates his name with the mountains of Wicklow, and we are told that he retired to the land of the Picts in North Britain, where he died.

Patrick probably felt great disappointment when Palladius was sent as the chosen envoy of Rome, but now Germanus seems to have decided that Patrick was the man for the task, and he was consecrated a bishop in 432. Suffice it to say here that Ireland belonged to the pagan tribes, and that the success of Patrick's undertaking depended entirely on his ability to gain the goodwill of the tribal kings and chiefs of clans. We are totally ignorant as to the extent and number of the pre-Patrician Christian communities in Ireland. It seems probable that they were, largely, if not wholly confined to the south-east of the island.

Patrick landed at Inverdea, the mouth of the river Vartry in Wicklow, but we are not informed as to any of his doings in Leinster at this period. According to the story, he immediately proceeded northward to the kingdom of Ulidia (east Ulster), though a certain tradition represents him as going to Meath. Landing on the shores of Strangford Lough, he commenced his labors in the plain on the south-west side of that inlet. A convert chief named Dichu granted him a site for an establishment, and a wooden barn is stated to have been utilized for the purpose of worship.

Patrick's activity was bound to bring him sooner or later into conflict with the High-king Loigaire (reigned 428-467), son of Niall Noigiallach Fedilmid, a brother of the monarch, is represented as having made over his estate at Trim to the saint to found a church, and thus the faith was established within Loigaire's territory. The story in picturesque fashion makes Patrick challenge the royal authority by lighting the Paschal fire on the hill of Slane on the night of Easter Eve (Holy Saturday). It chanced to be the occasion of a pagan festival at Tara, during which no fire might be kindled until the royal fire had been lit. A number of trials of skill between the Christian missionary and Loigaire's Druids ensue, and the final result seems to have been that the monarch, though unwilling to embrace the foreign creed, undertook to protect the Christian bishop. At a later date the saint was probably invited by Loigaire to take part in the codification of the *Senchus Mor* in order to represent the interests of the Christian communities.

On another occasion Patrick is reported to have overthrown a famous idol known as *Cenn Cruaich* or *Cromm Cruaich* in the plain of Mag Slecht (county Cavan). Several churches seem to have been founded in the kingdom of Meath by the saint, but they cannot now be identified. Patrick is stated to have visited Connaught on three different occasions and to have founded churches, one of the most important being that at Elphin. As regards Ulster our information is very scanty, though we find him establishing churches in the three kingdoms of the province (Ailech, Oriel and Ulidia).

Patrick's work is more closely identified with the north of Ireland than with the south. Traces of his mission, however, are to be found in Ossory and Muskerry. But his task in the south was doubtless rather that of an organizer, and a kind of circular letter has come down to us which was addressed by Patrick, Auxilius and Iserninus, to all the clergy of the island. There is some evidence that he made a journey to Rome (441-443) and brought back with him valuable relics. On his return he founded the church and monastery of Armagh, the site of which was granted him by Daire, king of Oriel, and it is probable that the see was intended by him to be specially connected with the supreme ecclesiastical authority.

Some years before his death, which took place in 461, Patrick resigned his position as bishop of Armagh to his disciple Benignus, and possibly retired to Saul in Dalaradia, where he spent the remainder of his life. The place of his burial was a matter of dispute in early Ireland, but it seems most likely that he was interred at Saul.

Two highly important documents purporting to have been written by Patrick have come down to us. Although the genuineness of these writings has been impugned on various occasions by different scholars, there seems to be no reason for assuming that they did not emanate from the saint's pen. The one is the Confession, which is contained in an imperfect state in the Book of Armagh (c. 807), but complete copies are found in later manuscripts. The Confession, written towards the end of his life, gives a general account of his career.

Various charges had been brought against him by his enemies, among them that of illiteracy, the truth of which is borne out by the crudeness of his style, and is fully admitted by the writer himself. Before being admitted to deacon's orders he had communicated to a friend some fault which he had committed when about fifteen years of age. This friend had not considered it an obstacle to ordination. Later the secret was betrayed and came to the ears of persons who, as he says, "urged my sins against my laborious episcopate." It is impossible to ascertain who these detractors were - possibly British fellow-workers in Ireland.

The other document is the so-called Letter to Coroticus. The soldiers of Coroticus (Ceretic), a British king of Strathclyde, had in the course of a raid in Ireland killed a number of Christian neophytes on the very day of their baptism while still clad in white garments. Others had been carried off into slavery, and a deputation of clergy which Patrick had sent to ask for their release had been subjected to ridicule. In his Letter the saint in very strong language urges the Christian subjects of the British king not to have any dealings with their ruler and his bloodthirsty followers until full satisfaction should have been made. The text of this letter occurs in a number of manuscripts but is not contained in the Book of Armagh. It is however certain that it was known in the 7th century.

A strange barbaric chant commonly known as the Lorica or Hymn of St Patrick is preserved in the *Liber hymnorum*. This piece, called in Irish the *Faed Fiada* or "Cry of the Dee," contains a number of remarkable grammatical forms, and the latest editors are of opinion that it may very well be genuine.

From such slender material it is not easy to form a clear conception of the saint's personality. His was, evidently, one of an intensely spiritual nature, and in addition to the qualities which go to form a strong man of action he must have possessed an enthusiasm which enabled him to surmount all the difficulties that attend such missionary endeavors. Patrick's importance in the history of Ireland and the Irish Church consists in the fact that he brought Ireland into touch with western Europe and more particularly with Rome, and that he introduced Latin into Ireland as the language of the Church. His work consisted largely in organizing the Christian communities which he found in existence on his arrival, and in planting the faith in regions such as the extreme west of Connaught which had not yet come under the sway of the Gospel of Christ.