

St. Patrick

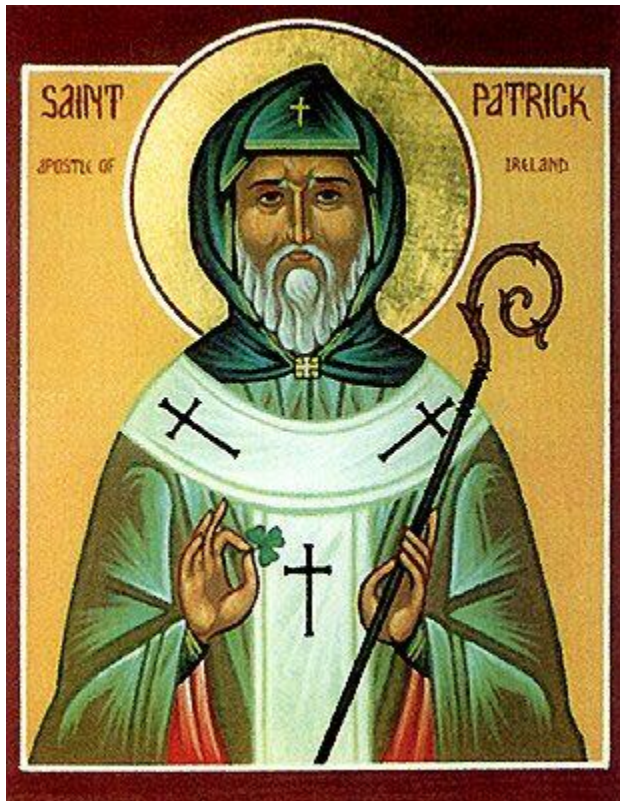
By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, www.clandonnell.net)

I'm going to tell you everything historians know about St. Patrick.

Actually, that's about it.

There is very little, historically verifiable, information or evidence about St. Patrick. We don't even know how many there are.

The annals of Ireland contain a wonderful history of the people of Ireland, but the annals weren't written until several centuries after the death of St. Patrick. There are many references to St. Patrick in the annals, but these are based upon prior oral histories, recorded for the first time by the writers of the annals. How accurate are the annals in this regard? Who knows?



All we have by way of contemporaneous records are two letters written by St. Patrick, one of which is a somewhat autobiographical. This letter is currently at Trinity College in Dublin.

We do know from St. Patrick is that he was a Briton. The Britons were one of the several Celtic groups which migrated from continental Europe to the British Isles. The Romans invaded the land of the Britons in about 43 A.D., and over time, the Britons became less Celtic than the people who lived in Ireland or Scotland. But among other things, the Romans brought Christianity to the region.

Patrick's parents and grandparents were Christians, according to Patrick's letters, but it is not at all clear whether Patrick was, at least

when he was a boy.

Irish raiders captured Patrick when Patrick was still a boy. Literature about Patrick usually describes these Irish as "pirates", but that is likely a misunderstanding of the Celtic clan culture.

The Celtic clans were close-knit communities, and people within a clan felt a great deal of loyalty and attachment to others within their clan. But people within a clan didn't give a damn

about any who was outside of the clan. Indeed, one of the favorite pastimes of any Irish clans was raiding a neighboring clan.

The annals of Ireland often describe a clan raid by saying something like: “The O’Neills raided the land of the O’Reillys and took all of the movables.” The word “movables” is one of my favorite words in the annals, since it leaves so much to the imagination.

Movables” certainly includes cattle, sheep, harvested food, and weapons. It may also include furniture, pots and pans, and anything else not permanently tied down.

But “movables” sometimes included people. And the Irish clan which raided Briton saw Patrick as a movable, and they took him with them.

The target of most Irish clan raids was typically another nearby clan. But this raid crossed the Irish Sea, which made it a bit unusual. The raid must have been by a coastal Irish clan which had great confidence in its navy.



My clan, ClanDonnell, became the strongest seafaring clan in later centuries. The Irish members of the clan settled along the Antrim coast in northern Ireland. There is some suggestion in the folklore that Patrick was taken to the hills of what is now County Antrim. So I’d like to think that it was my ancestors who raided Briton and took St. Patrick as a movable. I have no evidence to prove this. But then again, I have no evidence to deny it.

Much about Patrick today says that he was a slave in Ireland. That too is a bit of a misunderstanding about Celtic culture. He certainly was taken against his will. But people/movables were not mistreated by the capturing clans. The captured worked alongside members of the clan, doing whatever work was required to be done. And slavery wasn’t hereditary. The captured movables could advance within the clan as well as anyone else, depending upon their particular skills.

St. Patrick was born in the year 390ish. He was captured by the Irish raiders at the age of 15 or 16. He spent six years as a shepherd, probably in County Antrim

But then he had a vision. He wrote that he was visited by an angel who told him to escape. And so he did.

Where do you think he went?

He went to France. He walked from the north of Ireland to the southern coast. There he took a ship to the northern coast of France.

Once in France, he studied the priesthood and became an ordained priest. As a priest, he traveled first to Britain. In Britain, he had yet another vision. In the vision, he heard an Irish voice, which called to him “to come and walk among us”.

Patrick couldn't resist the vision, and he returned to Ireland. You will often see accounts of St. Patrick today which state that he was sent to Ireland by the Pope. But this is more confusion, as you will see in a moment. St. Patrick went to Ireland on his own accord.

Patrick spent 30 years in Ireland.

According to the legends, which are probably mostly true, Patrick traveled around Ireland, ordained a lot of priests, and baptized a lot of Irish people. He died in the mid 400s.

Did he introduce Christianity to Ireland?

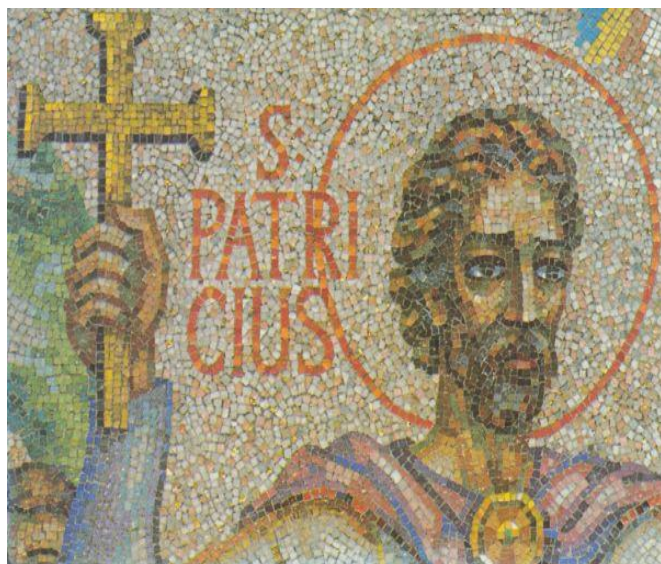
No. There were priests and bishops in Ireland already. But they were in the minority. Virtually everyone in Ireland was Christian by the time of Patrick's death.

How many St. Patricks were there?

There were probably two.

A man named Palladius lived in Rome, and was probably Italian. He was sent by the Pope to Ireland to administer the Catholic Church there. There were already Christians in Ireland at the time, as well as priests and bishops. Palladius was sent to Ireland by the Pope to expand the church which was already there.

The word “Patricius” in the Latin of the era meant “honorable” or “noble” man. It was a title which would have been applied to



Palladius when he arrived in Ireland. So Palladius, in Ireland, was likely called “Patricius”.

When Patrick, the Briton, arrived in Ireland a generation later, he too might have been called “Patricius”. This is because he too was an honorable and noble man. So when he roamed around Ireland, he was Patricius which became Patrick in English.

So the second Patrick might have deserved sainthood, but he might also have been given credit for the work done by the first Patrick.

The name Patricius was given to Patrick because he was honorable and noble. But what was his name originally? What name did his mother and father give him?

Patrick's original name was Maewyn Succat ("MAY-win sue-CAT"). Fortunately, people called him Patrick. Otherwise we would be celebrating St. Maewyn's Day, and that doesn't sound near as much fun.

We all know Patrick became a saint, otherwise he wouldn't be known as St. Patrick. Which Pope made Patrick a saint?

None. During the first millennium, popes didn't name saints. Sainthood was a purely local thing. If the locals prayed to someone and good things happened, the locals would make him, or her, a saint. It wasn't until the second millennium that the Vatican brought the entire sainthood business in-house. Since then, only the Pope can declare someone a saint. But St. Patrick was a saint long before then.

Why do we celebrate St. Patrick's Day on March 17?

That is, presumably, the day St. Patrick died.

Why do we celebrate the death of an honorable and noble man? Shouldn't we reserve celebrations of death for people like Adolf Hitler?

Many centuries ago, the church in Ireland decided to celebrate Patrick's death. And it was not so much a day of celebration, but a day of contemplation and reflection. It was a day randomly picked by the church.



Boston. In 1730.

So when did St. Patrick actually die?

We haven't a frickin' clue. We have no idea the date of his death. We're not even sure of the year, although historians are pretty sure of the decade.

When and where was St. Patrick's Day first celebrated as something other than a religious day of contemplation?

Who celebrated it then?

Recent Irish-Protestant immigrants to Boston. The first Irish-Americans were Irish Protestants. The large wave of Irish Catholics didn't occur until the 19th Century. These Protestants in Boston missed dear-old Ireland and decided to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.



When and where was the first St. Patrick's Day parade?

In New York, on the eve of the American Revolution. The year was 1762.

Who marched in the parade?

Soldiers in the British army.

That may surprise you a bit, unless you understand the make-up of the British army. For many centuries, there was very little opportunity for

young men in Ireland. So many of them joined the British army or British navy. Ireland was England's first colony. One can make a good argument that the British Empire was created in large part from the service of the Irish in the British military.

Irish Protestants at the time could become officers in the army or navy. An Irish Catholic could not, although at times the British Navy permitted Catholic officers.

There was considerable unrest in America in the mid-1700s, which of course led to the American Revolution. The British responded to the unrest by sending its army to America, most of which remained in the coastal cities.

Irish soldiers stationed in New York decided to celebrate St. Patrick's Day with a parade. It was the first St. Patrick's Day parade – by Irish soldiers in the British Army.

What about the shamrocks?

Legend has it that St. Patrick used the three-leafed shamrock to illustrate the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Did he?

Who knows? But he probably did. Patrick and the early priests in Ireland were pretty good at taking ancient Celtic customs and religious beliefs, and turning them into Christian themes.

The Druids held the number “3” as sacred. Many things, as we know, come in threes. Earth, wind and fire. Past, present and future. Faith, hope and charity. The shamrock, with its three leaves, was considered a sacred plant.

And finally, what about the snakes? Did St. Patrick rid Ireland of snakes?



No. We can credit the Ice Age with ridding Ireland of snakes. During the Ice Age, the island of Ireland was covered with ice. It made it too cold for snakes, if there were any there before. Snakes can swim, but they don't swim very well over long distances. There really is no evidence that there have ever been snakes in Ireland since the glacier ice receded.

Ireland is not alone in this regard. There are no snakes in New Zealand, Iceland or Greenland.

Legend has it that snakes attacked St. Patrick during Patrick's 40 day fast. He responded by banishing all snakes from Ireland. Scientists

suggest, though, that there were no snakes in Ireland for Patrick to banish. Of course, what do scientists know?

Ancient Druids did use serpents in their religious symbolism. The legend may have evolved to symbolize Patrick's ridding of the Druids and the pre-Christian religions from Ireland.

And it was a serpent which tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, and resulted in the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The Biblical serpent symbolizes temptation, so maybe that is what St. Patrick banished from Ireland. He wasn't totally successful, though.

There remains more than a wee bit of temptation in Ireland. There aren't a lot of Druids, though.