

Sermon The Gift of the Green for website

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Tommy Makem was driving through the "no man's land" border with Northern Ireland, when he saw an old woman tending livestock. As he would say when he performed this song: **"She was oblivious to the political boundaries; the land was older than the argument, and she didn't care what was shown on the map."**

The old woman is Ireland, and her four sons are the four provinces, and the one in bondage is an allegory for the six Ulster counties in Northern Ireland that chose to stay part of the United Kingdom when the rest became the Irish Free State in the 1920s.

Seen from space, Ireland is a vivid green jewel in the sea, so close to Wales and England and Scotland that it seems to have just drifted away from them yesterday instead of 16,000 years ago. The land has been tilled for 200 generations, with traditions for keeping livestock and farming that go back at least 5000 years. Its rich earth and milder climate were a beacon to friendly and hostile invaders.

"Long time ago, there was war and death, plundering and pillage." Like the Fertile Crescent on the Mediterranean coast, Ireland and the British Isles have attracted conqueror after conqueror, settler after settler, over thousands of years; leaving their stamp on features and faiths and a history of heartbreaking cruelty on this fractious and beautiful land. But perhaps none was so devastating as the Irish Famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"My children starved, by mountain, valley and sea..." The Irish Famine was a political, a man-made abomination. It followed decades of British and Anglo-Irish landholder practices which forced the tenant families to divert food from the mouths of their own children and export it to England and Europe. Even at the height of the potato blight, which killed off the staple food of the poor, Ireland was still exporting tons of food. Hundreds of thousands died from disease and starvation. And thousands more emigrated to other countries and across the ocean to Canada and America.

The history between England and Ireland is long and bloody, predating their first attempt to rule Ireland in 684. Even before then, Celtic tribes had a long and lively history of piracy and plunder themselves all over the coast of western Britain. Perhaps those successful pirates brought Christianity back from their forays. In any event, as early as 431, there seem to have been Christians in Ireland to receive bishop Palladius, sent by Pope Celestine the first. Palladius may or may not have been St. Patrick, for there is ample evidence that there was a later missionary, Patricius, who might have arrived as late as 461. One of these men, either Palladius or Patricius, was an apocalyptic missionary credited with writing an account of his own life – the Confession – as part of his effort to convert all of Ireland to Christianity and bring about the end of days and heaven on earth.

St. Patrick was born in Roman Britain into a family of Christian clergy. Calpurnius, his father, was a deacon, his grandfather Potitus a priest. Patrick, however, was not an active believer. According to his story, at the age of just sixteen Patrick was captured by a group of Irish pirates. They brought him to Ireland where he was enslaved and held captive for six years.

In the fifth century, Ireland was the only country in western Europe not part of the Roman Empire. It was considered the last wild outpost at the edge of the known world. Because there is no evidence of writing left behind for archeologists, it is believed that pre-Christian Ireland was a non-literate culture. Many spiritual traditions were incorporated into their faith practices, including those which may have travelled from as far away as India.

Patrick wrote in his Confession that the time he spent in captivity was a turning point in his spiritual development. He explains that the Lord had mercy on his youth and ignorance, and afforded him the opportunity to be forgiven of his sins and converted to Christianity.

After six years of captivity he heard a voice telling him that he would soon go home, and then that his ship was ready. Fleeing his master, he travelled to a port, two hundred miles away. where he found a ship and with difficulty persuaded the captain to take him. After returning home to Britain, Saint Patrick continued to study Christianity.

Not long after his return to Britain, Patrick had a series of visions. "I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. His name was Victorinus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: "The Voice of the Irish". As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea—and they cried out, as with one voice: "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." Patrick believed God was telling him to go back to Ireland to preach the Gospel, and he did – but this was not a cross he bore lightly. He was lonely and faced hostility from Irish people, whom he regarded as uncivilized.

St. Patrick's mission as a foreigner in Ireland was not an easy one. His refusal to accept gifts from kings placed him outside the normal ties of kinship, fosterage and affinity. Legally he was without protection. He was often regarded with suspicion and hostility. Despite this, Patrick succeeded in baptizing thousands.

This is what we know:

By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were nunneries and monasteries which included among their number members of Irish royalty. The monks were able to read and write using the Latin alphabet, preserving oral traditions. Their scholars excelled in learning and Christian theology. Irish monasteries attracted intellectuals from all over Europe and helped to preserve the study of classics during the Early Middle Ages.

***How The Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*** is a non-fiction historical book written by [Thomas Cahill](#).

Here is where the legends start.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, there was a cleric named Muirchu [mw~~eh~~rehkoo]. According to Professor Tom O'Loughlin, Muirchu wanted to "wanted to unite the warring tribes of Ireland and the Irish Church under the leadership of the Church of Armagh..." (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zpx987h>) "Muirchú realised he needed a saint or figure around which he could unite the Irish people. With some of Patrick's writings at his disposal, he constructed a version of Patrick's life that portrayed the Irish as a chosen people and Patrick as their prophet."

Some of the legends are based on the stature of monastic accomplishments and scholarship.

Patrick is traditionally credited with preserving and codifying Irish laws.

He is credited with introducing the Roman alphabet, which enabled Irish monks to preserve parts of the extensive oral literature.

"Where he lacked biographical details, Muirchú simply filled in the blanks with stories that would have appealed to the seventh-Century mind. Muirchú is only the first of a long line of people who've reinvented Patrick to justify their vision of Irishness."

The first myth of course was that **Patrick Brought Christianity to Ireland**

The myth is that Saint Patrick single-handedly converted the Irish people to Christianity, but historians believe that Christianity had filtered into Ireland via Roman Britain before Saint Patrick's supposed arrival around the mid fifth Century.

**Defeated the druids**

**Banished the snakes**

**Explained Trinity using the shamrock**

## **Patrick's walking stick grows into a living tree**

## **Patrick speaks with ancient Irish ancestors**

March 17<sup>th</sup> was reportedly the day Patrick died. After the St. Patrick's Day service, Irish worshippers traditionally were allowed to break their Lenten fasts with feasts and beer.

Catholicism had taken a strong hold in Ireland, for centuries. When King Henry the VIII determined to make Ireland part of his kingdom, he sought to quell Irish Catholicism and stripped Catholics from their rights to the land as well as everything else. This political and economic suppression would grow and dominate British and Irish relations until the famine and exodus and explosion of the Irish War for Independence.

## **So how did St. Patrick become a symbol of Irishness?**

It was really in America that Saint Patrick became the symbol of Irishness that he is today. Boston held its first St. Patrick's Day parade in 1737. After the Great Famine of the mid 19th Century, huge numbers of poor Irish people emigrated to the United States, especially New York. What had started out as a small scale and Protestant celebration of Saint Patrick in the mid 18th Century, evolved into the huge celebration of Irish identity and culture that we have today." (O'Loughlin)

## **What are our gifts from the Irish and St. Patrick's Day?**

- The land is older than argument, but it has sustenance to offer that is not food for the body but food for the spirit.
- That no tradition that responds to our yearnings for connection to the land, for rootedness, for peace in this life and the next is ever lost.
- We can strive to keep evil from our doors and welcome the weary stranger at the same time.
- We are always capable of savagery and always capable of civilization. The lesson from the Irish for us is that overcoming our differences is the only way we will survive. We can learn to love or at least respect that which we don't agree with and don't understand. There is no one way, no one path to truth, but a vital living mosaic of life.
- We must, in all things, have a legacy to pass down to our children and our children's children. We must record for posterity. We must remember and remember well the voices of our ancestors.
- We must celebrate, especially in spring time. A people of faith are a people of joy.