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ST. PATRICK: A SAINT FOR ALL TRADITIONS

By

The Rt Rev. Bishop and Professor R.P.C. Hanson

St. Patrick is one who deserves better from history than the treatment which he has received. Up to the nineteenth century he was treated as a wholly incredible figure of legend, his true lineaments disfigured by a senseless accretion of hagiographical embroidery. In the nineteenth and twentieth century he has been made a vehicle for denominational rivalries which are as irrelevant to him as were the mediaeval inventions about him. The historical St. Patrick needs to be discovered before we can appreciate him, and when we find him we can see that he is no unsuitable character to portray in a volume dedicated to an Orthodox Archbishop, because he lived during the period of the undivided Church; he is a saint well worthy of reverence from Orthodox, Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike; at one point he tells us that he had an experience surprisingly like an Orthodox type of prayer, as we shall see.

But anyone who approaches the subject of St. Patrick must first analyse the sources for his life, so that the rubbish may be cleared away and the gold beneath it discovered. There are three main sources which have always been called upon to reconstruct the life of Patrick. One is the mediaeval Lives of the saint, the second the Irish Annals and the third the writings of Patrick himself. These sources have been used and estimated very differently during the history of Patrician scholarship, from an xviiith century scholar who refused to believe in the existence of Patrick at all to a nineteenth century archbishop who accepted every single tradition about him, no matter how badly attested. Most of the mediaeval Lives of Patrick are written in Latin and most are acknowledged to be quite worthless historically, but two, the earliest, have been taken more seriously; those of Muirchú and of Tirechán, both written at the very end of the seventh century and both associated with the ecclesiastical centre and great monastery of Armagh. Recent research has however come to regard these lives, even though relatively early, as almost all fictional. Undoubtedly the cult of St. Patrick was sedulously maintained at Armagh from the seventh

century onwards, and the earliest known MS of his *Confession*, that in the famous *Book of Armagh*, was copied in that city. But archaeological research has now shown that the great earthwork called Navan Fort just outside Armagh had long been sacked and deserted in Patrick's day; we cannot associate him with the Eoghanacht dynasty that ruled from that fort in its palmy days, and indeed the traditional association of Patrick with Armagh as the seat of his episcopal activity has become doubtful. It is impossible to discern in the Lives of Muirchú and Tirechán a continuous or written source which might suggest that they had access to reliable information about Patrick, though they both knew Patrick's works.

The Irish *Annals*, sets of which were maintained in Irish monasteries continuously through a large part of the Middle Ages, almost all mention Patrick and give what appears to be at first sight much useful information about the dates of his birth and death, of his arrival as a bishop in Ireland, as well as several other alleged facts. Some scholars, notably T. F. O' Rahilly, have in the past relied on the Annals to establish the facts about Patrick while discarding the Lives. But the epoch-making work by D. A. Binchy, *Saint Patrick and his Biographers*, began the process of discrediting the *Annals* as a source of information on Patrick, and this process was completed by the American J. V. Kelleher. The earliest *Annals* which survive cannot be dated before 740, and this date is too late for us to imagine that they can have picked up reliable information about Patrick. They all unanimously give the date of his arrival in Ireland as a bishop as 432, but this is not because they have reliable tradition on the subject, but because the monastic writers knew the *Chronicle* of Prosper, and this book relates reliably that in the year 431 Palladius was sent as a missionary to Ireland and the annalists wished to place Patrick's arrival there as close to that of Palladius as possible.

We are then left with the writings of Patrick himself as the main source for his life. To this we can of course add our knowledge of contemporary history and

conditions during his lifetime. This means that we must demolish a great deal that has passed for history about Patrick for centuries and has woven itself into the conventional picture of the saint. He did not banish snakes from Ireland. He did not teach the doctrine of the Trinity by taking a shamrock (this invention does not predate the sixteenth century); he did not climb Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo nor institute St. Patrick's Purgatory in Co. Donegal nor spend his captivity near Mt. Slemish in Co. Antrim; nor did he have a dramatic encounter with Laoghaire High-King of Ireland (there was no High-King of Ireland in his day nor any ever for more than a very short period) on the Hill of Tara in Co. Meath. The conventional, traditional Patrick must disintegrate before the advance of scholarship and the historical, and much more attractive, Patrick take his place.

It is possible to sketch the outlines of his career. The question of when precisely he lived has proved a difficult one. Almost every scholar places him in the fifth century, but some wish to see him as living in the second half of that century, others in the first half. Concrete evidence is surprisingly hard to come by. The theory which places him in the later period, however, has some very weak links, and I am personally convinced that it is better to envisage him as having been born about 390 and dying about 460. Patrick was British, British before the English had been invented, before the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain, indeed probably under the Roman Empire during the last few years of its control of Britain. He was the son of a British aristocrat who was also a deacon (I suspect he took Holy Orders to avoid taxation) who owned a villa some where in Britain probably near the Western coast. His grandfather had been a presbyter. He was brought up as a conventional Christian but he tells us that he had no living knowledge of God until the greatest disaster of his life befell him. At the age of nearly sixteen he was kidnapped by Irish pirates who raided his father's estate and carried him away to spend six years as a slave herding sheep probably on a spot near the modern little town of Killala, near the border between Co. Sligo and Co. Mayo, on the edge of the Atlantic. In a sense Patrick never recovered from this terrible experience of being wrenched away as a teenager from everything and everybody that he knew and loved, and forced to live in a foreign land among people whose language he did not know. Even as an elderly bishop he still thinks of himself as a helpless orphan (*pupillus* is the word which he uses of himself). But in this state of complete dereliction he turned to God and found him, as he tells us in his *Confession*. When six years later he found a means of escaping from his captors and obtaining a passage (probably in a boat used by Irish raiders) back to Britain (to his *patriam et parentes*, as he calls them more than once), he was a most religious young man. Eventually he was ordained deacon and priest in the British Church, because though he probably paid a visit to Gaul it is now evident that the first half of his career lay in Britain,

not, as the Lives suggest, the Continent, and it was from the British Church that he was sent to Ireland. While he was absent from Britain (no doubt in Gaul) he was chosen by the British Church to go as a bishop to Ireland, where there were already a good many Christians. He was duly despatched and spent the rest of his life in Ireland. We know little of his time there. He was constantly exposed to danger, to pillaging, to captivity and to death. But his mission was successful. He converted, baptised and communicated thousands of people, ordained many clergy and encouraged many, both men and women, to take up a monastic life, not in communities but as individuals living by an ascetic rule. We know of one incident in which a British war-lord or *tyrannus*, ruling some part of Britain after that country had thrown off allegiance to Rome in 410, raided a part of Ireland where Patrick had just baptised and communicated a number of Christians, murdered many of them and carried the rest into captivity. Later an attempt was made by people, probably bishops, in Britain, to discredit and perhaps even to depose Patrick, instigated by one who had been his close friend and confidant. But this attempt failed, and Patrick ended his days as a bishop in Ireland (he never mentions any other bishops though he may perhaps at one point hint that others had evangelised there before him). We do not know when or where he died. Graves of St. Patrick shown in Ireland to-day are of doubtful authenticity.

Two of his writings have come down to us. They are both written in a remarkable kind of Latin, very different from the literary and rhetorical Latin used by the great majority of Patristic writers. Patrick was very sensitive about his lack of education. He missed the education in literature and rhetoric which the third stage of Roman education was intended to confer. He feels himself inferior to others (probably British bishops) who have this capacity to write good Latin which he is conscious of lacking. Even when as a bishop equipped with all a bishop's capacity to excommunicate, even when he is employing this capacity to excommunicate marauding British soldiery, he cannot help calling himself «very badly educated» (*indoctus scilicet*). He is not only incapable of writing literary Latin, he cannot write any Latin at all with fluency; he tells us so himself. His Latin is a strange mixture of Vulgar Latin, as spoken in Britain, ecclesiastical Latin, and Biblical Latin. It tells us both that Patrick cannot have spent any long period in Gaul, where he would have learnt to speak and write Latin (some sort of Latin) fluently, and that he had read almost no other literature except the Latin Bible (pre-Vulgate, of course), which however he knew very well indeed. He was *unius libri homo*. But his Latin, devoid of rhetoric or literary device, has a certain charming transparency about it, so that we feel that we know Patrick's real sentiments and character much better than we can know those of his contemporaries like Sulpicius Severus or even Augustine.

He wrote an indignant Letter to the war-lord

Coroticus whose soldiers had attacked Patrick's converts. It is a short, sharp and sorrowful letter, lamenting the outrage and excommunicating Coroticus and his men. He also wrote a much longer work at the end of his life, designed to record his gratitude to God for his goodness to Patrick during all his career and to vindicate that career, modestly and piously, for posterity. He called this work his *Confession*, and it is a minor Christian classic, not as well known as it deserves to be. For instance, though it has been edited for the *Sources Chrétiennes* Series, it has appeared in neither the *Corpus Christianorum* nor the *CSEL*. This is not a confession of sin, but what the Greeks would call an ἐξομολόγησις, a recording publicly of what Patrick owes to God. Patrick always maintained that God had punished his sin, kindly and for his own good, when he caused him to be captured by the pirates. This work is a spiritual biography and though it tells us much about Patrick's life it leaves much tantalizingly unspoken. It affords us, however, the first opportunity in history of actually knowing the personality of an ancient Briton, and constitutes one of the most moving and authentic accounts of a human soul in the whole of Patristic literature.

Patrick was a person of extreme, almost pathological, modesty and tendency to self-abasement. His protests about his worthlessness go well beyond the protests of unworthiness which were then conventional in Christian literature. «Before I was humiliated,» he says, «I was like a stone that lies in deep mud, and he who is mighty came and in compassion raised me up and set me on the top the wall» (one of the very few metaphors in Patrick not taken from Scripture). «I see that I have been promoted above measure by the Lord in this present age, and I was not worthy nor the kind of person to whom he might grant this, since I know for certain that poverty and disaster are more suitable for me than riches and luxury». But he is no self-pitying introvert. He displays remarkable courage, both in undertaking to go Ireland, unprotected and vulnerable, and in rebuking and excommunicating a powerful nominally Christian war-Lord (indeed it may be that Coroticus was behind the attack later made upon Patrick). In this respect he contrasts favourably with Gildas in Britain and Gregory of Tours in Gaul. Patrick is above all a man of faith. He has unwavering faith in God's goodness and providence; not that he expects God to deliver him from danger and trouble, on the contrary he expects both. But his whole personality is deeply committed to God. It is remarkable that of the books of the New Testament which Patrick quotes it is the Epistle to the Romans which appears most often in his works. He also exhibits a wonderful joy and cheerfulness; he constantly breaks off his account in the *Confession* to praise God and acknowledge his goodness. His doctrine, which has been searched minutely by both Catholics and Protestants in Ireland to afford them ammunition for their sectarian warfare, stands up

well to any test. He is both fully Catholic and finely Evangelical. He maintains the authority of the Church and of the bishop. He administers baptism, confirmation and the eucharist, he ordains clergy and institutes monks and nuns. But he is also deeply imbued with the great truths of the Gospel, the goodness and love of God declared in Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer, salvation offered to all who believe. In other words, he is in this a typical fifth-century bishop, or should one say he is a product of the undivided Church before even the Chalcedonian Formula has been devised, though not before the Nicene Creed was known?

One of the most interesting aspects of Patrick is his account of his spiritual experiences. Indeed, these are the main content of his *Confession* as far as it is a description of Patrick and not simply an ascription of praise to God. He relates to us no less than eight visions which he had at various critical moments in his life. He sometimes calls them «answers» (*responsa*). Of these one is so remarkable that it must be transcribed here:

«And another time I saw him praying within me and I as it were within my body and I heard above me, that is above my inner man, and there he was praying earnestly with groans, and while this was going on I was in amazement and I was wondering and I was considering who it could be who was praying in me but at the end of the prayer he spoke to the effect that it was the Spirit and at that I woke up . . . »

It is hardly necessary to say how like this is to the Orthodox «prayer of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian».

All Patrick's visions come to him in dreams, and all have the convincing inconsequentiality and surrealist touch of genuine dreams. Here is one of the most interesting of them, describing Patrick's call, when he had been safely in Britain for some time, to return to Ireland, coming from the people among whom he had been held captive:

«And next a few years later I was in Britain among my parents who had received me for their son and earnestly requested me that I should now after all the troubles which I had experienced never leave them, and it was there that I saw in a vision of the night a man coming apparently from Ireland whose name was Victoricus, with an uncountable number of letters, and he gave me one of them and I read the heading of the letter which ran, 'The Cry of the Irish', and while I was reading aloud the heading of the letter I was imagining that at that very moment I heard the voice of those who were by the Wood of Voclut which is by the Western Sea, and this is what they cried as with one voice, 'Holy boy, we are asking you to come and walk among us again', and I was struck deeply to the heart and I was not able to read any further and at that I woke up. God be thanked that after

several years the Lord granted to them according to their cry».

These passages may perhaps even in translation faintly convey the taste of Patrick's paratactic, unstructured style.

Unlike his later mediaeval biographers, Patrick himself had no taste for miracles. The most thamaturgical event he records is no more than what we would call providential coincidence, when, reduced to starvation as he wanders with the Irish raiders lost in a British forest he comes across a herd of wild pigs, or when the raiders, having refused him passage across to Britain, change their minds suddenly and admit him to their number. Patrick is always credible, whether we look at his history or his psychology.

Finally, Patrick is of great interest simply as an historical phenomenon. He is the first British writer (except Pelagius) whose words have come down to us, and almost the only one; the first British contributor to Patristic literature; one of the first to mention the Picts (to whom Coroticus sold his captives and whom Patrick holds in abhorrence). We can learn quite a lot about the British Church from him. A thorough search of his Scriptural quotations would tell us much about the text of the Bible used by the Britons. Early

in the *Confession* he gives us his Rule of Faith, and this is certainly the Rule of Faith of the British Church. It shows clear influence from the controversies of the fourth century, possibly witnesses to the Nicene Creed, and is derived ultimately from that popular but by no means elegant author Victorinus of Pettau. But it gives no sign of having absorbed the controversies of the fifth century. Clearly the British Church held synods, sent out missions (Ninian had probably been sent northward before Patrick's day), valued confirmation, which Patrick specially mentions as well as baptism and the eucharist, and encouraged an early form of monasticism. Its doctrine was both Catholic and evangelical. It valued the Bible greatly. During most of Patrick's lifetime Britain must have been experiencing a period of relative freedom from external invasion and internal strife. Patrick hints at neither, and the British Church could hardly have been able to subsidise his mission continually as, he makes it clear, it did otherwise.

It is to be hoped that more people, scholars and others, of all traditions will read Patrick's works, preferably in the original Latin, and so fall victim to the peculiar fascination which he exerts over most of those who are acquainted with him*.

* This paper is the substance of a lecture delivered by the author to an audience gathered at Bellinter House, Navan Co. Meath, Ireland, in August 1984 after the meeting there of the Anglican/Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission. Translations of Patrick's Latin here are taken from R. P. C. Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick*.