



# History

## The Forgotten Saint Patrick

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With the coming of St. Patrick's Day, we will be bombarded with commercial depictions of the Patron Saint of Ireland. Some will show him chasing snakes out of Ireland. Far too many will depict a mitred man with a crozier in one hand and a green beer in another. Very few if any will touch upon the real man or his greatness and why his day should be much more than an excuse for a second Madri Gras.

The boy who would become Patrick was born in Romano-Britain in the fifth century A.D.. Some traditions say in Wales others, perhaps more geographically plausible, the west coast of Scotland. What is known is that he was born of a noble family on the fringes of a Roman Empire that was collapsing. At the age of 16 he was captured along with several hundred other prisoners by pagan Irish raiders and sold into slavery. He became the property of a minor Irish King Miliucc in what would be today's County Antrim.

For the next six years Patrick would live the life of a shepherd slave, tending his flocks around the hill near modern day Ballymena with hunger and loneliness his constant companions. The fact that he was able to survive this ordeal indicates that he must have been strong and well cared for as a child, else he likely would not have survived. Deprived of human contact, he turned to God, praying daily. Finally, Patrick states he received a vision informing him that his bondage was at an end and giving instructions that would lead him to walk hundreds of miles through a foreign and alien land eventually finding a ship that would take him home.

Upon returning home to Britain, Patrick experienced what is now known to be a common experience amongst modern kidnapping

victims who have been abducted for a long period of time; he no longer fit into what should be his home and family. The world of his boyhood had passed him by during his absence, he had left a young teenager and had returned a young man hopelessly behind in his education, something he would regret throughout his life, and unable to fit in. Again Patrick turned to God and says he received a vision of a man he knew in Ireland holding letters, one of them entitled "The Voice of the Irish" pleading with him to return to Ireland and spread the word of God. He leaves his family to become a priest and then bishop and returns to Ireland, to preach the Gospel to those who had enslaved him.

It cannot be overstated what a courageous decision Patrick was undertaking in returning to Ireland at the beginning of the Dark Ages. While there had been other Missionaries such as St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Thomas; their ministries had all been within areas of the then known classical world. Patrick was literally "going off the map" for his faith at a time when the "civilized world" was going dark, going alone into that unknown area where the map makers of the age put inscriptions "Here be monsters". Patrick would write "The Gospel has been preached to the point where there is no one....every day I am ready to be murdered, betrayed or enslaved...But I am not afraid of these things because of the promise of heaven."

Patrick would spend the next forty some years preaching to the Irish and converting thousands. Some of the traditions associated with him are likely myth; the driving out of the snakes being an analogy for Patrick driving out paganism. Others have a ring of truth: using the Shamrock to explain the mystery of the Trinity is very much in keeping with a former shepherd who is more comfortable around nature than words.

However, St. Patrick's greatest act, but also his least known, there is no disputing. A petty British Chieftain Coroticus raided the now peaceful coast of Northern Ireland that Patrick's preaching had created and carried off hundreds of Patrick's congregation. After failing to ransom the captives, the former slave Patrick wrote in indignation to British Bishops asking that pressure be brought to bear against Coroticus. "It is not right to pay court to such men nor to take food and drink in their company, nor is it right to take their alms...(until the slavers) make amends before God and free the servants of God." In this letter, St. Patrick becomes the first human being to speak out unequivocally against slavery. The world would not hear such a ringing denunciation of slavery again for another 12 centuries.

### Did you Know that....

- On March 4, 1776, George Washington decided to break the siege of Boston by mounting the cannon that Irish American Henry Knox had recently brought from Ft Ticonderoga on Dorchester Heights; thus making Boston Harbor unusable to British Ships. When Commander William Howe saw the guns, he decided to evacuate Boston on March 17th. Realizing the role that the sizable number of Irish American troops in his army had played, Washington's field orders for the day of this first victory of the American Army list the password as "Saint Patrick". Tradition says as the British sailed out, they were serenaded by the band of the Continental Army playing "St. Patrick's Day in the Morning." It should be noted that Washington was playing a bluff, he didn't have powder for his cannon!
- Ireland actually has 3 recognized patron saints: St. Patrick, St Brigid and St. Columba (also known as Colmcille)
- St Patrick was given his name when he was elevated to Bishop by Pope Celestine. The name comes from the Latin, "pater civium" meaning "the father of his people".
- The first St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York was held in 1762. It is the oldest organized parade in America
- Unfortunately Coroticus would not be the last English Chieftain to raid Ireland for Slaves. It is estimated that Oliver Cromwell sent over 50,000 Irish as slaves to Barbados and the American Colonies, a large number being women and children.

How successful Patrick was in securing the release of Coroticus prisoners is unrecorded. What is known is that at the time of his death the slave trade in Ireland was abolished. St. Patrick should be remembered among all people, irrespective of heritage or religious belief, as one of the great voices for humanity and human rights. It is therefore sad that so many try to strip the man from the day honoring him; dismissing the true St. Patrick either out of misguided political correctness or petty commercial interest. As the proud descendants and heir to the legacy of St. Patrick, the reduction of this great man to "St. Patty (sic)" is a trend we should speak out against wherever we encounter it.