

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 60: How the Irish Were Saved

Patrick the Saint

Behind the fanciful legends of the fifth-century British missionary stands a man worthy of embellishment.

Mary Cagney

A fleet of 50 *currachs* (longboats) weaved its way toward the shore, where a young Roman Brit and his family walked. His name was Patricius, the 16-year-old son of a civil magistrate and tax collector. He had heard stories of Irish raiders who captured slaves and took them "to the ends of the world," and as he studied the longboats, he no doubt began imagining the worst.

With no Roman army to protect them (Roman legions had long since deserted Britain to protect Rome from barbarian invasions), Patricius and his town were unprepared for attack. The Irish warriors, wearing helmets and armed with spears, descended on the pebbled beach. The braying war horns struck terror into Patricius's heart, and he started to run toward town.

The warriors quickly demolished the village, and as Patricius darted among burning houses and screaming women, he was caught. The barbarians dragged him aboard a boat bound for the east coast of Ireland.

Patricius, better known as Patrick, is remembered today as the saint who drove the snakes out of Ireland, the teacher who used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, and the namesake of annual parades in New York and Boston. What is less well-known is that Patrick was a humble missionary (this saint regularly referred to himself as "a sinner") of enormous courage. When he evangelized Ireland, he set in motion a series of events that impacted all of Europe. It all started when he was carried off into slavery around 430.

Escape from sin and slavery

Patrick was sold to a cruel warrior chief, whose opponents' heads sat atop sharp poles around his palisade in Northern Ireland. While Patrick minded his master's pigs in the nearby hills, he lived like an animal himself, enduring long bouts of hunger and thirst. Worst of all, he was isolated from other human beings for months at a time. Early missionaries to Britain had left a legacy of Christianity that young Patrick was exposed to and took with him into captivity. He had been a nominal Christian to this point; he now turned to the Christian God of his fathers for comfort.

"I would pray constantly during the daylight hours," he later recalled. "The love of God and the fear of him surrounded me more and more. And faith grew. And the spirit roused so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night only slightly less."

On The Mountain. Legend holds that Patrick rang a large bell

After six years of slavery, Patrick received a supernatural message. "You do well to fast," a mysterious voice said to him. "Soon you will return to your homeland."

Before long, the voice spoke again: "Come and see, your ship is waiting for you." So Patrick fled and ran 200 miles to a southeastern harbor. There he boarded a ship of traders, probably carrying Irish wolfhounds to the European continent.

After a three-day journey, the men landed in Gaul (modern France), where they found

(held in a reliquary, at the National Museum of Ireland) on the top of Eagle Mountain, now called Croagh Patrick. Depending on the legend, the bell scared away either Ireland's snakes or its demons. Patrick's other relic, a staff supposedly given to him by Jesus, was burned as an object of superstition in 1538.

only devastation. Goths or Vandals had so decimated the land that no food was to be found in the once fertile area.

"What have you to say for yourself, Christian?" the ship's captain taunted. "You boast that your God is all powerful. We're starving to death, and we may not survive to see another soul."

Patrick answered confidently. "Nothing is impossible to God. Turn to him and he will send us food for our journey."

At that moment, a herd of pigs appeared, "seeming to block our path." Though Patrick instantly became "well regarded in their eyes," his companions offered their new-found food in sacrifice to their pagan gods.

Patrick did not partake.

The prodigious son returns

Many scholars believe Patrick then spent a period training for ministry in Lerins, an island off the south of France near Cannes. But his autobiographical *Confession* includes a huge gap after his escape from Ireland. When it picks up again "after a few years," he is back in Britain with his family.

It was there that Patrick received his call to evangelize Ireland—a vision like the apostle Paul's at Troas, when a Macedonian man pleaded, "Help us!"

"I had a vision in my dreams of a man who seemed to come from Ireland," Patrick wrote. "His name was Victoricius, and he carried countless letters, one of which he handed over to me. I read aloud where it began: 'The Voice of the Irish.' And as I began to read these words, I seemed to hear the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut ... and they cried out as with one voice, 'We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.' I was deeply moved in heart and I could read no further, so I awoke."

Despite his reputation, Patrick wasn't really the first to bring Christianity to Ireland. Pope Celestine I sent a bishop named Palladius to the island in 431 (about the

time Patrick was captured as a slave). Some scholars believe that Palladius and Patrick are one and the same individual, but most believe Palladius was unsuccessful (possibly martyred) and Patrick was sent in his place.

In any event, paganism was still dominant when Patrick arrived on the other side of the Irish Sea. "I dwell among gentiles," he wrote, "in the midst of pagan barbarians, worshipers of idols, and of unclean things."

Demons and druids

Patrick did not require the native Irish to surrender their belief in supernatural beings. They were only to regard these beings in a new light as demons. The fear of the old deities was transformed into hatred of demons. If Christianity had come to Ireland with only theological doctrines, the hope of immortal life, and ethical ideas—without miracles, mysteries, and rites—it could have never wooed the Celtic heart.

Predictably, Patrick faced the most opposition from the druids, who practiced magic, were skilled in secular learning (especially law and history) and advised Irish kings. Biographies of the saint are replete with

stories of druids who "wished to kill holy Patrick."

Pilgrims.
On the last Sunday of each July, between 25,000 and 30,000 pilgrims pass the saint's statue and climb to the top of Croagh Patrick, commemorating the saint's fasting there for 40 days and nights. Carbon dating of church ruins at the 2,710-foot summit has shown it dates from Patrick's day, supporting the legend that says Patrick climbed it.

"Daily I expect murder, fraud or captivity," Patrick wrote, "but I fear none of these things because of the promises of heaven. I have cast myself into the hands of God almighty who rules everywhere."

Indeed, Patrick almost delighted in taking risks for the gospel. "I must take this decision disregarding risks involved and make known the gifts of God and his everlasting consolation. Neither must we fear any such risk in faithfully preaching God's name boldly in every place, so that even after my death, a spiritual legacy may be left for my brethren and my children."

Still, Patrick periodically avoided such confrontations by paying protection money: "Patrick paid the price of 15 souls in gold and silver so that no evil persons should impede them as they traveled straight across the whole of Ireland," wrote one biographer.

Patrick was as fully convinced as the Celts that the power of the druids was real, but he brought news of a stronger power. The famous *Lorica* (or "Patrick's Breastplate"—see [I Rise Today](#)), a prayer of protection, may not have been written by Patrick (at least in its current form), but it expresses perfectly Patrick's confidence in God to protect him from "every fierce merciless force that may come upon my body and soul; against incantations of false prophets, against black laws of paganism, against false laws of heresy, against deceit of idolatry, against spells of women and smiths and druids."

According to legend, it worked. The King, Loiguire, set up a trap to kill Patrick, but as the bishop came near, all the king could see was a deer. (Thus the Breastplate has also been known as the Deer's Cry.)

There was probably a confrontation between Patrick and the druids, but scholars wonder if it was as dramatic and magical as later stories recounted. One biographer from the late 600s, Muirchoe, described Patrick challenging druids to contests at Tara, in which each party tried to outdo the other in working wonders before the audience:

"The custom was that whoever lit a fire before the king on that night of the year [Easter vigil] would be put to death. Patrick lit the paschal fire before the king on the hill of Slane. The people saw Patrick's fire throughout the plain, and the king ordered 27 chariots to go and seize Patrick

"Seeing that the impious heathen were about to attack him, Patrick rose and said clearly and loudly, 'May God come up to scatter his enemies, and may those who hate him flee from his face.' By this disaster, caused by Patrick's curse in the king's presence because of the king's order, seven times seven men fell. ... And the king, driven by fear, came and bent his knees before the holy man

"[The next day], in a display of magic, a druid invoked demons and brought about a dark fog over the land. Patrick said to the druid, 'Cause the fog to disperse.' But he was unable to do it. Patrick prayed and gave his blessing, and suddenly the fog cleared and the sun shone. ... And through the prayers of Patrick the flames of fire consumed the druid.

"And the king was greatly enraged at Patrick because of the death of his druid. Patrick said to the king, 'If you do not believe now, you will die on the spot for the wrath of God descends on your head.'

"The king summoned his council and said, 'It is better for me to believe than to die.' And he believed as did many others that day."

Yet to Patrick, the greatest enemy was one he had been intimately familiar with—slavery. He was, in fact, the first Christian to speak out strongly against the practice. Scholars agree he is the genuine author of a letter excommunicating a British tyrant, Coroticus, who had carried off some of Patrick's converts into slavery.

"Ravenous wolves have gulped down the Lord's own flock which was flourishing in Ireland," he wrote, "and the whole church cries out and laments for its sons and daughters." He called Coroticus's deed "wicked, so horrible, so unutterable," and told him to repent and to free the converts.

It remains unknown if he was successful in freeing Coroticus's slaves, but within his lifetime (or shortly thereafter), Patrick ended the entire Irish slave trade.

Royal missionary

Patrick concentrated the bulk of his missionary efforts on the country's one hundred or so tribal kings. If the king became a Christian, he reasoned, the people would too. This strategy was a success.

As kings converted, they gave their sons to Patrick in an old Irish custom for educating and "fostering" (Patrick, for his part, held up his end by distributing gifts to these kings). Eventually, the sons and daughters of the Irish were persuaded to become monks and nuns.

From kingdom to kingdom (Ireland did not yet have towns), Patrick worked much the same way. Once he converted a number of pagans, he built a church. One of his new disciples would be ordained as a deacon, priest, or bishop, and left in charge. If the chieftain had been gracious enough to grant a site for a monastery as well as a church, it was built too and functioned as a missionary station.

Before departing, Patrick gave the new converts (or their pastors) a compendium of Christian doctrine and the canons (rules).

Self doubt

Despite his success as a missionary, Patrick was self-conscious, especially about his educational background. "I still blush and fear more than anything to have my lack of learning brought out into the open," he wrote in his *Confession*. "For I am unable to explain my mind to learned people."

Nevertheless, he gives thanks to God, "who stirred up me, a fool, from the midst of those who are considered wise and learned in the practice of the law as well as persuasive in their speech and in every other way and ahead of these others, inspired me who is so despised by the world."

Over and over again, Patrick wrote that he was not worthy to be a bishop. He wasn't the only one with doubts. At one point, his ecclesiastical elders in Britain sent a deputation to investigate his mission. A number of concerns were brought up, including a rash moment of (unspecified) sin from his youth.

His *Confession*, in fact, was written in response to this investigation. Reeling from accusations, Patrick drew strength from God: "Indeed he bore me up, though I was trampled underfoot in such a way. For although I was put down and shamed, not too much harm came to me."

If Patrick was not confident about his own shortcomings, he held a deep sense of God's intimate involvement in his life. "I have known God as my authority, for he knows all things even before

they are done," he wrote. "He would frequently forewarn me of many things by his divine response."

Indeed, Patrick recorded eight dreams he regarded as personal messages from God. And scattered throughout his **Confession** are tributes to God's goodness to him: "Tirelessly, I thank my God, who kept me faithful on the day I was tried, so that today I might offer to him, the Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of my soul. He saved me in all dangers and perilsSo, whatever may come my way, good or bad, I equally tackle it, always giving thanks to God."

According to the Irish annals, Patrick died in 493, when he would have been in his seventies. But we do not know for sure when, where, or how he died. Monasteries at Armagh, Downpatrick, and Saul have all claimed his remains. His feast day is recorded as early as March 17, 797, with the annotation; "The flame of a splendid sun, the apostle of virginal Erin [Ireland], may Patrick with many thousands be the shelter of our wickedness."

Ultimate model

It is difficult to separate fact from fiction in the stories of Patrick's biographers. It is historically clear, however, that Patrick was one of the first great missionaries who brought the gospel beyond the boundaries of Roman civilization. According to tradition, he had established bishops throughout northern, central, and eastern Ireland. Only Munster, in the south, was to remain pagan until a century after Patrick's death.

Patrick was the ultimate model for Celtic Christians. He engaged in continuous prayer. He was enraptured by God and loved sacred Scripture. He also had a rich poetic imagination with the openness to hear God in dreams and visions and a love of nature and the created.

He is, then, most worthy of the appellation **saint**, as one "set apart" for a divine mission. As such, he became an inspiring example. Hundreds of Celtic monks, in emulation of Patrick, left their homeland to spread the gospel to Scotland, England, and continental Europe.

It is a legacy Patrick was proud of: "For God gave me such grace, that many people through me were reborn to God and afterward confirmed and brought to perfection. And so then a clergy was ordained for them everywhere."

Mary Cagney, a former editorial resident at Christianity Today, has written a screenplay titled A Celtic King.

PATRICK'S POWER

By David Feddes

Patrick was not the first person to preach the gospel in Ireland, but he surely made the biggest impact. A few faltering efforts had been made to spread Christianity to Ireland, but when Patrick arrived, things began to happen in a big way. Thousands upon thousands of people came to faith in Christ and were baptized. Many pastors were ordained, and churches were built. People were set free from fear of druids, witches, and demons. Family life improved. Political conflicts and wars still happened, but the conflicts were not as frequent or as savage. As a former slave, Patrick strongly opposed the slave trade, and slavery had nearly vanished from Ireland. There's an old legend that Patrick drove all snakes out of Ireland. Actually, Ireland never had snakes, but Ireland had spiritual serpents—demons, oppressors, and teachers of false religion—and Patrick surely did a great deal to drive out snakes of that sort.

Keys to Patrick's Impact

What made Patrick so powerful? What enabled him to change the course of history and make a huge impact on an entire nation? One vital aspect of Patrick's effectiveness was his prayer life, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Patrick spent so much time in conversation with God that he sensed where God was guiding him and he had God's power when he needed it. At important turning points, God sent Patrick dreams to show him the next step to take, and Patrick obeyed the Holy Spirit's guidance in those dreams. Four centuries earlier the apostle Paul had a dream of a man from Macedonia pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul responded to that dream by taking the gospel of Christ into Macedonia. Patrick had a similar dream, and he responded in a similar way. After study of Scripture and preparation for ministry, Patrick went to Ireland to lead people to Jesus Christ. God says in the Bible, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions" (Joel 2:28). Patrick loved that verse, and he loved Jesus' promise: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit made Patrick a Christian and a man of prayer; the Holy Spirit gave Patrick a dream of being a witness for Christ among the very people who enslaved him; and the Holy Spirit gave Patrick power to deal with opposition and to keep doing the Lord's work.

Another factor in Patrick's effectiveness was that Patrick knew how to connect with the Irish. As a youth Patrick had been a slave in Ireland for six years, so when he returned as a missionary and bishop, he knew the language and understood the people. The Holy Spirit had arranged his life to equip him for his mission.

Another vital key to Patrick's enormous impact was his knowledge of the Bible and his boldness in proclaiming the biblical gospel. Patrick sometimes felt embarrassed that he wasn't very sophisticated. His late teens and early twenties weren't spent with learned professors but in slavery, and Patrick sometimes felt like a hick and a hayseed compared to more polished preachers and scholars. But what Patrick lacked in fancy phrases, the Holy Spirit made up for in spiritual power and knowledge of the Bible. Patrick's *Confession* is a short account of his conversion to Christ and his ministry. In that brief document alone, Patrick includes more than 200 references from the Bible. Whatever his limits in education, he knew the Scriptures. When Bible truth is proclaimed in the Spirit's power, it accomplishes more than clever speeches.

Still another part of Patrick's power was his God-given courage and determination. When Patrick returned to Ireland, he faced physical dangers from people who wanted to kill him. His life was in serious danger at least twelve different times, not counting various plots that fizzled before actual attempts were made on his life. As Patrick faced physical attacks, he also faced spiritual attacks from druid wizards, witches, and others who directed curses and magic spells against him. Patrick didn't deny that the druids had certain powers or that spirits dreaded by the people really existed. Patrick treated these powers as real. But Patrick declared that they were demonic powers which could be subdued by the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Patrick put into practice the words of Ephesians 6, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but ... against the powers of the dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10-13). Whether threatened by physical death or demonic curses, Patrick counted on the armor of God.

We can't be certain whether the ancient prayer called St. Patrick's Breastplate was written by Patrick himself. The wording has changed from the language of Patrick's time, but the substance of it fits with what we know about Patrick. He believed firmly in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united as one God. He trusted that God's power to help him would be the same power that enabled Jesus to accomplish all his wonders, the same power all angels and holy people have depended on, the same power that upholds all the forces of nature. Putting on this vast power as his defense, with Christ inside him and all around him, Patrick could face anything. He wrote, "I am prepared to give even my life without hesitation and most gladly for Jesus' name... Daily I expect murder, fraud, or captivity, or whatever it may be; but I fear none of these things because of the promises of heaven." Patrick had some scary showdowns with angry kings and powerful wizards. He had many close brushes with death. But no threat could frighten him into silence. No problem could discourage him into giving up. The Bible says, "For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:7). That was certainly true of Patrick. The Holy Spirit gave him such power, such love for the people of Ireland, and such self-control in the face of trials, that nothing could stop him from spreading the gospel.

Sometimes opposition arises where you'd least expect it. If God calls you to his service and to a special gospel outreach, you might think church people and leaders would be your biggest supporters, but they can be the people who hurt you most. They may be skeptical of what you're doing, and they may even attack you. But don't give up. In Patrick's case, not everybody back in Britain supported his mission, and not all high-ranking church officials approved of his efforts. "Many tried to prevent my mission," wrote Patrick. "They would even talk to each other behind my back." A boyhood friend publicized a sin which Patrick had committed back in his non-Christian youth and which he had confessed to this friend. That betrayal of a confidential confession hurt Patrick deeply, but though it was meant to bring Patrick down, it failed. He pressed on with his mission, and God continued to transform Ireland through him.

Patrick's greatest desire was God's approval, not human applause. Patrick saw his work a part of Jesus' Great Commission to preach the gospel to all nations, baptize, and teach. Patrick loved Jesus' call to be fishers of men and said, "It was most necessary that a great multitude and throng might be caught for God." God used Patrick to lead thousands to Christ personally, and he used Patrick's example to inspire many to become ministers and missionaries, not only to Ireland but also to other places that needed Christ.

God can turn even our weaknesses into strengths. Patrick was embarrassed by what he felt was a lack of learning, but when he brought Irish people to Christ, they came to love learning. When Roman civilization in Europe and North Africa was falling to barbarian invaders, when books were burned and learning was despised, it was Irish Christians, especially monks and pastors, who copied books and preserved the classic writings of civilization. Thomas Cahill tells the story in his popular book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. In one of history's humorous twists, God used Patrick, a man ashamed of not being educated enough, to spread the gospel beyond the boundaries of the old Roman Empire and to play a crucial part in preserving the world's great books for future generations to read.

Patrick's Importance for Us

What is Patrick's importance for us today? Is he just an excuse to party on St. Patrick's day, wear green clothes, and drink green beer, as some people do? Or should we go to the opposite extreme and join those who regard Patrick as a patron saint, someone with a special interest in their cause who can get a reluctant God to help them? Patrick is designated as a patron saint of downtrodden people, of engineers, of those who fear snakes, of various cities, and as patron of the nations of Ireland and Nigeria.

There's no doubt that God blessed Ireland greatly through Patrick's mission. There's no doubt that churches in Nigeria have experienced amazing growth in recent decades which is much like the church growth that occurred in Patrick's time. There's no doubt that downtrodden people can be encouraged that God's Holy Spirit would use a former slave like Patrick to convert thousands and improve the life of a nation. But there's no biblical basis for the idea of having someone as a patron saint. Our faith must not be in Patrick but in God, in the truth and love of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Patrick's Breastplate is a prayer to be shielded and clothed by Christ and the power of the Trinity; it's not faith in a patron saint. Patrick would be horrified if people prayed to him for help instead of praying to Christ. Patrick wrote, "I owe it all to God who gave me such grace that many people were born again in God through me." Patrick knew it was God's doing, not his own.

So don't trivialize Patrick, and don't worship him either. Instead, let Patrick point you to the Lord. Thank God for the great things he did through Patrick, and ask the Lord to do great things through you. If life seems to go against you, don't let it become an excuse for failure and despair. God can use your afflictions to bless you and to prepare you for amazing purposes. Trust the same Lord Jesus whom Patrick trusted for salvation. Be empowered by the same Holy Spirit who empowered Patrick. Be courageous in the divine protection that shielded Patrick. Love others, even enemies, with the God-given love that a former slave like Patrick could have for the people and nation that kidnapped him.

I don't believe in patron saints, but I do admire heroes of faith. I don't pray to Patrick, but I'm eager to learn from his example and to be encouraged by God's work in his life. Patrick was a living demonstration of the Bible's truth and the Spirit's power. He served Christ, loved others, and changed history. Now it's our turn.

Resources about St. Patrick:

Patrick, *Confession* <http://www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/confession.html>

Mary Cagney, "Patrick the Saint," *Christian History*, Fall 1998 **Vol. XVII, No. 4**

Richard N. Hanula, "Patrick: Missionary to the Irish," *Trials and Triumph* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), pp. 45-50.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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I Rise Today

The most famous Celtic prayer shows why the Celts are known for exalting both creation and the Creator.

Patrick

I rise today
in the power's strength, invoking the Trinity
believing in threeness,
confessing the oneness,
of creation's Creator.

I rise today
in the power of Christ's birth and baptism,
in the power of his crucifixion and burial,
in the power of his rising and ascending,
in the power of his descending and judging.

I rise today
in the power of the love of cherubim,
in the obedience of angels
and service of archangels,
in hope of rising to receive the reward,
in the prayers of patriarchs,
in the predictions of the prophets,
in the preaching of apostles,
in the faith of confessors,
in the innocence of holy virgins,
in the deeds of the righteous.

I rise today
in heaven's might,
in sun's brightness,
in moon's radiance,
in fire's glory,
in lightning's quickness,
in wind's swiftiness,
in sea's depth,
in earth's stability,
in rock's fixity.

I rise today
with the power of God to pilot me,
God's strength to sustain me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look ahead for me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to protect me,

God's way before me,
God's shield to defend me,
God's host to deliver me,
 from snares of devils,
 from evil temptations,
 from nature's failings,
 from all who wish to harm me,
 far or near,
 alone and in a crowd.

Around me I gather today all these powers
against every cruel and merciless force
to attack my body and soul,
against the charms of false prophets,
the black laws of paganism,
the false laws of heretics,
the deceptions of idolatry,
against spells cast by women, smiths, and druids,
and all unlawful knowledge that harms the body and soul.

May Christ protect me today
against poison and burning,
against drowning and wounding,
so that I may have abundant reward;
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me;
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me;
Christ to the right of me, Christ to the left of me;
Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising;
Christ in the heart of all who think of me,
Christ on the tongue of all who speak to me,
Christ in the eye of all who see me,
Christ in the ear of all who hear me.

I rise today
in power's strength, invoking the Trinity,
believing in threeness,
confessing the oneness,
of creation's Creator.

For to the Lord belongs
salvation,
and to the Lord belongs salvation
and to Christ belongs salvation.
May your salvation, Lord, be with us always.

—*"Saint Patrick's Breastplate,"*
Old Irish, eighth-century prayer.

Prayer from Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources (SPCK, 1995). Used with permission.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Iona's Tough Dove

Though named for a gentle bird, the ascetic Columba wielded enormous influence with chieftans and kings—even after he died.

Thomas Owen Clancy

Scion of the most powerful family in the north of Ireland, founder of monasteries, and instigator of missions to the Picts and the English, Columba is undoubtedly the most important saint associated with Celtic churches.

Legends about him grew over the centuries, and many of the stories must be treated with caution. One of the more famous paints him as a sort of Christian sorcerer's apprentice, naughtily copying his master's precious psalter by the light of his own hand, and thereby sparking a major battle!

So too, hundreds of poems, some quite romantic in their descriptions of nature, others simple devotional verses, were attributed to the saint long after his death. Nevertheless, through the obscuring mists of his legends, it is possible to make out an outline of this key figure in the early Gaelic church. In fact, of all the Celtic saints, he is also the one about whom we know the most historically.

Fox and dove

Columba was born of royal stock around 521, in northwestern Ireland's Donegal. Although destined for the church by an early age, his noble birth gave him insight and influence in the political world.

Legend tells us that his original name was Crimthann ("fox") and that when he was trained as a priest he changed it to Columb, ("dove"), later known to all as Colum Cille: "dove of the church." It has become something of a tradition in modern times to view the saint through the twin lenses of these names: the astute fox on the make, and the peacemaking and peaceable dove.

He apparently took part in a battle in 561 between his near and more distant cousins; this led to his exile and even excommunication for a time. Yet his biographer and successor, Adomnán, saw it differently, glossing over his excommunication, and telling us only that: "In the second year following the battle of Cúl Drebene, when he was 41, Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ."

Despite the skeletons in Columba's closet, his efforts in Scotland reveal a man who had learned much in his 41 years, enough to establish a string of monasteries in the Inner Hebridean islands off the west coast of Scotland. This monastic system anticipated later orders such as the Cistercians and Carthusians.

Iona, a small island off the larger Hebridean island of Mull, was the fertile center of this system. Remote to modern eyes, Iona was at the hub of early medieval sea lanes that brought pottery and perishable goods north from France and the Mediterranean. Still, Iona was intended as a true monastery, a place set apart for Columba and his brethren.

Other island monasteries, such as one on Tiree, housed lay-folk serving out penances for their sins. Another island housed older, more experienced monks living as holy anchorites.

Iona, however, trained priests and bishops, and Columba's reputation for scholarship was great when he died (though we have little of his own work). From Iona, priests and monks ranged far and wide, founding churches in Scotland and seeking "deserts in the ocean" (lonely, distant islands).

Mighty monk

Columba's legends give us a flavor of both the fox and the dove. *The Life of Columba*, by Adomnán, is packed with stories about Columba conversing with angels, sending an angel to rescue a monk falling from a roof, and being whipped by an angel to convince him to ordain God's (rather than his own) choice for king of the Gaelic colony in Scotland.

He is seen rapt in contemplation, seeing "with a mind miraculously enlarged ... the entire orbit of the whole earth and the sea and the sky around it." From these visions, he proclaims prophecies, sends monks to help distressed people, or prays to refresh his tired monks laboring in the fields.

Columba holds his own with kings. Though he prays for the military success of kings whom God has chosen, he argues with angels over their appointment. He faces down the king of Picts through his power, blasting him with loud psalms, throwing wide his strong oak doors, and besting the magic of the king's druids. He even defeats wild animals: a fierce boar drops dead on the spot, and a strange monster on Loch Ness runs from his power.

Though Columba's power is often depicted in entertaining form, his influence was in fact the key to winning over the kings of Gaelic Scotland, and his legendary powers were famous enough for his monks later to convince the Picts to convert.

After his death, Columba's political and military power became a key element in his cult. His relics were taken into battle by minor Irish chieftains and Scottish kings—one of his relics preceded the victorious Scottish army at Bannockburn in 1314.

One particular appearance, decades after his death, to the English king of Northumbria was pivotal in the history of Christianity in Britain. That king was Oswald, who had been raised in exile in Iona. As Oswald fought the battle in which he secured his kingship, Columba towered above the field promising victory, as one modern scholar puts it, like Batman over Gotham. In 635, Oswald sent for missionaries from Iona to renew the flagging Christianity of Northumbria with their monastic sobriety and good works.

Posthumous achievements

Columba was a poet, scholar of wide-learning, monastic founder and leader, a visionary churchman. At the time of his death on June 9, 597, he was already celebrated.

Though more monk than missionary, Columba established churches in Scotland that went on, in time, to evangelize the Picts and the English. The legacy of the monasteries he founded, which drew constantly on the inspiration of their patron saint, multiplies many times the influence of the man himself. Fittingly, at the end of the *Life*, Adomnán has his hero ascend the little hill near the monastery on Iona, and declare;

"This place, however small and mean, will have bestowed on it no small but great honor by the kings and peoples of Ireland, and also by the rulers of even barbarous and foreign nations with their subject tribes. And the saints of other churches too will give it great reverence."

One way Columba's influence was felt after his death was the Law of Innocents enacted by Adomnán in 697. This law sought protection for non-combatants (in the midst of a militarized society) and for women (in danger from domestic violence, common abuse, and appalling labor conditions).

Adomnán's Law imposed strong punishments against offenders. It is a remarkable landmark in the history of law.

Adomnán records many tales of Columba as a protector of innocents, and these tales reinforce the stern message of the Law. In the most famous, Columba is a young boy, studying in a meadow with his tutor. A young girl appears, pursued across the plain by a vicious thug, who spears her at the very feet of the clerics. Appalled, the tutor cries, "How long, Columba, my holy son, will God the true judge let this crime and our dishonor go unpunished?" Columba calls down God's wrath on the killer, who falls dead on the spot.

It is difficult to summarize his accomplishments, but one memorial composed after his death does it better than most:

"He was learning's pillar in every stronghold,
he was foremost at the book of complex Law.
The northern land shone,
the western people blazed,
he lit up the east with chaste clerics."

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