

St. Patrick

March 17th

St Patrick's Day: "The Wearing of the Green"

Life: (c.385-461)

Apostle of Ireland, born (perhaps) in South Wales. At 16 he was carried to Ireland by pirates, and sold to an Antrim chief. Six years later he escaped and became a monk in France. Ordained a bishop at 45, he then became a missionary to Ireland (432), travelling widely among the chiefs, and in 454 fixed his see at Armagh. He died at Saul (Saulpatrick), and was probably buried at Armagh. The only authentic literary remains of the saint are his Confession, and a letter addressed to a British chieftain, Coroticus.

Traditionally, 17 March is the date both of St Patrick's birth (in C. 385) and of his death (in C. 461). Though the patron saint of Ireland, he was not born on Irish soil. He was, most likely, of Scottish birth.

At the age of sixteen, he was captured by Gaelic raiders. Taking him to Ireland, they sold him there as a slave. Whilst working as a shepherd, Patrick began to ponder about God and came to feel his presence ever more strongly.

After six years, he escaped to the Continent where, possibly in Gaul, he studied religion. He then had a dream. It urged him to go back to Ireland to convert its pagan population to Christianity. He heeded the "call" and in C. 435, this time as a bishop, he returned to embark on his mission.

This was not an easy task. The well-established Druids tried everything in their power to stop him. They even threatened his life, but they never succeeded in carrying out their threat.

Indomitable in his zeal, he managed to convert ever more pagans. He displayed his courage by challenging the High King of Tara. More than anything else, however, it was the miracles attributed to him that attracted the crowds.

The best known of these was his alleged banishment of all snakes from Irish soil. There are two versions of how he did this. It had become his habit on his visits to the various parts of the country to announce his presence by beating a huge brass drum. One day, he promised, he would use this drum to rid Ireland of all its venomous creatures.

At the appointed time, he climbed Croagh Patrick, the mountain now called after him, which is situated just outside the present Westport in the county of Mayo. During his ascent, he beat his drum with such force that it burst! This made many in the crowd that was following him start to lose faith, especially when they saw a huge black snake suddenly appear. As it glided down the hillside its body was shaking with what the people interpreted as laughter. But suddenly an angel, sent from heaven, appeared and patched up Patrick's drum. When, with renewed vigor, he resumed beating it, the snakes began to vanish. Not one of them remained - or ever returned.

According to the second tradition, Patrick ascended the holy mountain ringing a handbell. On reaching the summit, he threw the bell over the precipice and, as it fell, hundreds of serpents cascaded into the depths with it! Time and again angels retrieved the bell, and Patrick repeated the wondrous act till no snake was left! Patrick's bell is now displayed in the National Museum in Dublin along with the shrine in which it had been kept reverently for centuries.

It is asserted that St Patrick's miraculous feat permanently endowed Irish soil and timber with a potent anti-venomous quality. The story goes that as King's college, Cambridge, was built of Irish wood, no spider ever comes near it. Irish soil was specially shipped to Sydney, Australia, to be deposited around the newly built Vaucluse House to protect its grounds against the intrusion of snakes!

When teaching the Irish the principles of the Christian faith, St Patrick experienced great difficulty in explaining to them the meaning of the Trinity. Ingeniously, he then used nature as an illustration. Picking a shamrock, the plant that grows in profusion in Irish fields, he pointed to one of its distinctive features the way its triple leaf grew out of one stem. Had not God thus implanted the Trinity in the soil of their country? His message was well understood. The Irish not only adopted the dogma, but made the shamrock their own.

The shamrock's green color, indeed, gave the Emerald Isle its special hue and name. The Irish wear the shamrock with pride, and particularly so on St Patrick's Day. The custom is known as "the wearing of the green."

St Patrick became one of the most beloved of saints, and every Irishman identifies himself by his nickname, "Paddy."

When he was about to die, the story goes, Patrick implored the people not to grieve overmuch for him. On the contrary, he urged them to celebrate his departure to celestial heights. As practical as in his use of the shamrock, he suggested that to alleviate their sorrow, Irishmen should take a small drop of "something."

In lasting obedience and reverence, the Irish continue to observe St Patrick's Day in the manner ordained by their saint. They do the rounds and, in convivial gatherings, "wet the shamrock." Some authorities trace Irish men's love of their whiskey to this practice.

Patrick has been given credit as well for the making of poteen, the strong, home-brewed drink distilled from potatoes. Even the name poteen, it was said, did not derive, as is generally thought, from the "little pot" in which it was made, but was a variation of St Patrick's name.

Many other customs commemorate the saint's birth and death. As, in the northern hemisphere, the date falls in March when the weather is often cold and windy, the celebration of St Patrick's Day includes the eating of hot Irish stew and the drinking of an abundance of Guinness beer, followed by strong Irish coffee.

Of the many parades held on St Patrick's Day in American cities, the largest and most renowned is the one in New York City, which proceeds along Fifth Avenue and passes St Patrick's Cathedral. Hundreds of thousands of people including numerous bands, join in it. Proud of the Irish ancestry of so many Americans, participants and onlookers alike display the shamrock.