

You are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are citizens like all the saints and part of God's household. You are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations and Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord and you too, in Him, are being built into a house where God lives in the Spirit.

Letter to Ephesians 2:19-22

Irish saints tend to be studied en masse. This approach is traceable back to John Colgan and his Franciscan colleagues at Louvain in the 1640s, through the local traditions collected by the researchers for the Topographical Department of the Ordnance Survey Office in the 1830s and 1840s, the early twentieth-century editions and translations of the Anglican prelate Charles Plummer down to Richard Sharpe's *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives* (1991), Dorothy Anne Bray's *List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (1992) and the various publications of Pádraig Ó Riain (culminating in the recent magisterial *Dictionary of the Irish Saints* in 2011). Throughout, emphasis has been laid on the sheer number of holy men and (to a rather lesser extent) holy women from Erin's green isle.

This is partly due to a longstanding desire to stress the strength of Irish Christian tradition but it also reflects the nature of our medieval sources. Many Irish saints are recorded in litanies, in martyrologies, in genealogical lists or as the founding saints of settlements whose heirs (*comarbai*) are recorded in annalistic death notices. Specific detail on the events of a saint's life and their theological beliefs is very often lacking. Instead, the most easily available facts are their feast days, the settlements with which they are associated, their place of burial and their family origins.

This close association between saint and locality is often traceable today. Travelling through the Irish countryside, you will find a hospital named after St Lommán, a church dedicated to St Feichin, a school named after St Munchin or a well commemorating St Declan. Some of these saints might be relatively well known, others almost unheard of outside their own district. Writing in far away Louvain, John Colgan wrote letters to Irish diocesan bishops asking that they collect and send him as much local data as they could amass and his magisterial works, *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* (1645) and *Trias Thaumaturgae* (1647), are, in consequence, often peppered with place-names and local lore. There is also the happy coincidence that nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey researchers were collecting data about local saints immediately before the Great Famine swept away much of the Irish-speaking population from large areas of the country. In the same period, too, Catholic Emancipation was producing a new Catholic parochial system, based around new church buildings reflecting contemporary needs and settlements – and all those churches needed dedications. The national school system for primary schools introduced in 1831 had been intended to foster a non-denominational education in secular subjects but the effort to separate out religious education was opposed by the three main denominations and already by the middle years of the century, it had evolved into a mixed system in which religion (of whatever denomination) was firmly embedded into the curriculum. The 1838 Poor Law set up a workhouse and hospital system which was designed to be firmly secular but the practice of medicine in other contexts was heavily denominational. Thus today there are many contemporary

parish churches, schools and hospitals in modern Ireland which, despite originating in the Victorian period, are named after local holy men and women of the Middle Ages.

For those who are interested in such figures and the Church in which they operated, the difficulty often lies not in their identification but in trying to add colour and life to the bare facts of name and family origin. Narrative accounts exist, in both Latin or Irish, which provide the researcher with biographies of a certain number of individual saints but it is often difficult to determine the particular era in which these lives were written. Some but by no means all have been translated into English although it is increasingly hard, as humanities and especially language departments come under siege, to produce scholars with the skills and the resources to read and translate such works. Furthermore, much historical analysis on the social, cultural and theological environment in which our saints operated has still to be done. The last lecturer at the national seminary in Maynooth to specialise in early medieval Ireland, the era when Ireland earned the sobriquet, "Land of Saints and Scholars" was the late Cardinal Ó Fiaich who left the college in 1977.

In modern scholarship, by far the greatest degree of focus has been on the three great saints of Ireland: Patrick, Brigit and Columba. Even here, however, our understanding is often extremely limited; there are many questions whose answers, in the absence of detailed scholarship, remain elusive. In the case of St Brigit, for example, an overriding preoccupation has been with Brigit as euhemerized Celtic goddess. The argument is a modern one which draws on a glossary linked to Cormac, an early tenth-century bishop of Cashel:

Brigit i.e. a learned woman, daughter of the Dagdae. That is Brigit woman of learning i.e. a goddess whom the poets worshipped. For her protecting care was very great and very wonderful. So they call her goddess of *écse* [divination, wisdom, poetry]. Her sisters were Brigit woman of healing and Brigit woman of smith-work, daughters of the Dagda from whose names among all the Irish, a goddess used to be called Brigit"

The literal meaning of the Dagdae's name is "Good God". In the mindset of modern romantic nationalism, there were many who wanted to believe that what the bishop was including in his learned glossary was a stray memory of paganism which had survived in oral tradition for some five hundred years prior to being written down. Such beliefs gained further credence from a description offered by the twelfth-century Welshman, Giraldus Cambrensis:

In Leinster's Kildare, which glorious Brigit made famous, there are many miracles worthy of record. Of these the first to come to mind is Brigit's fire, which they say is inextinguishable, not because it could not be extinguished but because nuns and holy women tend and maintain it so carefully and attentively with sufficient fuel so that it has ever remained unextinguished from the time of the virgin throughout the passage of so many years.

Given the prominence of the classics in Victorian education, this description proved an almost irresistible reflex of the pagan Vestal Virgins in Rome although Gerald himself makes no claims for pagan ancestry. Prominent amongst those so affected were R.A.S. Macalister, first Professor of Archaeology in

the National University of Ireland and friend and contemporary of James Frazer, writer of *The Golden Bough*. He wrote

There was doubtless here, in pagan times, a college of priestesses who tended a perpetual fire and who... honoured the fire-goddess Brigid, this divinity being immanent in the sacred sun-oak which gave to the place the name it still bears. [Kildare is *Cell Dara* or church of the oak] Probably the head of the college was regarded as an incarnation of the goddess and so bore her name... One of the succession came under Christian influence and embracing the Faith of the Cross, she accomplished the tremendous feat of converting the pagan sanctuary into a Christian religious house – a work in its way far more wonderful than the miracles with which her biographers credit her. (underlining is my own.)

The key point is the last. There are at least three full length biographies of St Brigit representing traditions of the seventh and eighth centuries as well as various other texts. None of these make the slightest reference to Brigit as pagan goddess. On the contrary, she is invariably described as one who from her girlhood practised Christianity and insisted, against her family's wishes, on taking the veil. In all of her biographies, the miracles with which she is credited are consistently attributed to her unwavering faith and obedience to God's will. A very frequent image is that of Brigit as Mary, whose ritual of purification and presentation of Jesus as her firstborn at the Temple (Luke 2: 22-24) is commemorated on the 2nd February, the day after Brigit's feast-day. Like Mary, too, Brigit's role crossed the cultural boundaries between married and unmarried; though a consecrated virgin, she was also the female head of Kildare who ruled Kildare "by means of a mutually happy alliance" with her bishop in the manner of an Irish wife or *cétmuintir* who had equal but separate spheres of authority from those of her male counterpart. Despite the ongoing popularity of the image of Brigit as Christianized pagan goddess, therefore, there is nothing whatsoever in her early biographies to substantiate such a belief and Macalister's theories remain nothing more than speculation.

In the same way that discussion of St Brigit has concentrated on her putative role as pagan Celtic goddess, much contemporary scholarship on St Patrick's writings has been transformed into the early history of Ireland. So there has been extensive discussion of Patrick's dates, his British origins, his education, the ethnic composition of his congregation and his relationships with higher church authorities. Exceptions to this social and cultural focus are Bishop Joseph Duffy's *Patrick in his own words* (2000) – a translation for modern Christians - and Thomas O'Loughlin's *Discovering St Patrick* (2005) which has a particularly useful chapter on "Patrick's view of his ministry". There is also an interesting, if somewhat inconclusive study by Daniel Conneely (*Letters of St Patrick*, 1993) which seeks to establish whether Patrick was aware of Augustine's theories of grace.

The longer of Patrick's two autobiographical writings, his *Confessio*, is bookended by two statements which have not received the attention they deserve. In his opening chapter he explains the reason for the Irish raids on British Christians:

It was in accordance with our deserts because we had forsaken God and did not keep his commandments and were not obedient to our church-leaders who used to admonish us for our salvation.

In the final chapter he explains his motivations:

Now, then, I have given an honest account to my brothers and fellow servants, who have believed me because of what I have preached and am preaching, in order to strengthen and confirm your faith. My desire is that you also strive after greater things and do more excellent deeds. This will be my glory because a wise son is the glory of his father.

These are the sentiments of a man who sees the purpose of his existence to be the proclamation of God's word. For all the attention which subsequent generations have paid to Patrick's personal story – his capture by raiders as a young boy, his life of slavery, his escape by boat to a desert where the ship's crew wandered without food, Patrick himself saw none of these details as important as the pastoral need to lead Irish people in search of salvation.

It has been frequently commented upon that Patrick introduces himself to his readers as "*Ego Patricius peccator rusticissimus*" - "I, Patrick, the most rustic of sinners" and, on three separate occasions, he defines himself as *indoctus* "uneducated". Fascinatingly, however, he also uses the verb *docere* "to teach/educate" on six separate occasions. In the opening section of the *Epistola*, in fact, he says that to teach the peoples for God is his life even though others may despise him. In *Epistola* 3, he refers to a priest "whom I have taught from infancy" – a formula which suggests that, like later Irish priests, he fostered young boys and taught them the alphabet and the psalms. Elsewhere, he refers to the imperative to produce such men: "everywhere there should be clergy to baptize and exhort a needy and thirsting people". Such men only existed in Ireland because of God's will (*Confessio* 38):

I am exceedingly in debt to God who granted me so great a grace that through me a multitudinous people should be reborn in God and afterwards confirmed; and that clerics should everywhere be ordained for them - for a people newly coming to belief whom the Lord took from the uttermost parts of the earth

This information is repeated in *Confessio* 50. In three other instances, it is the Lord who is said to teach – and what he teaches is that the men are to go forth and preach in his name. In *Confessio* 40 Patrick quotes Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17: "the Lord teaches 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men'." Patrick is one of those fishermen – as he says in *Epistola* 11, "God's grace put this anxious concern into my heart to be one of the hunters and fishers whom long ago God foretold He would send in the last days."

It is hardly surprising, of course, to find that the man remembered as the most important figure of the Irish conversion places such emphasis in his writing on preaching and on teaching the faith. Though relatively little attention has been paid to this fact by modern historians, for medieval writers, it is fundamental. The seventh-century Bishop Tírechán, living in north Mayo, wrote an account of

Patrick's mission which is dominated by the imagery of Isaiah 9:2 "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light". The very beginning of the mission was at dawn:

"[Patrick] went on land in *Mag Breg* (north Co. Dublin/Meath) with the blessing of God, with the true sun of wondrous doctrine, enlightening the thick darkness of ignorance. As the great light-bearer, the holy bishop rose over Ireland, all the time reciting the refrain from one end to the other "In the name of the Lord God, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is called in the Irish language *Ochen Ísu Crist* or "Sing Jesus Christ".

Though Brigit and Patrick are two of the best attested Irish saints, each with a detailed medieval dossier, it is apparent that the study of their particular charisms has been overlain by the disciplinary interests and attitudes of modern academics. An interest in the antiquity of Irish culture and a concomitant desire to identify primeval pagan beliefs has led to an over-interpretation of the extremely slight evidence suggesting that Brigit of Kildare was originally a Celtic goddess. Similarly, a fascination with the personal events of Patrick's life has resulted in a skewed evaluation of his autobiographical texts which, in contrast to much modern commentary, are particularly concerned with the salvation of his converts and the need to educate an ecclesiastical leadership. In short, in order to see and appreciate Irish saints as their contemporaries saw them, it is necessary to peel back multiple layers of later rhetoric and propaganda and re-examine the original evidence to see them in all their human individuality and glory.

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