

Behind the Legends

by Bro Linus Walker fsp

He divided the night into three portions; during the first he went through a hundred of the psalms; the second he spent immersed in cold water, finishing the other fifty; and in the third took his meagre rest lying on bare stone.

This is a good example of the legends attached to the name of the saint and quoted in so many "Lives" of St. Patrick. If those works were first penned to discourage us, I do not presume to say, but that they signally failed to stir me to attempt to equal them is beyond doubt. On the other hand, the love of Scripture so evident in the saint's "Confession" has stirred me, and encouraged me to "take and read", and even to have a sporadic programme of Bible reading. I think it likely, and may the saint forgive me if I am presumptuous, that were I privileged to meet and talk with him, Patrick would more readily approve a study of Scripture than any proposal to sleep on stone or for other severe and prolonged penance.

His reason for putting the story of his life in writing was, he says, "that my brothers and relatives may know what kind of man I am". Nowhere in the Confession does he advocate corporal penances of the kind so readily attributed to him by later writers. Yet he was thoroughly acquainted with hardship, even in the performance of his devotions.

The quotation at the beginning set me thinking about the old legends, particularly about the places commonly associated with Patrick. I don't know if any writer other than he was quite so sparing of details about people encountered and places visited. He could never be accused of name-dropping. He tells us, for instance, that he grew up at "Bannavem Taberniae", and then leaves the scholars to guess where in the western world that place might have been. France, northwest and south-west, Wales, Cumbria and Scotland, all have their claims.

The place of his captivity in Ireland, was it Slemish or somewhere in the north-west midlands? Or both? We know that he had divine guidance to the ship which carried him from Ireland, but where did he find it? Far from the place of slavery, "about 200 miles; I had never been there, nor did I know anyone there". We may conjecture that it sailed from somewhere along the east or south coasts, but where did it make landfall? France, says one scholar; Britain, says another, insisting that no Irish vessel, nor even the galleys of Imperial Rome, could have made the journey to Gaul in the three days mentioned in the Confession.

Could Patrick have set foot in all those places which claim a connection with him? It would seem more likely that the earliest scene of his mission was mid-Ulster, before military defeat drove the Ulaidh, and Patrick with them, to the lands east of the Bann, to the area now represented by Antrim and Down. As for Armagh, it seems that a manuscript of the 7th century accords it a primacy, rooted, possibly, in an earlier memory of a ministry in the area of Eamhain Macha.

As for his grave, don't ask me to decide where it is. I have prayed at Downpatrick, and I know that Patrick lent an ear. With that I shall be content.

What then of Slane? of Tara? of Croagh Patrick? It is very possible that the tales of Patrick's connection with these places are of the same gossamer web as those which connect him with snake and shamrock. Pious fairy tale and lovely myth, but even then nothing essential is lost. The very existence of these stories testifies to the impact the man was deemed to have made, or at the very least to the need which later generations felt for a connection with him. Had Patrick thought that any contact of his with people or place might help us glorify God, or better display what God had done for "a sinner and the most

contemptible of men", I believe that he would have told us of it.

I like that story in which he tells of how the voices of those who dwelt "by the western sea" called him back. I cherish even more his admission that it took him years to respond, and his humble gratitude to God who granted the desire voiced so long before. The name of the messenger who brought the "cry of the Irish" is given as "Victorious" which one scholar renders as "Buadhach", with the assumption that he was someone known to Patrick from the days of his slavery.

The voices came from Foclut Wood. We are not told just where that was, but some scholars seem to agree that it was in the present County Mayo. If so, Patrick had some knowledge of that area from an early period. Moreover, since the voices asked that he "come and walk once more" among them, it may be that there were Christians in that area long before Patrick's mission began.

This brings me to a final legend, one that recounts how the saint's chariot-tree broke three times when he came to my home parish of Clogh in north Ossory (Co. Kilkenny). Seeing this as a sign from heaven, Patrick blessed a nearby well and began to evangelise. Relations, the legend tells, became strained when local Christians understood the newcomer to claim precedence over their own saint, Ciaran. Patrick, as always in the legends, was unyielding, and was stoned for his insistence. He, in turn, cursed the place and the holders of an inhospitable tradition. Since then, perhaps as an attempt at reparation, the parish church has been renamed "St. Patrick's", at the cost of "dispossessing" St. Aengus of Rathaspick. The well still springs at Aughatubrid close by the townland of Kilpatrick. An t-aithreachas mall (late repentance), perhaps, but then Patrick would be the first to admit that he was far from perfect, himself.

The great man's failures, his efforts to do right, his genuine struggle with difficulties and the contempt in which some men held him are features which must draw us again and again to his writings. Who he was, his sense of being committed to God and his sense of God's strong commitment to him, are vastly more important than tales of wonders involving snakes, stones, shamrock or place-names. The Patrick of the writings is a thousand times more human and more encouraging than the Elijah-like figure of the legends and of the severe penances.

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