

TO “LEAVE A BEQUEST”:
PATRICK’S CAREER AND HIS
LEGACY IN EARLY CELTIC IRELAND

When Patrick was born, the Romans had been in Britain for roughly 350 years. South of Hadrian’s Wall they had crisscrossed the land with a network of Roman roads. Urban centres of importance, such as Eburacum (York), Glevum (Gloucester) and Londinium (London), had been developed and dotting the countryside lavish villas had been built by the Romano-British upper class. Among these wealthy Britons there had grown to be an appreciation of and desire for Roman culture, and consequently they sought to ensure that their children received a proper Roman education. The Roman historian Tacitus (c.56-c.120) depicts this eagerness of the British upper classes to acquire Roman culture in a famous text from his biography of Agricola (40-93), the Roman general who was instrumental in extending Roman rule throughout Britain:

[Agricola] educated the sons of the [British] chiefs in the liberal arts... The result was that instead of loathing the Latin language they became eager to speak it effectively. In the same way, our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen.¹

¹ *Agricola* 21 [trans. H. Mattingly and revised S.A. Handford, *Tacitus: The Agricola and the Germania* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), 72-73].

It is not surprising that the members of this social strata became genuinely bilingual, conversant in both their native British and the Latin of their rulers. On the other hand, the lower classes, especially those in rural areas probably knew little, if any, Latin.² The ability of Patrick to write in Latin, albeit imperfectly as we shall see, is a clue to his social origins: he was from the upper class of Romano-British society.³

At the close of the fourth century, however, the comfortable world of the Romanized British upper class was about to be shattered, never to be restored. During the last quarter of that century the Empire had suffered a number of severe body blows which would precipitate the total collapse of imperial rule in the West in the following century. Those momentous events were naturally not without impact on Roman Britain.

During the winter of 406-407, the Rhine river, the natural northern frontier of the Western Roman Empire, froze to such an extent that a large number of Germanic warriors were able to cross over to ravage the Roman territories of Gaul and Hispania. They were never driven

² Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953), 97-106.

³ See the discussion of Patrick's social background by R.P.C. Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 4-5; E.A. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1985), 40-41; Máire B. de Paor, *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 26-28.

out. The following summer, Constantine III, an usurper who had been elevated to imperial power by the legions in Britain, crossed the Channel, ostensibly to repel the barbarians. The legions never returned.

In the decades that followed, the British sought to organize their own defence against Saxon raiders from the east and hit-and-run attacks by Irish pirates from the west. But with the departure of the legions, economic and cultural decay started to set in. Towns began to be deserted and the lavish villas of the upper classes abandoned. The monetary system began to suffer decay and the Roman system of education also probably collapsed.⁴ But what did not collapse or leave with the Roman legions was the Christian witness on the island.

THE BRITISH CHURCH

While Patrick's writings constitute some of the earliest literary evidence from an actual member of the British Church, there is written testimony going back to the second century regarding the presence of Christianity in the British Isles. In the 190s the North African author Tertullian, for instance, states in his *Adversus*

⁴ Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 7.

Judaeos that Christianity had spread so far it had reached Britain and had gone beyond the Antonine Wall. In answer to his question, “In whom else have all the nations believed, than in the Christ who has already come?”, he states that even “places in Britain..., though inaccessible to the Romans, have yielded to Christ.”⁵

In the following century Origen, the learned Alexandrian exegete, also shows an awareness that the Christian faith has secured adherents in Britain when he asks, “when ever did the land of Britain agree on the worship of one god before the arrival of Christ?” By the late second century/early third century, then, “British Christianity was sufficiently well-founded and its membership sufficiently large that Christians in North Africa and Alexandria” knew of its existence.⁶

How Christianity first came to the shores of Britain is impossible to determine. W.H.C. Frend has plausibly suggested that it was brought thither by merchants or by soldiers garrisoned in Britain.⁷ But up until the fourth century very little is known, in the way of

⁵ *Adversus Judaeos* 7. See also Joseph F. Kelly, “The Origins of Christianity in Britain: The Literary Evidence” (Unpublished paper, May, 1983), 4-5.

⁶ Kelly, “Origins of Christianity in Britain”, 5. Cp. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Rev. ed.; London: Penguin Books, 1993), 63, who believe that it was not until the middle of the third century that the Christianity was securely established.

⁷ “Romano-British Christianity and the West: Comparison and Contrast” in Susan M. Pearce, ed., *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: B.A.R., 1982), 6.

either literary or archaeological evidence, about the Church in Britain.

With the fourth century, however, there appear a number of statements about the British Church and its bishops by contemporary authors on the continent. One which is of some import is that made by Athanasius of Alexandria, to the effect that the British Church had fully assented to the Nicene Creed and its condemnation of the fourth-century heresy, Arianism.⁸ As we shall see, a significant part of Patrick's spiritual bequest to the Celts in Ireland will be a doctrine of the Trinity that is in full accord with that of Nicaea.

Archaeological evidence from third- and fourth-century Britain confirms a growing acceptance of Christianity by the upper classes, a movement that was parallel to what was happening in the rest of the Empire.⁹ By the turn of the fifth century we encounter for the first time prominent British churchmen: men such as Pelagius (fl.400), whose perspective on the Christian faith brought about a far-ranging controversy with that colossal thinker of

⁸ *Letter to the Emperor Jovian 2.*

⁹ For a discussion of the evidence for the existence of Christianity in Britain up to and including the fourth century, R.P.C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 30-34; Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., 1981); Kelly, "Origins", 5-9; Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland. A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 59-60.

antiquity Augustine (354-430); Faustus (c.408-c.490), bishop of Riez and a well-known preacher in Gaul;¹⁰ and Ninian (fl.400), a missionary working among the Picts in southwestern Scotland in the first half of the fifth century.¹¹

The picture of the British Church that emerges from this brief sketch is one that had made sufficient headway on the island to have a number of bishops. It was able to produce theologians and scholars of the calibre of Pelagius and Faustus. And it was seeking to evangelize, at least to some degree, through the likes of a Ninian.¹²

THE CAREER OF PATRICK (C.389-C.461)

Such is the context into which the life and career of Patrick must be placed, if it is to be properly appreciated. Now, the dates of Patrick's birth and death have been, and still are, the subject of much debate. Hanson has put forward a fairly convincing argument in favour of placing Patrick's birth c.389 and his death some 70

¹⁰ For Faustus, see J.G. Cazenove, "Faustus (11)", *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, eds. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: John Murray, 1880), II, 467- 470; Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 63-65.

¹¹ The major source for the life and ministry of Ninian is Bede, *Church History* 3.4. For a discussion of this text from Bede and Ninian's ministry, see Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 56-63; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 275-294.

¹² Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 69-71; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 198; Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, xviii, 197.

years later c.461, but he admits that these dates possess no finality.¹³ What is certain is that Patrick is a product of Britain in the late fourth century and his missionary activity in Ireland falls mostly within the first half of the fifth century.¹⁴

The broad outline of Patrick's career is fairly plain. At the beginning of his *Confession*, one of two texts that come from the hand of Patrick, he tells us of his family background and how his life at home was traumatically interrupted.

I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many. My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of Potitus, a presbyter, of the village Bannavem Taburniae; he had a country seat [*villulam*] nearby, and there I was taken captive. I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people—and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not keep his commandments, and did not obey our bishops, who used to remind us of our salvation. And the Lord “brought over us the wrath of his anger”¹⁵ and “scattered us

¹³ *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 171-188. See also his and Cecile Blanc, *Saint Patrick: Confession et Lettre à Coroticus* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1978), 18-21. For other perspectives on Patrick's dates, see Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 314-346, *passim*; Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 166-175. For a strong argument in favour of a later dating, see David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493-1993* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1993), 29-33. John T. Koch has argued for a much earlier dating, c.351-c.428; see his “The early chronology for St Patrick (c.351-c.428): some new ideas and possibilities” in Jane Cartwright, ed., *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 102-122.

¹⁴ *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 187.

¹⁵ Isaiah 42:25.

among many nations,”¹⁶ even “unto the utmost part of the earth”¹⁷ where now my littleness is placed among strangers.¹⁸

Patrick was raised in what appears to have been a nominal Christian home. He states in this text that his father Calpornius was both a deacon and the owner of a villa. In the only other literary text to come from the hand of Patrick, his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, we also learn that his father had a number of “men and women servants” and that Calpornius was also a decurion, that is, an official of the local town council.¹⁹ While this position was a prestigious one, it could also be very onerous and expensive. In the administrative structure of the late Roman Empire, the decurion was responsible for paying for public entertainment, the maintenance of public works and, most significantly, the collection of taxes from those who lived in the area covered by the council. If there was a shortfall in the amount collected, the difference came out of his own pocket. Some town councillors consequently sought to avoid this and the other expenses by acquiring the one position in the later Empire that offered a tax-free status, namely, that of an ordained deacon or presbyter.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 9:16

¹⁷ Acts 13:47.

¹⁸ *Confession 1* [trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Works of St. Patrick, St. Secundinus: Hymn on St. Patrick* (1953 ed.; repr. New York/Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, n.d.), 21, altered].

¹⁹ *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* 10 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 43).

When Constantine the Great had converted to Christianity in the first quarter of the fourth century, he had enthusiastically granted the clergy freedom from taxation. But when this freedom began to be abused, legislation was passed which required those who wished to be ordained to hand over two-thirds of their property to either their sons or relatives. Such legislation would obviously test the sincerity of a person's desire to be ordained.²⁰

The fact that Calpornius had managed to hang on to his estate says much about his probable reasons for becoming a deacon. And it provides a background to Patrick's statement that before his captivity in Ireland he "did not know the true God." In the words of Ludwig Bieler, his home was "worldly in spirit, though Christian in name."²¹

The text cited above also gives some indication of the general whereabouts of Patrick's home: the village Bannavem Taburniae, or, as E.A. Thompson and Máire B. de Paor spell it, Bannaventa Berniae.²² Unfortunately this village has not been identified. As

²⁰ This discussion of the role of the decurion in the late Roman Empire is dependent on Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 116-118, 176-179; *idem*, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 22-23; Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 8-9. See also Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 2-3.

²¹ "St. Patrick and the British Church" in M.W. Barley and R.C. Hanson, eds., *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), 123. See also Christopher Bamford, "The Heritage of Celtic Christianity: Ecology and Holiness" in Robert O'Driscoll, ed., *The Celtic Consciousness* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart/Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1981), 172.

²² Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 9; de Paor, *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland*, 25-26.

Thompson, has noted, “Romano-British village names which can be located on the map are few and far between.”²³ Nevertheless, it is most probable that this village was near the western coast of Britain, where it would be within easy striking distance of Irish raiders. Most Patrician scholarship has tended to place the village in the south of England, although Alan Macquarrie has recently argued that there is “nothing in the evidence which would be inconsistent with Patrick being a native of north Britain, even of areas like Galloway or Strathclyde north of Hadrian’s Wall.”²⁴ Be this as it may, the mention of his father’s villa (*villulam*) which was near this village provides solid evidence that Patrick was born into the upper crust of Romano-British society, and was accustomed to wealth and comfort.²⁵

Finally, Patrick’s description of himself as “most unlearned” (*rusticissimus*) is significant. A number of times in his *Confession* Patrick bemoans the fact that his education was deficient. For instance, in *Confession 9* he admits:

I have not studied like the others, who thoroughly imbibed law and Sacred Scripture, and never had to change from the

²³ Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 9.

²⁴ *The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History AD 450-1093* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1997), 37-41.

²⁵ See also his statement in the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus 10* about giving away his aristocratic status.

language of their childhood days, but were able to make it still more perfect. In our case, what I had to say had to be translated into a tongue foreign to me, as can be easily proved from the savour of my writing, which betrays how little instruction and training I have had in the art of words.²⁶

While Patrick's contemporaries were becoming progressively skilful in their use of Latin as a literary tool, he was a slave in Ireland, having to speak the language of his captors, Old Irish. His education in Latin had been severely curtailed and when, much later in life, he came to write the *Confession*, he often struggled to express himself clearly.²⁷

So, at the age of sixteen Patrick found himself violently torn away from all that was familiar to him and transported as a slave to the west coast of Ireland. As a result of this intensely traumatic experience, Patrick turned to God. In his own words:

And there [in Ireland] the Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection and mercy on my youth and ignorance.²⁸

²⁶ Trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 23. See also *Confession* 10, 12, 13, 46, 62; *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* 1.

²⁷ On Patrick's Latin, see Ludwig Bieler, "The Place of Saint Patrick in Latin Language and Literature", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 6 (1952), 65-97; Christine Mohrmann, *The Latin of Saint Patrick* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1961); Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 158-170; *idem* and Blanc, *Saint Patrick*, 155-163.

²⁸ *Confession* 2 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 21).

Patrick went on to recall one thing in particular about the years that followed while he was a captive in Ireland: his attempt to live a life in daily communion with God.

After I came to Ireland—every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed—the love of God and his fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountain; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me—as I now see, because the Spirit within me was then fervent.²⁹

After six years of captivity, Patrick managed to escape and eventually find his way back to his family in Britain. The period that elapsed between his return to Britain and his going back to Ireland as a missionary is quite obscure. We do know that in this period Patrick had a striking dream in which he sensed a call to return to Ireland to work among the people who had enslaved him.³⁰ It was also during this time that Patrick may have received some formal theological training in preparation for ordination as a

²⁹ *Confession 16* (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 25). On the distinct contrast of Christian prayer as found in this description of Patrick's piety with that of both Roman and Celtic paganism, see Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 29-30.

³⁰ *Confession 23-24*.

deacon. In the course of this preparation, he became thoroughly familiar with the Latin Bible, so much so that Christine Mohrmann has described Patrick as “a man *unius libri* (“a man of one book”).³¹

At the end of this period, that is, around 432, he departed for the part of Ireland where he had been held captive. He would never return to Britain. As he wrote in his *Confession* 43:

Wherefore, then, even if I wished to leave...and go to Britain—and how I would have loved to go to my country and my parents, and also to Gaul in order to visit the brethren and to see the face of the saints of my Lord! God knows it that I much desired it; but I am bound by the Spirit³² who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty; and I am afraid of losing the labour which I have begun—nay, not I, but Christ the Lord who bade me come here and stay with them for the rest of my life, if the Lord will.³³

And in another text from this same work he could state:

I came to the people of Ireland to preach the Gospel, and to suffer insult from the unbelievers, bearing the reproach of my going abroad and many persecutions even unto bonds, and to

³¹ Mohrmann, *Latin of Saint Patrick*, 8. On Patrick’s devotion to the Scriptures, see Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 44-47.

³² Cp. Acts 20:22.

³³ *Confession* 43 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 35).

give my free birth for the benefit of others; and, should I be worthy, I am prepared to give even my life without hesitation and most gladly for his name, and it is there that I wish to spend it until I die, if the Lord would grant it to me.³⁴

These texts reveal a man who has a deep certainty of the will of God for his life: to live out his days in Ireland so that the Irish might come to know God as he had done. In the first text he says that he must do this because he is “bound by the Spirit.” This phrase, “bound by the Spirit” is drawn directly from Acts 20:22, where the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he is “bound by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem, despite the probability that he would experience much suffering there. The Apostle Paul is committed to doing what he perceives as God’s will, no matter the cost. The clear implication in Patrick’s use of this term is that he shares the Apostle Paul’s attitude and depth of commitment.

It needs to be noted that Patrick’s writings display the conviction that his evangelistic activity was to be one of the final events of history. He writes:

I must accept with equanimity whatever befalls me, be it good or evil, and always give thanks to God, who taught me to trust in him always without hesitation, and who must have heard my prayer so that I, however ignorant I was, in the last

³⁴ *Confession 37* (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 32).

days dared to undertake such a holy and wonderful work—thus imitating somehow those who, as the Lord once foretold, would preach his Gospel “for a testimony to all nations before the end of the world.”³⁵ So we have seen it, and so it has been fulfilled: indeed, we are witnesses that the Gospel has been preached unto those parts beyond which there lives nobody.³⁶

This text dovetails well with the experience of one for whom the disintegration of Roman imperial might was a living reality and who, like other Christians of the day, regarded that event as a sign of the end of the world.³⁷ It also fits well with one who had been raised with the typical Roman perspective that beyond the shores of Ireland there was only ocean. As R. P. C. Hanson puts it: “To a man of classical antiquity, [Ireland] was literally the last country on earth. It was the most westerly country in Europe; beyond it was nothing.”³⁸ In Patrick’s mind, he had been given the incredible privilege of preaching Christianity to the literally last nation to be evangelized.³⁹

The course of his travels in Ireland is not at all clear from his *Confession*, but it was probably restricted to the northern half of the

³⁵ See Matthew 24:14.

³⁶ *Confession* 34 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 32).

³⁷ Thus Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 184-185, 201; Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: S.C.K., 1972), 71-72; John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches. A History A.D. 200 to 1200* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59. Pace Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 87, n.81.

³⁸ Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 23.

³⁹ Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 119-125.

island.⁴⁰ In human terms, his ministry was extremely successful, though he certainly had not evangelized the whole of the north of Ireland by the time of his death, which cannot have been long after he wrote his *Confession*.⁴¹ His final days, though, were ones of trouble. As shall be seen, there were those who had opposed his mission to Ireland. Despite the evident success of Patrick's ministry, this opposition did not go away, but appears to have become more vocal with the passing of years. They especially charged him with having undertaken the mission to Ireland for the basest of reasons, namely financial gain. Patrick's *Confession* was written to lay these criticisms and charges to rest once and for all.⁴²

⁴⁰ Macquarrie, *Saints of Scotland*, 40-41.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 84-85. Patrick was an old man when he wrote his *Confession*. See *Confession* 62: "This is my confession before I die." (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 40).

⁴² Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 144-146; de Paor, *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland*, 145-152; Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 142-149.

PATRICK'S BEQUEST

After Patrick's death in the 460s total silence reigns about him in the Irish Christian tradition until the 630s, when he is mentioned by Cumman, abbot of Durrow. In a letter to Segene, abbot of Iona, Cumman describes Patrick as the "holy Patrick, our father."⁴³ But this shroud of silence should not be taken to mean that Patrick was forgotten. His works, the *Confession* and the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, were obviously cherished, copied and transmitted. Moreover, his missionary labours firmly planted the Christian faith in Irish soil, and left a deep imprint on the Celtic Church that would grow up from this soil.

Patrick speaks of "thousands" converted through his ministry,⁴⁴ including sons and daughters of Irish kings.⁴⁵ They were converted, he tells us, from the worship of "idols and filthy things."⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that he here speaks of the worship practices of Celtic paganism with "scorn and dislike."⁴⁷ In order to increase the range of his influence he ordained "clergy everywhere."⁴⁸ Patrick never lost sight of the fact, though, that it

⁴³ Cited Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, 66.

⁴⁴ *Confession* 14, 50; see also *Confession* 38; *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* 2.

⁴⁵ *Confession* 41-42.

⁴⁶ *Confession* 41.

⁴⁷ Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 111.

⁴⁸ *Confession* 38, 40, 50.

was God’s grace that lay behind each and every success of his mission. “For I am very much God’s debtor,” he joyfully confessed, “who gave me such great grace that many people were reborn in God through me.”⁴⁹

Yet, his missionary labours were not without strong opposition, presumably from pagan forces in Ireland. In one section of his *Confession* he says: “daily I expect murder, fraud, or captivity.”⁵⁰ He mentions two distinct occasions of captivity, one for two months and the other for a fortnight.⁵¹ He also relates that he was in peril of death “twelve” times, though he gives no details of these lest he bore the reader!⁵² Patrick’s response to these dangers reveals the true mettle of the man.

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, as the prophet says: “Cast thy thought upon God, and he shall sustain thee.”⁵³

There was not only external opposition, though. Many of Patrick’s Christian contemporaries in the Western Roman Empire appear to have given little thought to evangelizing their barbarian

⁴⁹ *Confession* 38 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 32).

⁵⁰ *Confession* 55 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 38).

⁵¹ *Confession* 21, 52.

⁵² *Confession* 35.

⁵³ *Confession* 55 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 38).

neighbours. As Máire B. de Paor notes: “there was seemingly no organised, concerted effort made to go out and convert pagans, beyond the confines of the Western Roman Empire” during the twilight years of Roman rule in the West.⁵⁴ Whatever the reasons for this lack of missionary effort, Patrick’s mission to Ireland stands in splendid isolation. As Thompson notes, what we find in the *Confession* is paragraph after paragraph on this issue, bespeaking Patrick’s uniqueness in his day.⁵⁵

Thus, when Patrick announced his intention in Britain to undertake a mission to the Irish there were those who strongly opposed him.

Many tried to prevent this my mission; they would even talk to each other behind my back and say: “Why does this fellow throw himself into danger among enemies who have no knowledge of God?”⁵⁶

Patrick, though, was assured of the rightness of his missionary activity in Ireland. He knew himself called to evangelize Ireland.⁵⁷ He had a deep sense of gratitude to God for what God had done for him. “I cannot be silent,” he declared, “about the great benefits and the great grace which the lord has deigned to bestow upon me in

⁵⁴ *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland*, 23-24.

⁵⁵ Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 82-83.

⁵⁶ *Confession* 46 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 36).

⁵⁷ See *Confession* 23.

the land of my captivity; for this we can give to God in return after having been chastened by him, to exalt and praise His wonders before every nation that is anywhere under the heaven.”⁵⁸

The Celtic Church would inherit Patrick’s missionary zeal. His spiritual descendants, men like Columba (c.521-597), Columbanus (c.543-615), and Aidan (died 651), drank deeply from the well of Patrick’s missionary fervour, so that the Celtic Church became, in the words of James Carney, “a reservoir of spiritual vigour, which would... fructify the parched lands of western Europe.”⁵⁹ As Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire notes, it is surely no coincidence that what was prominent in Patrick’s life was reproduced in the lives of his heirs.⁶⁰

Patrick’s Celtic Christian heirs also inherited his rich Trinitarian spirituality, which, unlike his missionary passion, was central to Latin Christianity in late antiquity. Near the very beginning of the *Confession* Patrick sets out in summary form the essence of his faith in God.

⁵⁸ *Confession* 3 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 21-22).

⁵⁹ “Sedulius Scottus” in Robert McNally, ed., *Old Ireland* (New York: Fordham University Press 1965), 230.

⁶⁰ “Old Ireland and Her Spirituality” in McNally, ed., *Old Ireland*, 33.

There is no other God, nor ever was, nor will be, than God the Father unbegotten, without beginning, from whom is all beginning, the Lord of the universe, as we have been taught; and his son Jesus Christ, whom we declare to have always been with the Father, spiritually and ineffably begotten by the Father before the beginning of the world, before all beginning; and by him are made all things visible and invisible. He was made man, and, having defeated death, was received into heaven by the Father; “and he hath given him all power over all names in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue shall, confess to him that Jesus Christ is Lord and God,”⁶¹ in whom we believe, and whose advent we expect soon to be, “judge of the living and of the dead,”⁶² who will render to every man according to his deeds; and “he has poured forth upon you abundantly the Holy Spirit,”⁶³ “the gift” and “pledge”⁶⁴ of immortality, who makes those who believe and obey “sons of God...and joint heirs with Christ”⁶⁵; and him do we confess and adore, one God in the Trinity of the Holy Name.⁶⁶

The Old Irish prayer, *The Breastplate of Patrick*, though most likely written in the century following Patrick’s death, is an excellent example of the way in which Patrick’s Trinitarian faith was transmitted. In its opening and closing refrain, it declares:

I rise today
with a mighty power, calling on the Trinity,

⁶¹ Philippians 2:9-11.

⁶² Acts 10:42.

⁶³ Titus 3:5.

⁶⁴ Cp. Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:14.

⁶⁵ Romans 8:16-17.

⁶⁶ *Confession 4* (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 22).

with a belief in the threeness,
with a faith in the oneness
of the Creator of creation.⁶⁷

The credal statement cited above is the only place in the *Confession* where we can be sure that Patrick is referring to another work besides his Latin Bible. The Latin of the first half of this creed has the “balance and cadences of what passed for polished style in late antiquity” and is clearly not of Patrick’s own composition. And although the second half of the creed is filled with biblical quotation or allusion, it too has regular cadences.⁶⁸ It is most likely that Patrick is reproducing here a rule of faith used in the British Church to instruct new believers about the essentials of the Christian faith.⁶⁹

R. P. C. Hanson, though, has probed further into the source of Patrick’s creed and has cogently argued that it essentially stems from one found in the writings of Victorinus of Pettau (d.304), who died as a martyr in the Diocletianic persecution. Certain additions have been made to Victorinus’ creed in light of the Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Trans. Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland*, 161, 164.

⁶⁸ D. R. Bradley, “The Doctrinal Formula of Patrick”, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., 33 (1982), 124-133.

⁶⁹ Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 79, 81; Bradley, “Doctrinal Formula of Patrick”, 133.

⁷⁰ “Witness for St. Patrick to the Creed of 381”, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 101: 297-299.

The mention above of Patrick’s bibliocentrism brings us to a final aspect of Patrick’s bequest to Celtic Ireland. His Christianity is “very much a religion of the book,” namely the Latin Bible.⁷¹ Given the central place that the Bible held in his thinking, it is not surprising that the success of Patrick’s mission helped initiate an impetus among the Irish towards literacy. In fact, so profound was this impetus that by the seventh century the Irish had become major participants in one of the key aspects of the Christian *romanitas* of late antiquity: “bibliocentric literacy.”⁷²

Such are some of the key aspects of the long-range legacy of the mission of Patrick, who had simply come to Ireland to pass on his faith in the “One God in the Trinity of the Holy Name” to the Irish. As he wrote in *Confession* 14, tying faith in the Trinity and his mission together:

In the light, therefore, of our faith in the Trinity I must make this choice, regardless of danger I must make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation, without fear and frankly I must spread everywhere the name of God so that after my decease I may leave a bequest to my brethren and sons whom I have baptised in the Lord—so many thousands of people.⁷³

⁷¹ Joseph F. T. Kelly, “Christianity and the Latin Tradition in Early Mediaeval Ireland”, *Bulletin of The John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 68, No.2 (Spring 1986), 411; Hanson, *Historical Saint Patrick*, 44-47.

⁷² Kelly, “Christianity and the Latin Tradition”, 417.

⁷³ *Confession* 14 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*, 24).

