

St. Patrick and Ireland

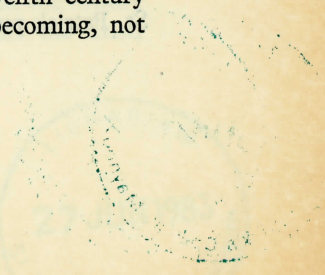
BY

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A PAPER WITH A TITLE : ' St. Patrick and Ireland ' may be expected to promise almost anything, and what it may be expected to achieve might be equally hard to pin down. It will hardly be denied that St. Patrick has meant more to the Irish people than most national apostles have to their respective countries ; from the earliest date they speak of him in terms of the highest veneration. The oldest of these testimonies, the Latin hymn attributed to his disciple Secundinus, is one long litany of praise. Cummian, writing at the beginning of the seventh century, speaks of ' St. Patrick, our pope,' and if we feel, justifiably, that the word had not then the exact and limited meaning which it has now, we have to consider a line from Secundinus which says that ' Christ chose him to be his vicar on earth.' True, the Irish are accused of a weakness for exaggeration, but at least we can see in these two passages a wish to exalt St. Patrick to the very highest degree, something in the same way as the Book of Lismore spoke of St. Brigid as ' the Mary of the Gael.' The Féilire of Oengus invokes ' the troop of the noble saints of Erin, with Patrick, greatest of them all,' and prays ' may Patrick, the flame of a splendid sun, the apostle of virginal Erin, with many thousands, be the shelter of our wretchedness.' No other saint has been so venerated in Ireland, nor from so remote a period, and the Irish wanderers brought the fame of their apostle all over Europe.

The veneration continued. After the great reform-movement of the twelfth century, there was a new surge of interest in the monasteries in the lives of the early saints, and this interest was shared by the monks of Norman origin recently arrived in the country. At the end of the twelfth century a Life of St. Patrick was written in Downpatrick by Jocelin, a Cistercian monk from Furness in Lancashire. It is, it must be confessed, of no great value as a historical document, but it may be of interest to note that Jocelin was able to base his work on a Life of St. Patrick current in twelfth-century England. At about the same time a monk in England was composing an account of a vision seen by an Englishman in St. Patrick's Purgatory. Already by the twelfth century it is clear that St. Patrick is well on the way to becoming, not



merely the possession of the Irish people, but, through them, of a wider world.

Another important development came when the Irish clergy trained in the schools of the Counter-reformation began to apply to their saints the new historical criticism stirred by the Renaissance and developed in the religious controversies of the sixteenth century. The highest achievement here is undeniably that of John Colgan, but many other publications show that St. Patrick was regarded as the great saint of all Irishmen, of Gaelic or Norman descent. It was Luke Wadding of Waterford who saw to it that his feast was inserted in the Roman Breviary, which Pope Pius V had prescribed for the whole Church of the Latin rite. From that time on, it is not necessary to trace in detail the place occupied by St. Patrick in the devotion of the Irish people at home and throughout the world. It is enough to open a directory of the Catholic Church in any of the English-speaking countries and simply count the churches and religious institutions which bear his name.

Of the fact of the veneration of the Irish for St. Patrick there can be no doubt ; to trace the implications of the fact is a slightly more involved question. It might be said—I mention it because in fact it has so often been said—that the first tribute the Irish paid to Patrick was to spin a legend about him which so deformed him that he would not recognize himself. The saint was woven into the national folklore ; he received all the attributes of the national heroes, and became a part of the Irish mythology. The more unfortunate extremes of such learning have left little in St. Patrick except mythology ; but the sober testimonials from the early Irish Church which I have already alluded to are a sufficient indication of the fact that Patrick was more to the Irish than a national legendary hero. It is true, of course, that legendary development did build him up into something of a hero of this kind, a super-human wonderworker, an ‘arch-druid’ whose chief characteristic is the power he commands, and whose miracles are inclined to be miracles of malevolence to a degree it is disconcerting to find associated with a Christian bishop. There is a sense in which St. Patrick was incorporated into the national sagas and given the attributes of the national heroes. But in this he is in no way exceptional, and these fantasies which popular imagination has woven round the saints are no more than attempts to emphasize the fact of veneration. For the real nature of the stamp which St. Patrick put on the Irish race we have to look elsewhere.

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Where are we to look? What I am going to suggest is that there
 are certain characteristics of Irish Christianity which are also so
 characteristic of Patrick himself that we must conclude that in some
 way they derive from him. A Christian nation is, of course, shaped
 by Christianity; but there is also a sense in which the nation shapes
 its Christianity, gives it a distinctive flavour, and I feel that we
 are not deceiving ourselves when we attribute certain distinctive
 characteristics to the Christianity of Ireland.

Every Christian has a twofold obligation in regard to the good
 news of Christ which has been given him—to grasp it and to pass
 it on. Of course these two obligations are not separable in any real
 way, and any attempt to separate them is highly dangerous, and it
 would be agreed, I am sure, that any success in it would be
 disastrous. Yet there would seem to be room for a legitimate
 difference of emphasis, a difference of emphasis which has in fact
 existed even among the saints. Some are naturally drawn to the
 contemplative life, some to the active: there have been few whose
 temperament has had all the gifts in perfect balance. The balance
 of the saints comes from the grace of Christ.

It is very commonly said that what the Irish have brought to
 the faith, their distinctive contribution, has been a gift for action
 rather than for learning and contemplation, and I would venture
 the suggestion that in the sense in which this may be said to be
 true it is a quality imprinted on them by their national apostle.
 St. Patrick had too much of the balance of the saints to take pride
 in the fact that he was an unlearned man, but, while he regrets it,
 he does admit it. St. Patrick came to meet God, not in the learning
 of the Christian schools, but in his captivity, in the personal
 affliction which it brought to him, but even more in the realization
 which came to him from living among a pagan people of what a
 great misfortune it was to be without God. If we can say of Irish
 Christianity that it has tended to find God in the obligation to
 bring Him to others, we can also say that in this it is following the
 path traced out by its national apostle.

At this stage I can see a rather firmly-voiced objection taking
 shape. Is not Ireland's proudest title 'the island of saints and
 scholars'? Were we not for centuries the teachers of Europe?
 No doubt we were, but here too I feel it is necessary to see things
 in proportion. The centuries of what has been justly called 'the
 Irish miracle of learning' were very exceptional ones in the history
 of Christendom. Without wishing to detract from the Irish



achievement, it must be pointed out that in those centuries it was not hard to hold a primacy in learning. When the initiative passed from the Irish schools, no doubt much of the explanation is to be sought in the disorders which came upon the country; but we must also give due weight to the fact that the recovery of Western Christendom re-established a more natural balance. It is certain at any rate that we have never in later ages recovered the predominance in learning of our comparatively brief period of glory. True, we have more scholars than we often get credit for; but none the less when we remind people that the first teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas was Peter of Ireland, or when we point to such figures as Maurice O'Fihely, it may be that we are betraying a slight inferiority complex. For long centuries our distinctive contribution to Christianity has not been in the domain of learning, and, like St. Patrick, while we may regret it, it seems that we have to admit it.

Closely connected with this preoccupation with the active apostolate is another characteristic, which might perhaps be described as a kind of austere intrepidity, tempered, we might almost say saved from its undoubted dangers, by a kindly charity, especially when it appears, as it so often does, in defence of the people of God. We find this characteristic very marked in St. Patrick; the *Letter to the soldiers of Coroticus* is on fire with it from beginning to end. I might quote one chapter—a short one—as an example, in which St. Patrick does not mince his words in bringing home to the soldiers the enormity of their crime in enslaving fellow-Christians. 'Let every God-fearing man know,' he writes, 'that they are enemies of me and of Christ my God, for whom I am an ambassador. Parricide, fratricide, ravening wolves that devour the people of God. . . . As it is said: *the wicked, O Lord, have destroyed thy law*, which in these last times He had planted in Ireland so well and so graciously, and which had established itself by the grace of God.'

This is the voice of a man so completely forgetful of himself, so given over to his people, that he is prepared to face any danger for them. It is a voice which we find often in Irish Christianity, and its courage is based on a great personal austerity. We need not look for examples of this austerity in the more outlandish mortifications recorded in the lives of the Irish saints; we can find them, with a more authentic ring, in more reliable documents. Take, for example, the monastic rule of St. Columbanus. In many respects it is a merciless document—'let a man go to bed,'

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he says, 'when he is falling asleep on his feet.' And yet, though his whole message could be summed up in the declaration that the Kingdom of Heaven could be won only by violence, he is equally emphatic that the violence is only a means to the kingdom. If the monk is to fear the abbot as his master, he is also to love him as his father; if the only measure of monastic obedience is that it be obedience unto death, the reason is that that was the measure of the obedience of Christ. The opening sentence of the rule lays down the motive and the hope of all Christian austerity: the first of all the commandments is to love God with the whole heart and with the whole mind.

Neither was this a narrow concentration on self-perfection. The love of God which was sought so intensely flowed over into love of man. The lives of the Irish saints stress this in many ways, in their zeal for souls above all, but also in such virtues as hospitality and kindness, especially to the poor and sick. Perhaps the most striking instance is the way in which the discipline of Penance was softened by the Irish monks—not softened in the sense of any minimizing of sin, but softened in an emphasis that the sacrament was given for healing as well as for correction. Documents like the Penitentials might seem at first sight to be no more than a list of punishments for faults, yet it was these documents which emphasized that the confessor was not only the judge who pronounced the Church's punishment, but also the *anamchara*, the friend of the penitent's soul.

One last characteristic which I would suggest ties the Irish Church to St. Patrick is that which has urged Irish missionary Christianity to the ends of the earth. 'Wandering,' said Walafrid Strabo in the ninth century, 'is a second nature to the Irish race.' Not that all the wanderings of Irish clerics were with the pure motive of spreading the Gospel—the long list of conciliar legislation against wandering clerics who are no credit to their cloth contains its share of uncomplimentary references to the Irish, and we can hardly take an unmixed pride in such byways of information as that most of the drinking-songs of the same ninth century were written by Irish wanderers. Yet these 'wastrels of the emigration,' as Dom Gougaud calls them, are only flotsam on a stream that ran strong with a missionary purpose. This motive for voluntary exile was coupled with a recognition that to leave Ireland was the severest penance which an Irishman could undertake—indeed, the penitential aspect of exile often seems to be the primary one with

these early Irish *peregrini*. But the two aspects, the desire to spread the Gospel and the acceptance of exile as a penance, have always remained strongly marked in the Irish. It is interesting to see how strong they were in St. Patrick himself.

It may be something of a blow to our conviction that St. Patrick gave all his thoughts to the Irish to realize how often those thoughts turned back to his home. He recognizes—it is the theme of every word he wrote—that God has given him a great grace in making him His missionary in Ireland, but on a number of occasions he lets us see that, like all God's gifts, it had its price—'the price,' he says, 'of leaving my country and my parents . . . to live among barbarians, a stranger and exile for the love of God.' If there have been many Irishmen in exile whose thoughts turned back to Ireland, St. Patrick in Ireland, 'among the barbarians,' hankered after the world of Rome.

I have picked out a few prominent characteristics of Irish Christianity and shown that they are found too in the life of the apostle of Ireland. Can we say that the Irish received them from St. Patrick? I think there is a sense in which we can say that they did. Recent research into Patrician problems may at times seem to have done little more than raise unanswerable questions, but it has focused attention on the fact that a number of other missionaries as well as Patrick came to Ireland in the fifth century. We do not know very much of their work, but it is clear that, in comparison with Patrick, they achieved little. In seeking some reason for this, it is impossible to ignore the consideration that there must have been some natural affinity between St. Patrick and the Irish, something which made his approach more successful than that of others. We can, of course, see much of the explanation for this in the six years of his youth which the saint spent as a captive in Ireland, but we might perhaps go further and see some temperamental affinity between him and his Irish converts. If that is so, and it seems to me a reasonable postulate, while we cannot say that these characteristics we have been considering bear the stamp of Patrick in the sense that they derive from him, there is a sense in which they do bear the stamp of Patrick in that it was from him the Christian Irish learned to put these natural gifts of temperament to the service of God. They have been so persistent in Irish Christianity that it seems that Patrick must have stamped them on his converts with some vehemence, but from all we know of the man this is just what we might expect.

