

Saint Patrick - the Patron of Ireland

St Patrick is known as the patron saint of Ireland. True, he was not a born Irish. But he has become an integral part of the Irish heritage, mostly through his service across Ireland of the 5th century.

Patrick was born in the later half of the 4th century AD. There are differing views about the exact year and place of his birth. According to one school of opinion, he was born about 390 A.D., while the other school says it is about 373 AD. Again, his birth place is said to be in either Scotland or Roman England. His real name was probably Maewyn Succat. Though Patricius was his Romanized name, he was later came to be familiar as Patrick.

Patrick was the son of Calpornius, a Roman-British army officer. He was growing up as naturally as other kids in Britain. However, one day a band of pirates landed in south Wales and kidnapped this boy along with many others. Then they sold him into slavery in Ireland. There he was for 6 years, mostly imprisoned. This was when changes came to him. He dreamed of having seen God. Legend says, he was then dictated by God to escape with a getaway ship.

Finally, he did escape and went to Britain. And then to France. There he joined a monastery and studied under St. Germain, the bishop of Auxerre. He spent around 12 years in training. And when he became a bishop he dreamed that the Irish were calling him back to Ireland to tell them about God. The Confessio, Patrick's spiritual autobiography, is the most important document regarding this. It tells of a dream after his return to Britain, in which one Victorinus delivered him a letter headed "The Voice of the Irish."

So he set out for Ireland with the Pope's blessings. There he converted the Gaelic Irish, who were then mostly Pagans, to Christianity. He was confident in the Lord; he journeyed far and wide, baptizing and confirming with untiring zeal. And, in a diplomatic fashion he brought gifts to a kinglet here and a lawgiver there but accepted none from any.

Indeed, Patrick was quite successful at winning converts. Through active preaching, he made important converts even among the royal families. And this fact upset the Celtic Druids. Patrick was arrested several times, but escaped each time. For 20 years he had traveled throughout Ireland, establishing monasteries across the country. He also set up schools and churches which would aid him in his conversion. He developed a native clergy, fostered the growth of monasticism, established dioceses, and held church councils.

Patrick's doctrine is considered orthodox and has been interpreted as anti-Pelagian. Although he is not particularly noted as a man of learning, a few of his writings remain extant: his Confession, a reply to his detractors, and several letters. The Lorica ("Breastplate"), a famous hymn attributed to Patrick, may date to a later period. By the end of the 7th century Patrick had become a legendary figure, and the legends have continued to grow since then. There are many legends associated with St Patrick. It is said that he used the three-leaved shamrock to explain the concept of the Trinity; which refers to the combination of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Hence its strong association with his day and name. Legend also has that, Saint Patrick had put the curse of God on venomous snakes in Ireland. And he drove all the snakes into the sea where they drowned.

True, these are mostly legends. But, after some 1500 years, these legends have been inseparably combined with the facts. And together they have helped us know much about the Saint and the spirit behind celebration of the day. Patrick's mission in Ireland lasted for over 20 years. He died on March 17, AD 461. That day has been commemorated as St. Patrick's Day ever since. The day's spirit is to celebrate the universal baptism of Ireland. Though originally a Catholic holy day, St. Patrick's Day has evolved into more of a secular holiday. Or, rather, 'be an Irish Day'. And the Irish has borne it as part of their national tradition in everywhere they populated and prospered. The Catholic feast day for this most loved of Irish saints has become a holiday in celebration of the Irish and Irish culture. The leprechaun, a Celtic fairy, has become entrenched as a chief symbol for this holiday, as is the shamrock, an ancient symbol for the triple goddess Brigit. It is fitting that this holiday should fall at the time of the year when the return of spring begins to seem at hand. But why the icons like the green color, the tri-leaved shamrock, the leprechaun, or the pot of gold and Blarney's stone all came to be associated with the celebration of this Day? And what do they all mean?

THE LEPRECHAUN



The Leprechaun is an Irish fairy. He looks like a small, old man (about 2 feet tall), often dressed like a shoemaker, with a cocked hat and a leather apron. According to legend, leprechauns are aloof and unfriendly, live alone, and pass the time making shoes. They also possess a hidden pot of gold. Treasure hunters can often track down a leprechaun by the sound of his shoemaker's hammer. If caught, he can be forced (with the threat of bodily violence) to reveal the whereabouts of his treasure, but the captor must keep their eyes on him every second. If the captor's eyes leave the leprechaun (and he often tricks them into looking away), he vanishes and all hopes of finding the treasure are lost.

Near a misty Stream in Ireland in the hollow of a tree

Live mystical, magical leprechauns
who are clever as can be

With their pointed ears, and turned up toes and
little coats of green

The leprechauns busily make their shoes and try
hard not to be seen.

Only those who really believe have seen these
little elves

And if we are all believers

We can surely see for ourselves.

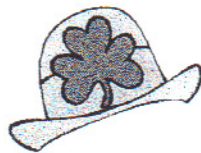
(Irish Blessing)



SHAMROCK

In written English, the first reference to the Shamrock dates from 1571, and in written Irish, as seamrog, from 1707. As a badge to be worn on the lapel on the Saint's feast day, it is referred to for the first time as late as 1681. The Shamrock was used as an emblem by the Irish Volunteers in the era of Grattan's Parliament in the 1770's, before '98 and The Act of Union. So rebellious did the wearing of the Shamrock eventually appear, that in Queen Victoria's time Irish regiments were forbidden to display it. At that time it became the custom for civilians to wear a little paper Cross colored red and green.

As a symbol of Ireland it has long been integrated into the symbol of the United Kingdom, along with the Rose, the Thistle and the Leek of England, Scotland and Wales. So today, on St. Patrick's Day, a member of the British Royal Family presents Shamrock to the Irish Guards regiment of the British Army.



THE MAGIC SHAMROCK

Three is Ireland's magic number. Hence the Shamrock. Crone, Mother and Virgin. Love, Valour and Wit.. Faith, Hope and Charity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Numbers played an important role in Celtic symbolism. Three was the most sacred and magical number. It multiplies to nine, which is sacred to Brigit. Three may have signified totality: past, present and future OR behind, before and here OR sky, earth and underworld. Everything good in Ireland comes in threes. The rhythm of story telling in the Irish tradition is based on threefold repetition. This achieves both intensification and exaggeration. Even today in quality pub talk, a raconteur can rarely resist a third adjective, especially if it means stretching a point. "Three accomplishments well regarded in Ireland: a clever verse, music on the harp, the art of shaving faces."

THE BLARNEY STONE

The Blarney Stone is a stone set in the wall of the Blarney Castle tower in the Irish village of Blarney. Kissing the stone is supposed to bring the kisser the gift of persuasive eloquence (blarney). The castle was built in 1446 by Cormac Laidhiv McCarthy (Lord of Muskerry) -- its walls are 18 feet thick (necessary to thwart attacks by Cromwellians and William III's troops). Thousands of tourists a year still visit the castle. The origins of the Blarney Stone's magical properties aren't clear, but one legend says that an old woman cast a spell on the stone to reward a king who had saved her from drowning. Kissing the stone while under the spell gave the king the ability to speak sweetly and convincingly. It's tough to reach the stone -- it's between the main castle wall and the parapet. Kissers have to stretch to their back and bend backward (and downward), holding iron bars for support.