

## EARLY CHRISTIANITY OF IRELAND.

**St. Patrick: came over A.D. 432; died, 461.**

BY THE REV. S. HARVEY GEM, M.A.

**I**T may be helpful to us to turn from the sad spectacle of the present state of Ireland, to consider its early brightness and the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century. In various parts of Europe Christians who had been taken prisoners and had become slaves, were the means of spreading Christianity. This was the case with Patrick. The name has been so closely identified with Ireland, especially in its abbreviation "Pat," that we naturally imagine that he was a native. But this was not the case. It has been usually held that he was born in North Britain, somewhere near Dumbarton. His grandfather was a priest, and his father a deacon, for the objectionable rule requiring the celibacy of the clergy in direct disregard of Holy Scripture had not then been enforced. The date of his birth is uncertain. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was made prisoner in a raid of Irishmen, and was carried off into bondage. He was sold to a chieftain, who made him overseer of his flocks. Under the influence of this sorrow, the Christian teaching given him as a child bore fruit in a true conversion. Lonely among the mountains, far from all human aid, he felt that God was revealing Himself to his soul, and learnt that communion with his God and Father in Heaven was a great reality. The Holy Spirit spoke within him in stillness of the Divine Presence. After a while he escaped from Ireland, but the years that intervened between his deliverance from slavery, and his return as missionary to that island, are not clearly recorded. It appears that he was taken a second time, but his captivity was not a long one. He found a ship that conveyed him to Gaul; and while there, he travelled to the south-west and became a student in a monastery famous at that time, on an island near Cannes, called Lérins. This part of Gaul was often in communication with Syria and Egypt, the results of which we shall have to notice in Patrick's subsequent career. Meanwhile, it is related that he also studied at Auxerre, and he is said to have been ordained as missionary bishop to Ireland while in Gaul.

Neander,<sup>1</sup> however, thinks this unlikely, "for we find in the Irish Church afterwards, a spirit of church freedom similar to that shown by the ancient British Church, which struggled against the yoke of Roman ordinances." But there had been previously an effort made from Rome, Pope Celestine having appointed Palladius as bishop for Ireland, and it is certain that there were Christians in Ireland before Patrick. At the death of Palladius, the missionary career of Patrick followed, and it may be left uncertain whether he obtained his authority in Gaul or in Britain. Such details matter little. His work in Ireland and his own spiritual character are the main points of interest for us. He felt himself called from above by a vision, to return to the land where he had been a slave, to deliver his former enemies from the captivity of sin. We have here a remarkable instance of obedience to our Lord's command, "Love your enemies."<sup>2</sup> On his return to Ireland, about the year A.D. 432, he prepared himself by resorting to a lonely mountain—Crochan Aigli, now frequented by pilgrims—for prayer and meditation. After this time of solitude he went forth to preach with some suitable companions to the heathen chiefs and their followers. He did not escape opposition. Even some who professed to be Christians accused him of unworthy motives. This cannot surprise us, for where real work is being done, Satan usually manages to raise opposition. But friendly chiefs gave him land, and he established centres for the spread of the Gospel by means of monastic dwellings, from whence the missionaries of the Cross might issue forth on their peaceful raids, and then return for temporary rest. He made his principal centre at Armagh, but founded churches in many other localities. "It was not with Irish pagans alone that he had to contend. A piratical British chieftain, Coroticus, fell upon a number of converts who had recently been baptized by Patrick, and sold them to heathen Picts. To this man, who professed outwardly to be a Christian, Patrick wrote a threatening letter, which has been preserved, and excommunicated him from the Church.

Another writing ascribed to Patrick is the hymn called "Lorica," a breastplate. Some part of it is probably his. Its petitions appear to be connected with pagan ideas of the enchantments of demons,

<sup>1</sup> Neander: *History of the Church*, Vol. III, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. v. 44.

which converts to Christianity continued to believe in. Other portions appeal for Divine Strength to be sent down by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Patrick may well have composed these, for they agree in a remarkable manner with his expressions elsewhere, to the effect that in his sinfulness and weakness, he felt that the power of God would be given him, to enable him for his work, and would be definitely manifested in answer to prayer. Every verse begins with an assertion of the reality of the Divine Gift of Strength.

“ I arise to-day in vast might, with invocation of the Trinity,”

“ I arise to-day in the might of Heaven,”

“ I arise to-day in the might of God for my piloting,”

“ for my upholding, for my foresight, for my guardianship, etc.”

The seventh verse consists of an appeal for the presence of Christ ; for instance, “ Christ before me, Christ behind me, . . . Christ in the heart of every person who may think of me ! Christ in the mouth of every one who may speak to me ! ” etc.

The whole hymn, as given in full in Dr. Newport White’s little book, is well worth attention, containing passages still very helpful to every Christian reader, as to the “ Strength made perfect in weakness.” <sup>1</sup>

A still more interesting literary relic, which, with the letter above referred to, is considered to be authentic by experts, and that bears every mark of a personal composition, is Patrick’s *Confession*.<sup>2</sup> It was evidently written in his old age, and is a thanksgiving to God for the way he had been led, with all its changes, by the Divine Hand, and for the work he had been appointed to fulfil. It shows a wonderful knowledge of the Bible, in its apt quotations. The simplicity, and earnestness of its expression, has been well shown in Professor Bury’s *Life of St. Patrick*.<sup>3</sup> “ I must not hide the gift of God, this is the refrain which pervades the *Confession*. Nothing is said of the marvels which monkish writers delight in ; to Patrick his own strange life seemed more marvellous than any miracle. The *Confession* reveals vividly his intense wonder that it had fallen just to *him* to carry out a great work for the extension

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. xii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Newport White has just published a translation of the letter to Coroticus, and the Confession, in *St. Patrick, his Life and Writings*. S.P.C.K. (6s. 6d.).

<sup>3</sup> Bury’s *Life of St. Patrick*, p. 197.

of the borders of Christendom. As he looked back upon his past life, it seemed to him unutterably strange that the careless boy of a British town should have shone forth as a light to the Gentiles, and the ways whereby this had been accomplished made it seem more mysterious still. But what impressed him above all as a divine miracle, was that he should have felt assured of success beforehand. This seemed to Patrick a direct revelation from One who had knowledge of the future. So the motive of the *Confession* was to declare the wonderful dealings of God with himself as a thanksgiving before Him."

"In a strange land," says Patrick, "the Lord brought me to a sense of my unbelief, so that although late, I minded me of my sins, and turned with my whole heart to the Lord my God, Who looked down on my lowliness, had pity on my youth, my ignorance,—Who preserved me ere I knew Him, and Who protected and comforted me as a father doth his son, ere I knew how to distinguish good from evil." As to his own attainments Patrick expresses himself with much simplicity and humility. "I thought of writing this long since, but have hesitated to this present time, for I was in dread lest I should incur censure from men, because I have not had the same opportunity of reading with others, who have had the best instructions in sacred literature and have never been obliged to interrupt their studies." In the closing sentence of his *Confession*, he expresses his motives as follows:—"I protest in truth, and can rejoice in the thought before God and the holy angels, that I never had any motive, save the Gospel and its promises, for ever returning to that people from whom I had escaped. And I beg of all that believe in God and seek and fear Him, whoever may be pleased to examine or read this letter, which I, Patrick, poor sinful and ignorant creature as I am, have written in Ireland, to understand that my ignorance is not to have the credit of it, if I have effected or proved any little matter according to the purpose of God, but believe and be assured for certain that it was God Who has done it. And this is my *Confession* before I die."

Thus we see through the mist of ages a noble character emerging for our contemplation. Patrick, penitent for his early faults, is filled with anxiety to lead others to the great forgiveness which the Gospel of Christ had brought to himself, and to turn those who had once been his enemies "from darkness unto light, and from the

power of Satan unto God.”<sup>1</sup> Brave to risk his life amid the wild heathen chieftains, and strong in the Grace of God, he yet remained simple and humble, and free from all personal aims, he carried out his mission with entire singleness of purpose. He is indeed worthy of our reverence as the Apostle of Ireland.

We have noticed that he does not claim a complete education for himself. But the monasteries to which he gave the impulse were intended to be training grounds both in religion and in all available knowledge. The fervid Celtic temperament took to the wonders revealed by study, and to the impressive revelations of the Christian Faith, with intense ardour. Ireland happily lay outside the limits of the Roman Empire, distracted at that period by barbarian invasions, and thus the student monks could devote themselves to all available learning. The copying of books was a prominent employment, and the manuscripts were beautifully ornamented with interlaced patterns in various colours. The finest remaining example of this is the Book of Kells, which experts attribute to the ninth century. In those early days all learning was closely connected with religion, and not only Latin, but Greek also became a subject for diligent study. This is the more remarkable, as in the mediaeval Church Latin alone survived, and Greek dropped out of notice till the time of Erasmus. On the contrary, in this early age, the Irish monks were such ardent devotees of study that they went out not only as missionaries, but also as teachers, both in Britain and on the continent. We have seen that Patrick studied in the South of France. There was much communication then between Marseilles and Alexandria. Christians of the Eastern rite abounded in Marseilles and all along the Rhone. Gallic clergy went to Egypt for a spiritual retreat. Alms were sent from the faithful in Gaul to the monks of Egypt. The letters of St. Jerome (who died about A.D. 420) show the close connection between Syria, Egypt and Southern Gaul. It is interesting to be told that the outward form of the Irish monasteries was similar to those of Syria and Egypt. We may take as an instance of this the monastery of Innismurray off the coast of Sligo.<sup>2</sup> It was built on the early Oriental plan, and consisted of a number of bee-hive cells, each monk having a cell, and books were hung on the inside by straps.

<sup>1</sup> Acts xxvi. 18.

<sup>2</sup> E. T. Stokes, D.D. : *Ireland and the Celtic Church*.

The cells were built either of wood and wattle or of slabs of stone. There was a chapel, and some room large enough for a refectory, and the whole was surrounded by a fence called "a cashel." Greatly did these monastic abodes differ in their simplicity from the grand foundations of subsequent ages. But they were homes of devotion combined with missionary effort, and when the latter ceased, the spiritual life of monasteries began to decay. Bede tells us that in these simple dwellings, the Irish monks used to receive Saxon students, and not only gave them gratuitous instruction, but entertained them without charge. What a contrast with the state of things now!

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## ST. JOHN XIX. 11 : A PROBLEM AND A SOLUTION.

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**S.** T. COLERIDGE is reported, in his *Table Talk*, under date May 20, 1830, to have said:—

"The meaning of the expression, *εἰ μὴ ἦν σοι δεδομένον ἄνωθεν*, 'Except it were given thee *from above*,' in the 19th Chapter of St. John, verse 11, seems to me to have been generally and grossly mistaken. It is commonly understood as importing that Pilate could have no power to deliver Jesus to the Jews, unless it had been given him *by God*, which, no doubt, is true; but if that is the meaning, where is the force or connexion of the following clause, *διὰ τοῦτο*, 'therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin'? In what respect were the Jews more sinful in delivering Jesus up, *because* Pilate could do nothing except by God's leave? The explanation of Erasmus and Clarke, and some others, is very dry-footed. I conceive the meaning of our Lord to have been simply this, that Pilate would have had no power or jurisdiction—*ἐξουσίαν*—over him, if it had not been given by the Sanhedrin, the *ἄνω βουλή*, and, *therefore*, it was that the Jews had the greater sin."

The chief merit of this passage lies in its transmitting to posterity the views of a layman upon an acknowledged Scriptural perplexity; but its author was no ordinary layman. As a ripe scholar, a profound thinker, and the possessor of an acute brain, he takes rank with the foremost giant intellects of the nineteenth century. His acquaintance with Patristic literature was perhaps