



(c.387-c.461)



St. Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland

Every year on March 17, Irish men and women raise a toast or two in honour of St. Patrick, Ireland's patron saint. While St. Patrick's Day is undoubtedly the most popular Irish tradition to survive in the modern world, what do we really know about the man and his legend?

There are several myths and misconceptions about Patrick, and much that is not generally known about him. For example, did you know that this celebrated saint's birth name was not Patrick? His given name was either Maewyn or Succat, (Celtic for 'clever in war'). Patricius was the name that he was given later in life by Pope Celestine after his consecration as a bishop in the Roman Catholic religion. Later, this evolved into the name Patrick that we know him by today.

Secondly, he was almost certainly not born in Ireland, but more likely England, or Brittany in France, about 387 AD. We get this information from his own '*Confessio*' (Confession) or '*magnum opus*' which tells us much about his life. The following is an excerpt from this document:

"I, Patrick, a sinner, the most rustic and the least of all the faithful, and in the estimation of very many deemed contemptible, had for my father Calpornius, a deacon, the son of Potitus, a Presbyter, who belonged to the village of Bannaven Taberniae; for close thereto he had a small villa, where I was made a captive."

"At the time I was barely sixteen years of age, I new not the true God; and I was led to Ireland in captivity with many thousand persons according to our deserts, for we turned away from God and kept not His commandments, and we were not obedient to our priests who used to admonish us about our salvation. And the Lord brought us the indignation of his wrath, and scattered us amongst many nations even to the utmost part of the earth, where now my littleness may be seen amongst strangers."

And later in the same document:

"Wherefore, however, I might have been willing to leave them, and go into the Britanniæ, as to my country and relatives, and not only so but also to the Galliæ, to visit my brethren."

"Again after a few years I was in the Britanniæ with my parents."

This defines exactly where he is from, a village called Bannaven Taberniae. But where is this? It is, according to Patrick, clearly in Britanniæ. But is this Britain or Brittany? Many believe that this is Britain (the Roman province of Britain), but other information throws this belief into dispute.

First there is the date of his capture at the age of sixteen. A simple calculation indicates St. Patrick was captured in the year 403 AD. It was at this time that the famous Irish King [Niall of the Nine Hostages](#) was raiding with his Scot (The Dal Riada tribe) and Pict (from Caledonia) allies into Britain and France. There is also the fact that Patricius (Patrick) had a great uncle through his

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mother, Conchessa, who was none other than St. Martin of Gaul (France). This information makes it clear that even if Patrick was not from France, at least his family was.

Patrick was sold as a slave to the house of a Miliue (or Milchu), a Druid of the Dal Riada in what is now Antrim, Ireland. Here he remained for six years, tending sheep and taking care of the farm. During his stay at the house of Miliue, St. Patrick learned the language and customs of the land. These he added to his already proficient skills in Latin that he learned in his youth. Little did he know at the time, but these skills would have a profound affect on the rest of his life.

Before he was sold into slavery, Patrick was a self-described "heathen", but during his years in Antrim, he began to feel a greater awareness for God. Six years after his capture (c. 409 AD), he escaped to a monastery in Gaul where he studied under St. Germain, Bishop of Auxerre. Patrick spent more than a year with Germain, and he became instilled with the desire to convert pagans to Christianity.

Patrick eventually became a priest. His main ambition was to become Ireland's first Bishop, but his monastic superiors did not believe he was adequately qualified for the position and passed him over in favor of St. Palladius. It seems that Palladius only had a short stay in Ireland (c. 431 AD): since he did not understand the people or the language, the Irish took to throwing rocks whenever the stranger (Palladius) would approach.

Patrick didn't give up however; he fulfilled his goal of becoming Bishop when Palladius transferred to Scotland. He landed in Ireland as a Priest in 432 AD and soon managed to get the attention of the King by lighting the fire at [Slane Hill](#). After this episode he was free to preach throughout Ireland with the permission of the King. Although he did not single-handedly convert all of Ireland, St. Patrick played a large role, and helped lay a significant portion of the groundwork in the form of monasteries, schools, and churches.

After 30 years of missionary work, Patrick retired to Saul in County Down, where he died around 461 AD, on March 17. This anniversary is now celebrated annually by many, through parades and various other activities, among them a traditional drink of whiskey known as "*Pota Phadraig*".

According to legend, Patrick was shortchanged on a shot of whiskey and told the landlord of the hostelry that the devil was in his cellar gorging himself on the landlord's dishonesty. Terrified by this prospect, the landlord vowed to change his ways and when Patrick returned to the tavern some time later, he found that the landlord now filled everyone's glass to overflowing!

Patrick then announced that the landlord's newfound generosity was "starving the devil in his cellar," and proclaimed that thereafter everyone should have a drop of the 'hard stuff' on his feast day: Patrick's Pot. The tradition is also known as "drowning the Shamrock" because of the custom of floating a shamrock in the whiskey before swallowing it.



One of the most recognizable aspects of St. Patrick's Day's are the celebratory parades. The first such parade in America was on March 17, 1737 in Boston, sponsored by the Charitable Irish Society of Boston to raise funds for ill, homeless, and unemployed Irishmen. Presently, the largest North American parade takes place on New York City's Fifth Avenue, with an annual participation of over two hundred thousand people. Revolutionary War veterans originally began the Fifth Avenue parade in 1762 as a proud display of Irish heritage, and as an act of defiance against those who "didn't like the Irish very much". In Canada's Irish cities of Saint John and Miramichi, New Brunswick as well as St. John's, Newfoundland and even Montreal, Quebec, St. Patrick's Day is a much vaunted celebration that is marked every year with great enthusiasm and

pride.

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Special thanks to Ron Bullis, for permission to use the beautiful picture of St. Patrick from his website [Photos of the Spirit's Footsteps: A Celtic Pilgrimage](#).

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