

St. Patrick

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains somewhat of a mystery. Many of the stories traditionally associated with St. Patrick, including the famous account of his banishing all the snakes from Ireland, are false, the products of hundreds of years of exaggerated storytelling.

It is known that St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around 460 C.E. Although his father was a Christian deacon, it has been suggested that he probably took on the role because of tax incentives and there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity. (There is some dispute over where this captivity took place. Although many believe he was taken to live in Mount Slemish in County Antrim, it is more likely that he was held in County Mayo near Killala.) During this time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people. Lonely and afraid, he turned to his religion for solace, becoming a devout Christian. (It is also believed that Patrick first began to dream of converting the Irish people to Christianity during his captivity.)

After more than six years as a prisoner, Patrick escaped. According to his writing, a voice—which he believed to be God's—spoke to him in a dream, telling him it was time to leave Ireland. To do so, Patrick walked nearly 200 miles from County Mayo, where it is believed he was held, to the Irish coast. After escaping to Britain, Patrick reported that he experienced a second revelation—an angel in a dream tells him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than fifteen years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission—to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish. (Interestingly, this mission contradicts the widely held notion that Patrick introduced Christianity to Ireland.)

According to the latest reconstruction of the old Irish annals, Patrick died in 461, a date accepted by some modern historians. While Patrick's own writings contain no dates, they do contain information which can be used to date them. Patrick's quotations from the Acts of the Apostles follow the Vulgate, strongly suggesting that his ecclesiastical conversion did not take place before the early fifth century. Patrick also refers to the Franks as being pagan. Their conversion is dated to the period 496–508.

There is plentiful evidence for a medieval tradition that Patrick had died in 493. An addition to the Annals of Ulster states that in the year 553 (approximately two hundred and fifty years before the addition was made):

I have found this in the Book of Cuanu: The relics of Patrick were placed sixty years after his death in a shrine by Colum Cille. Three splendid halidoms were found in the burial-place: his goblet, the Angel's Gospel, and the Bell of the Testament. This is how the angel distributed the halidoms: the goblet to Dún, the Bell of the Testament to Ard Macha, and the Angel's Gospel to Colum Cille himself. The reason it is called the Angel's Gospel is that Colum Cille received it from the hand of the angel.

St. Patrick is said to be buried at Down Cathedral in Downpatrick, County Down, alongside St. Brigid and St. Columba, although this has never been proven. As one of the earliest Christian missionaries traveling abroad to spread the Christian faith, Saint Patrick is important because he serves as a testament to the overall missionary legacy of the Church. His example afforded later Christian missionaries the opportunity to assess the best methods to employ when confronting pagan groups abroad. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Saint Patrick's missionary efforts in Ireland was that he transcended the boundary between Church hierarchy and prominent Church Fathers in terms of the viability of missionary pursuits. Saint Patrick proved that any Christian could live out the Scriptural commandment to spread the word of God while "exalting and confessing his wonders before all the nations that are under the heavens." Patrick's example would inspire later missionaries to undertake great missions to evangelize abroad in later years.