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THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ST. PATRICK

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Table of Contents

Preface

Chapter 1. On the Diffusion of Christianity Beyond the Roman Empire

Chapter 2. The Captivity and Escape of Patrick

Chapter 3. In Gaul and Britain

Chapter 4. Political and Social Condition of Ireland

Chapter 5. In the Island-Plain, in Dalaradia

Chapter 6. In Meath

Chapter 7. In Connaught

Chapter 8. Foundation of Armagh and Ecclesiastical Organisation

Chapter 9. Writings of Patrick, and His Death

Chapter 10. Patricks Place in History

Preface

[Table of Contents](#)

Perhaps the scope of this book will be best understood if I explain that the subject attracted my attention, not as an important crisis in the history of Ireland, but, in the first place, as an appendix to the history of the Roman Empire, illustrating the emanations of its influence beyond its own frontiers ; and, in the second place, as a notable episode in the series of conversions which spread over northern Europe the religion which prevails to-day. Studying the work of the Slavonic apostles, Cyril and Methodius, I was led to compare them with other European missionaries, Wulfilas, for instance, and Augustine, Boniface, and Otto of Bamberg. When I came to Patrick, I found it impossible to gain any clear conception of the man and his work. The subject was wrapt in obscurity, and this obscurity was encircled by an atmosphere of controversy and conjecture. Doubts of the very existence of St. Patrick had been entertained, and other views almost amounted to the thesis that if he did exist, he was not himself, but a namesake. It was at once evident that the material had never been critically sifted, and that it would be necessary to begin at the beginning, almost as if nothing had been done, in a field where much had been written.

This may seem unfair to the work of Todd, which in learning and critical acumen stands out pre-eminent from the mass of historical literature which has gathered round St. Patrick. And I should like unreservedly to acknowledge that I found it an excellent introduction to the subject. But it left me doubtful about every fact connected with Patrick's life. The radical vice of the book is that the indispensable substructure is lacking. The preliminary task of criticising the sources methodically had never been performed. Todd

showed his scholarship and historical insight in dealing with this particular passage or that particular statement, but such sporadic criticism was no substitute for methodical Quellenkritik. Hence his results might be right or wrong, but they could not be convincing.

It is a minor defect in Todd's St. Patrick that he is not impartial. By this I mean that he wrote with an unmistakable ecclesiastical bias. It is not implied that he would have ever stooped to a misrepresentation of the evidence for the purpose of proving a particular thesis. No reader would accuse him of that. But it is clear that he was anxious to establish a particular thesis. He does not conceal that the conclusions to which the evidence, as he interpreted it, conducted him were conclusions which he wished to reach. In other words, he approached a historical problem, with a distinct preference for one solution rather than another ; and this preference was due to an interest totally irrelevant to mere historical truth. The business of a historian is to ascertain facts. There is something essentially absurd in his wishing that any alleged fact should turn out to be true or should turn out to be false. So far as he entertains a wish of the kind, his attitude is not critical.

The justification of the present biography is that it rests upon a methodical examination of the sources, and that the conclusions, whether right or wrong, were reached without any prepossession. For one whose interest in the subject is purely intellectual, it was a matter of unmixed indifference what answer might be found to any one of the vexed questions. I will not anticipate my conclusions here, but I may say that they tend to show that the Roman Catholic conception of St. Patrick's work is, generally, nearer to historical fact than the views of some anti-Papal divines.

The fragmentary material, presenting endless difficulties and problems, might have been treated with much less trouble to myself if I had been content to weave, as Todd has done, technical discussions into the story. It was less

easy to do what I have attempted, to cast matter of this kind into the literary shape of a biography — a choice which necessitated long appendices supplying the justifications and groundwork. These appendices represent the work which belongs to the science of history ; the text is an effort in the art of historiography.

It should be needless to say that, in dealing with such fragmentary material, reconstructions and hypotheses are inevitable. In ancient and mediaeval history, as in physical science, hypotheses, founded on a critical examination of the data, are necessary for the advancement of knowledge. The reconstructions may fall to-morrow, but, if they are legitimate, they will not have been useless.

The future historian of Ireland will have much to discover about the political and social state of the island, which is still but vaguely understood, and the religion of the Scots, about which it may be affirmed that we know little more than nothing. These subjects await systematic investigation, and I have only attempted a slight sketch (Chapter IV), confining myself to what it seemed possible to say with tolerable safety on the chief points immediately relevant to the scope of this monograph. But, notwithstanding the dimness of the background, I venture to hope that some new light has been thrown on the foreground, and that this study will supply a firmer basis for the life and work of Patrick, even if some of the superstructures should fall.

The two maps are merely intended to help the reader to see the whereabouts of some places which he might not easily find without reference to the Ordnance Survey. I consulted Mr. Orpen's valuable map of Early Ireland (unfortunately on a small scale) in Poole's Historical Atlas of Modern Europe. But he has used material which applies to a later period, and I have not ventured to follow him, for instance, in marking the boundary between the northern frontiers of the kingdoms of Connaught and Meath.

It was fortunate for me that my friend Professor Gwynn was engaged at the same time on a "diplomatic" edition of the records contained in the Codex Armachanus, which constitute the principal body of evidence. With a generosity which has placed me under a deep obligation, he put the results of his labour on the difficult text at my disposal, and I have had the invaluable help and stimulus of constant communication with him on many critical problems arising out of the text of the documents.

Since the book was in type I have received some communications from my friend Professor Rhys which suggest a hope that the mysterious Bannauenta, St. Patrick's home, may perhaps be identified at last. I had conjectured that it should be sought near the Severn or the Bristol Channel. The existence of three places named Banwen (which may represent Bannauenta) in Glamorganshire opens a prospect that the solution may possibly lie there.

J. B. Bury.

Chapter 1

On the Diffusion of Christianity Beyond the Roman Empire

[Table of Contents](#)

The series of movements and wanderings, settlements and conquests, which may be most fitly-described as the expansion of the German and Slavonic races, began in the second century A.D., and continued for well-nigh a thousand years, reshaping the political geography and changing the ethnical character of Europe. The latest stage in the process was the expansion of the northern Germans of Scandinavia and Denmark, which led to the settlements of the Vikings and Danes in the west and to the creation of the Russian State by Swedes in the east. The general movement of European history is not grasped if we fail to recognise that the invasions and conquests of the Norsemen which began towards the close of the eighth century are the continuation of the earlier German expansion which we are accustomed to designate as the Wandering of the Peoples. It was not till this last stage that Ireland came within range of this general transformation, when, in the ninth century, Teutonic settlements were made on her coasts and a Teutonic kingdom was formed within her borders. Till then she had escaped the stress of the political vicissitudes of Europe. But, four centuries before, a force of another kind had drawn her into union with the continent and made her a part of the Roman world, so far as the Roman world represented Christendom. Remaining still politically aloof, still impervious to the influence of higher social organisation, the island was swept into the spiritual federation, which, through the act of Constantine, had become closely identified with the Roman State. This was what the Roman

Empire did for Ireland, not directly or designedly, but automatically, one might say, through the circumstances of its geographical position. The foundation of a church in Ireland was not accomplished till the very hour when the Empire was beginning to fall gradually asunder in the west ; and so it happens that when Europe, in the fifth century, is acquiring a new form and feature, the establishment of the Christian faith in the outlying island appears as a distinct, though modest, part of the general transformation. *Ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo*, and Ireland, too, has its small place in the great change.

To understand the conversion of Ireland, which we are here considering as an episode in the history of Europe, we must glance at the general conditions of the early propagation of the Christian idea.

It would not be easy to determine how much Christianity owes to the Roman Empire, and we can hardly imagine what the rate and the mode of its progress through southern and western Europe would have been if these lands had not been united and organised by the might of Rome. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the existence of the Empire was a condition of the success of a universal religion in Europe; and it is assuredly true that the hindrances which the Roman Government, for two centuries and a half, opposed to its diffusion, by treating it as the one foreign religion which could not be tolerated by the State, were more than compensated by the facilities of steady and safe intercourse and communication, which not only helped the new idea to travel, but enabled its preachers and adherents to organise their work and keep in constant touch with one another.

The manner in which this faith spread in the west, and the steps in its progress, are entirely hidden from us; we can only mark, in a general way, some stages in the process. We know that there were organised communities in Gaul in the second century, and organised communities in Britain at the

end of the third; but in neither of these countries, it would seem, did the religion begin to spread widely till after its official recognition by the Emperor Constantine. At the end of the fourth century there were still large districts in Gaul, especially in the Belgic provinces, which were entirely heathen. In this respect Gaul and Britain present a notable contrast to the other great Atlantic country of the Empire. In the Spanish peninsula Christianity made such rapid strides, and the Spaniards adapted it so skilfully to their pagan habits, that before the time of Constantine Spain had become, throughout its length and breadth, a Christian land.

It could not be expected that, while there were still within the Roman frontiers many outlying districts where the new religion had not penetrated, the western churches could conceive the design of making any systematic attempt to convert the folks who lived beyond the borders of the Empire. The first duty of the bishops of Gaul and the bishops of Britain, if they undertook any missionary work, was to extend their faith in the still heathen parts of their own provinces. The single conspicuous case in which it reached a northern people, independent of the Empire, is significant, for it exhibits the kind of circumstances which helped this religion to travel. The conversion of the West Goths in Dacia was not inaugurated by any missionary zeal on the part of the Church, but came to pass through the means of Christian captives whom the people had carried off in their invasions of Asia Minor in the middle of the third century. The "apostle" Wulfilas, whose work led to the general conversion of the Goths, sprang from a Cappadocian family which had thus been led into captivity, and had lived for two generations in Gothic land. Gothic in spirit and sentiment, as he was Gothic in name, he devoted himself to spreading the gospel of the Christians among his people. His work was recognised and supported at Constantinople, but the fact remains that the conversion of the Goths was due to the hostilities which had brought Christian captives to their land,

and not to missionary enterprise of the Church. The part which captives played in diffusing a knowledge of their religion is, in this instance, strikingly exemplified. The conversion of the kingdom of Iberia under Mount Caucasus is another case. The story that it became Christian in the reign of Constantine through the bond-slave Nino, who is still revered there as the "enlightener and apostle of Georgia," rests upon evidence only two generations later, and must have a foundation in fact. And even if the tale is not accepted literally, its existence illustrates the important part which Christian captives played in the diffusion of their creed. This is expressly observed by the author of the treatise *On the Calling of the Gentiles*. "Sons of the Church led captive by enemies made their masters serve the gospel of Christ, and taught the faith to those to whom the fortune of war had enslaved them."

The same nameless writer, who composed his work in the fifth century, notices another channel by which knowledge of his religion was conveyed to the barbarians. Foreign soldiers, who enlisted in the army of the Empire, sometimes came under Christian influences in their garrison stations, and when they returned to their own homes beyond the Imperial frontier they carried the faith with them.

That the silent and constant intercourse of commerce was also a means of propagation beyond the limits of the Empire cannot be doubted, though commercial relations and conditions in ancient and mediaeval history are among the hardest to realise because ancient and mediaeval writers never thought of describing them. The foundation of the Abyssinian church, however, exhibits the part which merchants, as well as the part which captives, might take in propagating a religious faith ; and fortunately we possess an account which was derived directly from one of the captives who was concerned in the matter.

A party of Greek explorers who had been sailing in southern seas landed on the coast of Abyssinia and were slaughtered by the natives, with the exception of two youths who were spared to become slaves of the king. One served him as cup-bearer, "the other, whose name was Frumentius, as secretary ; and after the king's death his son's education was entrusted to these two men. Frumentius used his influence to help the Roman merchants who traded with Abyssinia to found a Christian church. He was afterwards permitted to return to his own country, but he resolved to dedicate his life to the propagation of Christianity in Abyssinia, and having been consecrated by Athanasius at Alexandria as Bishop of Axum, the Abyssinian capital town, he returned thither to foster the new church.

This course of events illustrates both the way in which captives helped to spread Christianity abroad, and also how the intercourse of trade could lead to the planting of Christian communities in lands outside the Empire. It illustrates the fact that up to the sixth century the extension of that faith to the barbarians was not due to direct efforts or deliberate design on the part of the Church, but to chapters of accidents which arose through the relations, hostile and pacific, of the Empire with its neighbours. The "mission" to the Gentiles was, in practice, limited by the Church to the Roman world, though the heads of the Church were always ready to recognise, welcome, and affiliate Christian communities which might be planted on barbarian ground by the accidents of private enterprise.

It was only after the Roman Empire had become officially Christian through the memorable decision of Constantine, that the conversion of neighbouring states (with the striking exception of Armenia) really began ; just after that change the victorious religion began to spread generally in Gaul and Britain. The work of Frumentius and the work of Wulfilas were alike subsequent to the revolution of Constantine. It would be difficult to estimate how great was the impetus

which this religion derived, for the acceleration of its progress, from its acceptance by the head of the Roman State. But while it is evident that the Church gained immeasurably within the Empire by her sudden exaltation, it is perhaps generally overlooked how her changed position aided Christianity to pass out beyond the Empire's borders. We touch here on a fact of supreme importance — not less important, but more likely to escape notice, because it cannot be stated in terms of definite occurrences: — the enormous prestige which the Roman Empire possessed in the minds of the barbarian peoples who dwelt beyond it. The observant student who follows with care the history of the expansion of Germany and the strange process by which the German kingdoms were established within the Empire in western Europe, is struck at every step by the profound respect which the barbarians evinced for the Empire and the Roman name throughout all their hostilities and injuries. While they were unconsciously dismembering it, they believed in its impregnable stability ; Europe without the Empire was unimaginable; the dominion of Rome seemed to them part of the universal order, as eternal as the great globe itself. If we take into account this immeasurable reverence for Rome, which is one of the governing psychical facts in the history of the "wandering of the nations," we can discern what prestige a religion would acquire for neighbouring peoples when it became the religion of the Roman people and the Roman State. We can understand with what different eyes the barbarians must have regarded Christianity when it was a forbidden and persecuted doctrine and when it was raised to be a State religion. It at once acquired a claim on their attention ; it was no longer merely one among many rival doctrines current in the Empire. Considerations of political advantage came in ; and political motives could sway barbarians, no less than Constantine himself, in determining their attitude to a religious creed. And the fact that the Christian God was the

God of that great Empire was in itself a persuasive argument in his favour. Could a people find any more powerful protector than the Deity who was worshipped and feared by the greatest "nation" on earth? So it seemed to the Burgundians, who embraced the Roman religion, we are told, because they conceived that "the God of the Romans is a strong helper to those who fear Him." The simple barbarians did not reason too curiously. It did not occur to them that the Eternal City had achieved her greatness and built her empire under the auspices of Jupiter and Mars. There can be little doubt that, if the step taken by Constantine had been postponed for a hundred years, we should not find the Goths and the Vandals professing Christianity at the beginning of the fifth century.

Among the independent neighbours of the Roman Empire, Ireland occupies a singular place as the only part of the Celtic world which had not been gathered under the sceptre of Rome. It may be suspected that an erroneous opinion is prevalent, just because it lay outside the Empire, that this outlying island was in early times more separate and aloof from Europe than its geographical position would lead us to suppose. The truth is that we have but lately begun to realise the frequency and prevalence of intercourse by sea before historical records begin. It has been but recently brought home to us that hundreds and hundreds of years before the Homeric poems were created, the lands of the Mediterranean were bound together by maritime communication. The same thing is true of the northern seas at a later period. It is absurd to suppose that the Celtic conquerors of Britain and of Iverne burned their ships when they had reached the island shores and cut themselves off from intercourse with the mainland from which they had crossed. And we may be sure that it was not they who first established regular communications. We may be sure that the pre-Celtic peoples of south Britain and the Ivernians, who gave its name to Ireland, knew the

waterways to the coasts of the continent. The intimate connexion of the Celts of Britain with their kinsfolk across the Channel is amply attested in Caesar's history of the conquest of Gaul ; and in the ordinary histories of Britain the political connexion, which even took the shape of a Gallo-British kingdom, has hardly been duly emphasised. Ireland was further, but not far. Constant relations between this island and Britain were inevitable through mere proximity, but there is no doubt that regular communication was also maintained with Gaul and with Spain. Whatever weight may be allowed to the Irish semi-mythical traditions which point to ancient bonds between Ireland and Spain — and in judging them we must remember that the Ivernians are of the same Mediterranean race as the Iberians — it is, for the Celtic period, highly significant to find Roman geographers regarding Ireland as midway between Spain and Britain, a conception which seems to point unmistakably to direct intercourse between Irish and Spanish ports. But the trade of Ireland with the Empire is noticed by Tacitus, and is illustrated by the knowledge which Romans could acquire of its geography. Ptolemy, in the second century, gives an account of the island, which, disfigured though it is, and in many parts undecipherable through the corruption of the place-names, can be tested sufficiently to show that it is based upon genuine information.

It does not surprise us that in our Roman records we hear no syllable of any relations with Ireland, when we remember how meagre and sporadic are the literary records of Roman rule in Britain from the time of Domitian to the premature close. We know, indeed, that at the very outset the question had been considered whether Ireland should be occupied or not. A general of Domitian thought the conquest ought to be attempted, but the government decided against his opinion. The question has been asked why the Romans never annexed it? The answer is simple. After the time of Augustus no additions were made to Roman dominion except under

the stress of political necessity. Britain was annexed by the generals of Claudius for the same reason which prompted Julius to invade it, — political necessity, arising from the dangerously close bonds which united the Britons with the Gauls. The inference is that in the case of Ireland there was no such pressing political necessity. The Goidels of Ireland were a different branch of the Celtic race, and the Britons could find in Ireland no such support as the Gauls found in Britain. This explanation accords with the fact that till the middle of the fourth century the Irish or Scots are not named among the dangerous invaders of the British province ; they are not named at all.

But it would be a false inference from this silence to suppose that the government in Britain had not to take political account of their western neighbours. Ireland was well on the horizon of the Roman governors, and Irish affairs must from time to time have claimed their attention. The exile, of whom Agricola made much, was not, we might surmise, the last Irish prince who sought in Britain a refuge from enemies at home. But one important measure of policy has escaped oblivion, though not through Roman records. In the third century, it would seem, an Irish tribe which dwelled in the kingdom of Meath was driven from its land. The name of this tribe, the Dessi, still lives in their ancient home — the district of Deece. Some of them migrated southward to the lands of the Suir and the Blackwater, where their name likewise survives in the districts of Decies. But others sought new abodes beyond the sea, and they settled largely in South Wales. The migration of the Dessi rests on the records of Irish tradition, but it is confirmed by the clear evidence of inscribed stones which attest the presence of a Goidelic population in south-western Britain. Here we have to do with an act of policy on the part of the Roman Government similar to the policy pursued in other parts of the Empire. A foreign people was allowed to settle, perhaps under certain conditions of military service, on the south-western sea-