

**THE EPISTLES AND HYMN
OF SAINT
PATRICK, WITH THE
POEM OF SECUNDINUS**

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The Epistles and Hymn of Saint Patrick, with the Poem of Secundinus by Thomas Olden

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THOMAS OLDEN

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THE
EPISTLES AND HYMN
OF
SAINT PATRICK,
WITH
THE POEM OF SECUNDINUS,

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH.

EDITED BY

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VICAR OF BALLYCLOUGH.

“On y voit beaucoup le caractere de St. Paul. Il possedoit assurément fort bien l'Ecriture.”—TILLEMONT.

“He conquered by steadfastness of faith, by glowing zeal, and by the attractive power of love.”—NEANDER.



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EDITOR'S NOTE.

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INTRODUCTION.

1. THE sources from which the popular accounts of St. Patrick have been derived are the legendary Lives compiled during the middle ages by various authors known and unknown. These, as generally happens in such cases, become more minute in their details and more amazing in their prodigies the later their authors lived; and it is chiefly those of most modern date which afford the amplest materials for a sensational biography of him.

But though such a treatment of the subject may suit the popular taste, it does him serious injustice; for those who have taken the matter in hand, for the most part pass lightly over, or do not notice at all, those features of his character and missionary labours which are most worthy of record, and by the description they give us of him they repel the intelligent reader. For in the first place, they represent him as a worker of miracles, most of them of a childish and absurd¹ character. There may be some who believe them, or rather

¹ He lights a fire with icicles instead of sticks, (Jocelin, Life of St. Patrick, chap. v.) The water congeals in a kettle, notwithstanding the fire heaped around it (chap. xx.) A kid bleats from the stomach of a man who had stolen and eaten it, and afterwards returns to its owner uninjured, &c.

think they believe them, but the effect in most cases is to cause the rejection of his entire history; for as Dr. O'Donovan has observed, "The absurdity of the miracles attributed to St. Patrick by all his biographers, on every frivolous occasion, without number, measure, or use, has created a doubt in modern times of the truth of everything they relate."²

In the next place they misrepresent his mode of proceeding, from pure ignorance of what constitutes the character of a Christian missionary. Thus he curses rivers, territories, families, and individuals, for most trivial causes, and for the same reasons prophesies evil to people, though fortunately the fulfilment does not often follow.

The authors of these stories knew little of the spirit of our Lord's teaching, when he rebuked James and John for proposing to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the villagers who refused to receive Him: "Ye know not" (was His reply) "what manner of spirit ye are of, for the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."³ But these fable writers, when they represented St. Patrick as "flinging the bolt of his malediction,"⁴ as they term it, on every trivial occasion, thought they were doing honour to his zeal and energy.

Again, to mention one more instance, they even make

² Annals of the Four Masters, A.D. 493, note.

³ Luke ix. 54-56.

⁴ It is painful to find a professing Christian in the nineteenth century approving of this. Yet Miss Cusack, referring to the story of his cursing a river at Wicklow, and thus depriving the fishermen of their livelihood says, "The miracle was undoubtedly one specially fitted to convert these rude and barbarous men," p. 226.

him dishonest. He steals; but this in their eyes is meritorious, as the plunder consists of relics which he filches from the sacred places at Rome for the benefit of Ireland. "O wondrous deed," exclaims the writer. "O rare theft of a vast treasure of holy things committed without sacrilege, the plunder of the most holy place in the world."⁵

In the present work the reader will find the true St. Patrick as he appears in his own Letters, his Hymn and his nephew's Poem. He will find there no miracles, no rendering of evil for evil, no pious thefts or frauds, but the language and acts of a single-minded, faithful, and devoted preacher of the Gospel of Christ.

It is remarkable that for many ages, and down to a late period, these authentic and most interesting remains were comparatively unknown. In the seventeenth century one of the most diligent students⁶ of our ecclesiastical history never saw the Letters.

The Irish Hymn was unknown to all except the learned, until published by Dr. Petrie, and it is only twenty years since the Poem of Secundinus was translated for the first time. But perhaps the explanation may be that owing to their purity and simplicity, they were not so well suited to the public taste as the sensational stories which abound in the cheap popular Lives. Yet, whoever desires to know the truth about St. Patrick, and is willing to judge for himself, will find in them ample means of ascertaining it.

It is to be regretted that they afford but little information as to the history of his life, the writers confining

⁵ Vit. Tripart. iii. 82.

⁶ Colgan.

themselves to the spiritual aspect of the work and the principles on which it was conducted: a few notices in the early part of the *Confessio* are all that we find on the subject.

Whatever facts have come down to us are scattered through the legendary Lives, and to disentangle them is one of the objects of the learned work of Dr. Todd. Even he, however, with all his patience and critical skill, has sometimes failed to arrive at a certain conclusion, and many important portions of St. Patrick's life are still involved in obscurity. But enough may be considered as established to afford materials for an outline of his labours, which, while not pretending to the title of a biography, may be acceptable as sketches of missionary life in Ireland in the fifth century.

2. But here it should be mentioned that St. Patrick was not the first missionary to Ireland of whom we have an account. That title belongs to Palladius, who was sent A.D. 431,⁷ "to the Scoti [Irish] believing in Christ," by Celestine, who, as Bishop of the greatest city in the world, the centre of ancient civilization and learning, used his position in this instance for the furtherance of religion. In modern times a similar course has been pursued by the Archbishops of Canterbury, in sending forth Bishops and Clergy to territories outside the British Empire, which have no claim on them beyond the general obligation "to sow beside all waters" the seed of the Gospel of Christ.

In the present instance Celestine seems to have been ill-informed; for though there were some Christians, and

⁷ The Chronicle of Prosper.

perhaps a few congregations, scattered through the country, the Irish tribes were still Pagans, and exhibited violent hostility to Palladius' mission.

At Rome, Celestine was fondly believed to have "made the barbarous⁸ island Christian;" but native Irish authority informs us on the contrary that his missionary failed signally. "God hindered him," (says a very ancient writer,) "for no man can receive anything from earth, unless it be given him from Heaven; for neither did those fierce and savage men receive his doctrine readily, nor did he himself wish to spend time in a land not his own, but he returned to him that sent him."⁹

The hostile reception he met with, stands in singular contrast with that afterwards given to St. Patrick; and it is possible that some light may be thrown on it by the circumstance of his having a mission from Rome. Ages of warfare between the Irish clansmen and the Roman troops in North Britain¹ and elsewhere, had created hostile feelings; and at one time the Romans went so far as to plan the conquest of Ireland—believing that "it would be an advantage to them in their contest with Britain, if the Roman arms should appear everywhere triumphant, and liberty entirely removed

⁸ *Barbarous* (Prosper, *Contra Collatorem*.) The name was accepted by the Irish with the meaning of non-Roman (p.—note.) Ireland was outside the Roman Empire, and spoke a different language—a fact which is the key to many peculiarities in her subsequent history.

⁹ Muircu Maccu Machibeni, in the Book of Armagh.

¹ The Irish King, Niall of the Nine Hostages, who died A. D. 405, made incursions into Britain against Stilicho. The Poet Claudian describes the sea as "foaming with his hostile oars."—See O'Donovan, *Annals of Four Masters*, A. D. 405.