

**A TRANSLATION OF
THE LATIN WRITINGS
OF ST. PATRICK**

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A translation of the Latin writings of St. Patrick by Newport J. D. White

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TEXTS FOR STUDENTS. No. 5

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A TRANSLATION OF THE
LATIN WRITINGS OF
ST. PATRICK

BY

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INTRODUCTION

ST. PATRICK'S *Confession* and *Letter* are the two oldest writings connected with Christianity in Ireland. St. Patrick went there as missionary bishop in A.D. 432, and died in A.D. 461. The *Confession*, which is the Saint's self vindication, seems to have been composed towards the close of his career, perhaps about A.D. 450, and the *Letter* may be later than the *Confession*. The *Letter* is a manifesto called forth by a piratical raid on Ireland by a British Chieftain, Coroticus or Coriticus.

There can be no reasonable doubt as to the authenticity of these writings. They have a ring of unmistakable sincerity and genuineness, and contain strong internal evidence that they belong to the fifth century A.D.: (1) The text of the Latin Bible used by the author is, in the O.T., that current before St. Jerome published his retranslation from the Hebrew (A.D. 391-404); while the quotations from the N.T. seem to follow partly St. Jerome's revision (A.D. 383) and partly the earlier versions. The author's N.T., in fact, was of the type current in South Gaul, where there is reason to believe St. Patrick was educated. (2) The Franks are alluded to as heathens in *Letter*, c. 14; in A.D. 496 they followed their king, Clovis, into the Christian Church. (3) There are polemical allusions to sun-worship in *Confession*, cc. 20, 60. This was a prominent feature in the religion of Mithraism, which was popular all over the Roman Empire during the first four and five centuries of our era. Other points more or less favourable to the date claimed

for these writings are: the style of Latin, the references to the Roman organization of Britain, the casual mention of a married clergy (*Confession*, c. 1), and the application of the term "apostate" to the Picts (*Letter*, cc. 2, 15). St. Ninian's mission to the Picts is dated A.D. 398-432 or earlier.

The Latin text underlying this translation is a revision of that published by the present writer in 1905 (*Proceedings, Royal Irish Academy*, xxv., C. 7). The manuscripts known to exist are seven in number; the oldest being that contained in the Book of Armagh, transcribed between A.D. 807 and 846. The other MSS. belong to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. The Book of Armagh does not contain the *Letter*; and the copy of the *Confession* followed by the scribe was mutilated and in parts illegible. A critical account of these MSS. will be found in the edition mentioned above, and also in a paper on the Paris MS. published in *Proceedings, R.I.A.*, xxv., C. 11.

Apart from their value as an expression of religious experience, these two little books have a special historical significance. St. Patrick was a great Christian missionary, and, as such, an agent in the spread of Christian civilization. Ireland, unfortunately, never came under the moulding influences of the Roman Empire; and it was the mission of St. Patrick, consciously undertaken, to bring Irish Christianity into line with that of the Roman Empire, and thus undo the unfortunate consequences of the Cæsars' negligence or impotence. St. Patrick, a British Celt, was proud of his citizenship in the empire of Rome, which, even in its decadence, was to him conterminous with Christian civilization.

ST. PATRICK'S CONFESSION AND LETTER

THE CONFESSION

[As far as possible, in the quotations from the Bible, which are printed in italics, the rendering of the English Version of 1611 has been followed, except in O.T. Apocrypha, in which the Douay Version of 1609 has been used.]

1. I, Patrick the sinner, am the most clownish and the least of all the faithful, and contemptible in the eyes of very many.

My father was Calpornus, a deacon, one of the sons of Potitus, a presbyter, who belonged to the village of Banavem Taberniae. Now he had a small farm hard by, where I was taken captive.

I was then about sixteen years of age. I knew not the true God; and I went into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of persons, according to our deserts, because we departed away from God, and kept not his commandments, and were not obedient to our priests, who used to admonish us for our salvation. And the Lord *poured upon us the fury of his anger*, and scattered us amongst many heathen, even *unto the ends of the earth*, where now my littleness may be seen amongst men of another nation.

2. And there the Lord *opened the understanding* of my unbelief that, even though late, I might call my faults to

1. Is. xlii. 25; Acts xiii. 47.

2. Luke xxiv. 45.

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remembrance, and that I might *turn with all my heart* to the Lord my God, who *regarded my low estate*, and pitied the youth of my ignorance, and kept me before I knew him, and before I had discernment or could distinguish between good and evil, and protected me and comforted me as a father does his son.

3. Wherefore then I cannot keep silence—nor would it be fitting—concerning such great benefits and such great grace as the Lord hath vouchsafed to bestow on me in the land of my captivity; because this is what we can render unto him, namely, that after we have been chastened, and have come to the knowledge of God, we shall exalt and *praise his wondrous works before every nation which is under the whole heaven.*

4. Because there is no other God, nor was there ever any in times past, nor shall there be hereafter, except God the Father unbegotten, without beginning, from whom all things take their beginning, holding all things [*i.e.*, Almighty], as we say, and his Son Jesus Christ, whom we affirm verily to have always existed with the Father before the creation of the world, with the Father after the manner of a spiritual existence, begotten ineffably, before the beginning of anything. And *by him* were made *things visible and invisible.* He was made man; and, having overcome death, he was received up into heaven to the Father. And *he gave to him all power above every name of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth; and let every tongue confess to him that Jesus Christ is Lord and God in whom we believe.* And we look for his coming soon to be; he the Judge of the quick and the dead, *who will render to every man according to his deeds.* And *he shed on*

2. Joel ii. 12; Luke i. 48.

3. Ps. lxxxix. 5; Acts ii. 5.

4. Col. i. 16; Phil. ii. 9-11; Rom. ii. 6; Tit. iii. 5, 6.

us abundantly the Holy Ghost, the gift and earnest of immortality, who makes those who believe and obey to become children of God the Father and joint heirs with Christ, whom we confess and adore as one God in the Trinity of the Holy Name.

5. For he himself hath said through the prophet, *Call upon me in the day of trouble ; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.* And again he saith, *It is honourable to reveal and confess the works of God.*

6. Nevertheless, although I am faulty in many things, I wish my brethren and kinsfolk to know what manner of man I am, and that they may be able to understand the desire of my soul.

7. I am not ignorant of the testimony of my Lord, who witnesseth in the Psalm, *Thou shalt destroy them that speak a lie.* And again he saith, *The mouth that believeth killeth the soul.* And the same Lord saith in the Gospel, *The idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement.*

8. Wherefore then I ought exceedingly, with fear and trembling, to dread this sentence in that day when no one will be able to absent himself or hide, but when all of us, without exception, shall have to give account of even the smallest sins before the judgement seat of the Lord Christ.

9. On this account I had long since thought of writing ; but I hesitated until now ; for I feared lest I should fall under the censure of men's tongues, and because I have not studied as have others, who in the most approved fashion have drunk in both law and the Holy Scriptures alike, and have never changed their speech from their infancy, but rather have been always rendering it more perfect.

4. Rom. viii. 16, 17.

5. Ps. l. 15 ; Tob. xii. 7.

7. 2 Tim. i. 8 ; Ps. v. 6 ; Wisd. i. 11 ; Matt. xii. 36.

8. Eph. vi. 5 ; Rom. xiv. 10, 12.

For my speech and language is translated into a tongue not my own, as can be easily proved from the savour of my writing, in what fashion I have been taught and am learned in speech; for, saith the wise man, *By the tongue will be discovered understanding and knowledge and the teaching of truth.*

10. But what avails an excuse, no matter how true, especially when accompanied by presumption? since now I myself, in mine old age, earnestly desire that which in youth I did not acquire; because my sins prevented me from mastering what I had read through before. But who gives me credence even if I should repeat the statement that I made at the outset?

When a youth, nay, almost a boy, I went into captivity in language [as well as in person] before I knew what I should earnestly desire, or what I ought to shun. And so to-day I blush and am exceedingly afraid to lay bare my lack of education; because I am unable to make my meaning plain in a few words to the learned; for as the Spirit yearns, the [human] disposition displays the souls of men and their understandings.

11. But if I had had [only] the same privileges as others, nevertheless I would not keep silence *on account of the reward.* And if perchance it seems to not a few that I am thrusting myself forward in this matter with my want of knowledge and my *slow tongue*, yet it is written, *The tongue of the stammerers shall quickly learn to speak peace.* How much rather should we earnestly desire so to do, who are, he saith, *the epistle of Christ for salvation unto the ends of the earth*, although not a learned one, yet ministered most powerfully, *written in your hearts, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.* And again the Spirit witnesseth, *And husbandry [lit. rusticity] was ordained by the Most High.*

9. Ecclus. iv. 29.

11. Ps. cxix. 112; Exod. iv. 10; Is. xxxii. 4; 2 Cor. iii. 2, 3; Acts xiii. 47; Ecclus. vii. 16.