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Ireland before the 17th century plantation

The text of a lecture given at Bangor Free Presbyterian Young People's meeting by Rev. Ivan Foster

A knowledge of the history of Ireland is a very beneficial and precious thing and that for a number of reasons.

1. History displays the merciful dealings of God with our forefathers.
2. Such a knowledge will do much to expose the lie of Rome that has bred the spirit of Irish nationalism based upon the myth of a pure Irish race that has ever been fervently Roman Catholic.
3. It will go far toward removing the feeling of insecurity and of guiltiness at being in Ulster that many Ulster Protestants suffer from as a result of Rome's persistent lie.

I. THE PEOPLE AND RELIGION OF ANCIENT IRELAND

Records of the early period of Ireland's history are scant. Much that is termed history is in fact fairy tale and myth. Amidst the fairy tales and what purports to be history are undoubted references to historical events, though distorted and exaggerated. Dr. W. D. Killen, the great Irish Presbyterian historian of the nineteenth century, wrote of the records that are available: "All existing memorials concur to prove that Western Europe was peopled from the East; and the language of the Celts, the earliest colonists, is still inscribed on the Seine and the Rhone, the Alps, and the Apennines. Ireland, where this tongue is yet spoken by a portion of the population, can produce records describing the succession of its kings extending back to a very remote antiquity; and though these documents contain many errors and absurdities, the reader may see that they often embody historical materials exaggerated or distorted in the course of transmission. According to them all, the island, at first uninhabited, was occupied by successive importations of strangers of oriental origin. Some of these, known as the Firbolgs or Belgae, crossed from England--having previously migrated from Gaul; others, called the Tuath de Danan, or Northmen, arrived from Scotland--where they had found their way from Scandinavia; and others again, the Scots or Milesians, are said to have been colonists from Spain. The Scots spoke the language now known as Gaelic or Irish; the Tuath de Danan used a different tongue, still preserved in the Welsh or Cumraig. About the beginning of the Christian era, the Scots or Milesians were the dominant race--a distinction for which they were indebted to their superior activity, enterprise, and intelligence." {The Old Catholic Church, page 303-4}.

The religion of Ireland was that of Druidism, a religion with an abundance of priests and which chiefly centred upon the worship of the sun. It had strong overtones of the Baal worship we read of in the Bible. There are records that indicate some knowledge of the Gospel was found amongst the people shortly after the time of its entrance into England.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE GOSPEL IN IRELAND

Early in the 4th century, Constantine the Great had professed faith in the Gospel and had encouraged the spread of the message of Christ. It was at this time that some say that it gained an entrance into England and thereafter it would have been carried across the sea



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to Ireland since there was considerable commercial traffic between the two islands. In truth, the gospel would have reached the British Isles early in the second century. In the 5th century, a French writer wrote of Pope Celestine sending Palladius to the 'Irish believing in Christ'. This was in AD 431. It is clear that by that date there were believers in Ireland.

By this time, the Bishop of Rome had already become a superior person within the framework of Christendom. Rome was the capital of Christendom. His sending of an envoy to Ireland was an attempt to increase his authority. It is also to be noted that Ireland was considered of sufficient importance as to merit an attempt to bring it under the rule of the Bishop of Rome. Palladius had previously been the Archdeacon of Rome. He is considered to have been a Briton, and being about 60, he may well have welcomed such an appointment. He set out for Ireland accompanied by many attendants and as one Roman Catholic historian would have us believe, an ample supply of 'relics'.

Palladius had little success. The 'official' story is that he was driven from Ireland by a minor chieftain and forced to flee to Scotland. He met with little success there also and about a year after commencing his task, died of a fever. The 'official' account goes on to say that the Pope then sent over Patrick who had great success and saw the land won for the Pope and for the Gospel. Such an account is false.

III. THE MISSION OF PATRICK

While there is much that is mere fancy amongst the historical documents of Ireland, there are two that everyone accepts. They are the "Confession of Patrick" and his "Letter". From these we can glean certain facts, which, when coupled with other items of information that are available, give us the more likely account of what happened to Palladius and his attempt to claim Ireland for the Pope.

From Patrick's "Confession" we learn that Patrick was not in Ireland to carry out the will of the Pope. Were he sent there by Celestine, as Rome would claim, then that is one matter that Patrick would mention when giving an account of how he came to Ireland. Patrick makes no mention whatever of the Pope or of Rome or of being sent by Celestine. His call to Ireland was a simple call sent of God. His language is as straightforward on this matter as that which you would hear today in a fundamentalist meeting.

For a number of very good reasons, it is believed that Patrick died on 17th March 465. Likewise, it is believed that he laboured for 60 years in Ireland. That means he was in Ireland 25 years before Palladius arrived. The bishop of Rome's claim of being the chief Bishop was not universally accepted. The drift away from primitive simplicity was undoubtedly on, but the gross errors that prevailed in the dark ages were only beginning to emerge and find acceptance with the people. In France, particularly in that part called then 'Britain' and from which Patrick may well have come, there was resistance to the Bishop of Rome's claims of universal jurisdiction. Consequently, it fits in with the picture of Palladius being rejected in Ireland, not by a minor chieftain, but by the converts generally, because they rejected the attempts by the Bishop of Rome to bring them under his jurisdiction.



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Pope Leo {440-462} was a very active and diligent administrator. Evidence of his diligence is seen in the 150 letters of his that are still extant. They are addressed to all parts of his domain. There is not one addressed to the Patrick, who was supposedly the Pope's man in Ireland. The reason is clear. Patrick was God's man and Ireland was not then under the spiritual sway of Rome.

Further evidence of Ireland's separation from Rome at that time is seen in the refusal of the Irish to hold any fellowship with the Pope's emissaries sent to visit the western part of his empire. "The Irish at first utterly refused to hold communion with the ecclesiastics sent into England by the bishop of Rome. 'When the apostolic see,' says one of these strangers, 'sent us to these Western parts to preach to pagan nations, we came into this island which is called Britain, without possessing any previous knowledge of its inhabitants. We held both the Britons and the Irish in great esteem for sanctity, believing that they proceeded according to the custom of the catholic Church; but, becoming acquainted with the errors of the Britons, we thought the Irish had been better; yet we have been informed by bishop Dagan coming into this island . . . that the Irish in no way differ from the Britons in their behaviour; for bishop Dagan, coming to us, not only refused to eat with us, but even to take his repast in the same house where we were entertained." {Bede's History ii 4.} That is what I call a separatist!

There were many marks of distinction between the Irish Church under Patrick and his immediate successors and the rest of Christendom. The order established in this land placed the Church then much nearer the Church in the Acts of the Apostles than that practised elsewhere.

- Patrick did not practise confirmation.
- There was no insistence on the celibacy of the ministers
- The Roman tonsure was not worn.
- The Roman liturgy was not used.
- The Pope's laws respecting ordination and church government were not followed.

IV. PRESSURES ON IRELAND TO CONFORM.

In 597 Augustine arrived in England. His arrival brought renewed pressures for conformity to Rome. As it was, Ireland was the last to yield to Rome. It was not until the 12th century that Ireland finally succumbed. Ironically, it was an English army under Henry II, commissioned by the Pope, that broke the resistance of the Irish Church and destroyed its independence.

V. THE PRACTICES OF THE EARLY IRISH CHURCH

In doctrine and policy, the Irish church remained more faithful to God's word than any other part of Christendom. Listen to what Dr. Killen says of the doctrines taught in the early church in Ireland. "Though the Confession is the only ancient record to which we can safely appeal for information relative to the personal history of the famous Hibernian missionary, there is another memorial of great antiquity which illustrates his theological principles. It is



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a poem still extant in the Celtic language, and known as 'The Hymn of Patrick.' This bold and spirit-stirring composition was a favourite with Christian Irishmen upwards of twelve hundred years ago: it was then sung by them with the highest enthusiasm; and a peculiar blessing was supposed to be attached to its repetition. Nor is it difficult to account for its popularity. It brings before us the most exciting scene in the career of Patrick--his appearance in presence of King Laoghaire and the nobles of Ireland at the royal residence of Tara, to plead the cause of the Gospel against the priests of Druidism. The apostle, invoking the aid of the High and the Holy One, is represented as advancing, single-handed, to do battle with the powers of darkness. 'At Tara today,' says the Hymn, 'may the strength of God pilot me; may the power of God preserve me; may the wisdom of God instruct me; may the eye of God view me; may the ear of God hear me; may the word of God render me eloquent.... Christ be in the heart of each person to whom I speak; Christ in the mouth of each person who speaks to me; Christ in each eye which sees me; Christ in each ear which hears me.'

This poem is perhaps the production of the abbot of Armagh --'Patrick of the prayers who had good Latin.' It exhibits a degree of mental cultivation which cannot be traced in the Confession. But, whoever was its author, its great age is indisputable, as it is the oldest undoubted monument of the Irish language in existence. The doctrine taught by Patrick may here be distinctly recognized; for the Hymn virtually embodies the primitive creed of the Church of Ireland. Here is no invocation of Mary, no trust in relics, no confidence in personal righteousness. Christ alone was the hope of the Hibernian apostle.

Patrick acknowledged the supreme authority of the sacred volume; and yet he must have received Tobias and the books falsely ascribed to Solomon as inspired, for he quotes them along with the canonical Scriptures. It can be shown, however, that the early Irish Church rejected the greater part of the Apocrypha. Athanasius finished his chequered course about the time when Patrick was born; and the Arian controversy had fairly gone to rest before the young Frenchman had completed his first captivity. But there is abundant evidence that the author of the Confession was a zealous advocate of the Nicene faith.

Tradition relates that he taught the Irish how there could be a Trinity in Unity by holding up before them their own three-leaved shamrock; and in the Confession itself the doctrine is repeatedly inculcated. It is equally clear that he believed in the Atonement, or, as it is called in his Hymn, 'the virtue of Christ's crucifixion;' and he bears the most unequivocal testimony to the sovereignty of grace. 'I was,' says he, 'like a stone that lay in the deep mire; and He who is powerful came, and, in His mercy, relieved me; and raised me up, and placed me on the top of the wall; and from thence I should cry aloud 'What shall I render to the Lord for so great benefits here and hereafter, which the human mind cannot estimate.' ' We have already seen how he relates his own spiritual history--thus bearing emphatic testimony to the necessity of regeneration; and he expresses his views of the way of salvation by quoting the memorable words--'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned.'

In none of the works imputed to him does he make any reference to Purgatory; and, when he states that 'we must account even for our slightest sins before the tribunal of the Lord



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Christ,' he virtually rejects the idea of venial transgressions. There is satisfactory proof that, in early times, the Irish clergy were permitted to marry; and that, in the Eucharist, both the cup and the bread were given to the Irish laity. It can also be demonstrated that, long after the days of Patrick, the dogma of transubstantiation was unknown. The Hibernian doctors thought for themselves; they believed the testimony of their own senses: they saw that the elements remained unchanged after the prayer of thanksgiving; and even in the ninth century, when the doctrine of their transmutation was asserted on the Continent in all its absurdity by Paschasius Radbert, his most powerful opponent was a learned Irishman--the famous Johannes Scotus Erigena. Commenting on the words of our Lord, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' one of the earliest of the Irish expositors employs the following decisive language:--'He left a remembrancer of himself to us, even as if one that were going a far journey should leave some token with him whom he loved, that, as oft as he beheld it, he might call to memory his benefits and friendship.' [Killen's History of the Old Catholic Church, pages 322-324]

VI. THE INDEPENDENCE OF MISSIONARIES CONTINUED FOR A TIME.

The independence and orthodoxy of the Irish church was also seen in its missionaries. "Irishmen engaged in missionary operations on the Continent exhibited an independence of thought and action very embarrassing to the adherents of the papacy. Accustomed at home to rites and ceremonies quite different from the Roman, these worthies, in not a few instances, refused to abandon their own ecclesiastical observances when they went abroad; and, regarding the Italian pontiff as nothing more than the most powerful bishop in the West, they declined either to acknowledge his infallibility or to submit to his dictation. They were willing to believe that Peter had at one time been connected with the Church of Rome; but they did not see why the Pope was therefore entitled to exclusive jurisdiction. They had no idea that Peter alone was the rock which supports the Church; for they seem to have believed that every true evangelist shares that honour. Hence one of their ancient hymns in praise of Patrick says of him; "He is constant in the fear of God and immoveable in the faith; the Church is built on him as on Peter; whose apostleship also he has obtained from God, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against him."

Columbanus was not afraid to address the great patriarch of the West in language which must have astonished his Italian sycophants. Dissatisfied with the conduct of the court of Rome in reference to the question of the Three Chapters, he gave utterance to his indignation in a letter written with all the boldness of a Christian freeman. "That you may not lack apostolic honour," says this eloquent Irishman to Boniface IV., " preserve the apostolic faith; confirm it by testimony, strengthen it by writing, fortify it by synod, that none may justly resist you. . . . The Pastor of pastors is approaching; beware lest he find you negligent and beating your fellow servants with the blows of an evil example.... ' But the predominating influence of Romanism all around them, and the untiring zeal with which the Benedictine monks laboured to extend papal authority, gradually made an impression even on these outspoken Irishmen. Their continued residence on the Continent reconciled them to many things which they viewed at first with impatience; as we pass down through the Middle Ages their protests wax feebler and feebler; and at length some of them become the most strenuous supporters of Romish supremacy." [Killen's History of



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the Old Catholic Church, pages 331-333]

VII. IRELAND GRANTED TO THE ENGLISH CROWN.

The granting of Ireland to the English king, Henry II by Pope Adrian IV is a great embarrassment to Roman Catholic historians. They have even attempted to claim that the Bull was a forgery and the Pope never issued such a degree. It is worthy of reading.

"Adrian, Bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his dearest son in Christ, the illustrious King of England, greeting, and apostolic benediction. "Full laudably and profitably has your Magnificence conceived the design of propagating your glorious renown on earth, and of completing your reward of eternal happiness in heaven, whilst, as a Catholic Prince, you are intent on enlarging the borders of the Church, teaching the truth of the Christian faith to the ignorant and rude, extirpating the nurseries of iniquity from the field of the Lord, and for the more convenient execution of this purpose, requiring the counsel and favour of the Apostolic See. In which the maturer your deliberation and the greater the discretion of your procedure, by so much the happier, we trust, will be your progress, with the assistance of the Lord; because whatever has its origin in ardent faith and in love of religion always has a prosperous end and issue.

"There is indeed no doubt but that Ireland and all the islands on which Christ the Sun of Righteousness has shone, and which have received the doctrines of the Christian faith, belong to the jurisdiction of St. Peter, and of the holy Roman Church, as your Excellency also acknowledges. And therefore we are the more solicitous to propagate a faithful plantation among them, and a seed pleasing to the Lord, as we have the secret conviction of conscience that a very rigorous account must be rendered of them.

" You then, most dear son in Christ, have signified to us your desire to enter into the island of Ireland that you may reduce the people to obedience to laws, and extirpate the nurseries of vice; and that you are willing to pay from each house a yearly pension of one penny to St. Peter, and that you will preserve the rights of the churches of this land whole and inviolate. We, therefore, with that grace and acceptance suited to your pious and laudable design, and favourably assenting to your petition, hold it good and acceptable that, for extending the borders of the Church, restraining the progress of vice, for the correction of manners, the planting of virtue, and the increase of the Christian religion, you enter that island, and execute therein whatever shall pertain to the honour of God and welfare of the land; and that the people of that land receive you honourably, and reverence you as their lord,--the rights of their churches still remaining sacred and inviolate, and saving to St. Peter the annual pension of one penny from every house.

"If then you are resolved to carry the design you have conceived into effectual execution, study to form that nation to virtuous manners; and labour by yourself and others whom you shall judge meet for this work, in faith, word, and life, that the Church may be there adorned, that the religion of the Christian faith may be planted and grow up, and that all things pertaining to the honour of God and the salvation of souls be so ordered, that you may be entitled to the fulness of eternal reward in God, and obtain a glorious renown on



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earth throughout all ages." {Killen's Ecclesiastical History of Ireland, pages 211-212}

Pope Adrian's Bull was issued in 1155 but it did not suit Henry to invade Ireland until 1171. He landed at Waterford and met with little or no resistance and so Ireland passed into the hands of England.

Today, the Irish Republic would consider itself free from the invader of 1171. It is not so. The invader of Patrick's Ireland is still entrenched in the land. That invader is Roman Catholicism. What little there remains of Gospel religion in Ulster is the remnant of the faith that Patrick, under God, introduced some 1550 years ago. May it be our prayer and may it be the objective of our labours to see that the light of the Gospel is still burning on this island when the Saviour returns.