

St. Patrick in Munster

by Donal J. O'Regan

The following short article seeks to discuss the likelihood or otherwise of St. Patrick having set foot in Munster during the course of his Irish mission.

Considerable scholarly debate has centred on whether or not the holy man – Ireland's foremost apostle in Christ – ever set foot in the Munster province. Although it had traditionally been considered that Patrick did indeed travel throughout parts, at least, of the province of Munster, visiting, especially the King of Munster at Cashel¹, this assertion has been called into question in recent times by scholars as diverse as the late John Bradley², Professor Jean-Michel Picard³ and Charles Doherty⁴. However, my old mentor at University College Dublin, the late Professor Francis John Byrne⁵ appeared to think that the tradition of Patrick visiting the province of Munster including his setting foot in parts of Co. Tipperary might well contain a grain of truth.

The textual and place name evidence is such as to suggest that Patrick may well have visited Munster. Although this outcome is far from certain, as his own writings in this regard are less than revealing, it would appear to this writer at least that the weight of evidence favours the saint having visited the southern portion of Ireland. The two surviving documents known to emanate directly from the saint – his "Confessio"⁶ which I would date to c. AD 490, written towards the closing years of Patrick's life and "The Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus", an epistle decrying the slaying of neophytes and newly baptised Christians at the hands of an apostate slave trader and which probably dates to c. AD 486 tell us virtually nothing about the itinerary of the saint.

The only Irish place name mentioned by St. Patrick in his own writings (namely in The Confessio) is the Wood of Fochlut, today identified as probably equating with Fochail, near Killala, Co. Mayo, while his late seventh century biographers Muirchú⁷ and Tírechán⁸, bring Patrick on a tour of part of the country, including in the case of Tírechán to Cashel in Co. Tipperary. Accordingly, it is stated that "... He consecrated Fíacc the Fair in Sléibte and baptised the sons of Dúnlang, and set out by Belut Gabhráin and founded a church in Roigne of the House of Martyrs, and he baptised the sons of Nie Froích in the land of Munster on Patrick's Rock at Cashel"⁹. Although this latest assertion may seem to be somewhat contrived, it nonetheless might reflect genuine historical tradition. In an interesting entry in the *Annals of Ulster*¹⁰, which are generally held to be fairly reliable, it is stated under the year AD 490 "The battle of Cenn Losnad or Cell Losnaig in Mag Fea, in which fell Aengus son of Nad-fraích, King of Mumu, as Cuanu has written..." The corresponding entry is given in the *Annals of Inisfallen*¹¹ under the year AD 492: "The

battle of Cell Losnada, in which fell Aengus, son of Nad Fraích, and Eithne Uathach his wife". Both the *Annals of Ulster* and their Munster counterpart *The Annals of Inisfallen* derive from a common prototype, possibly itself drawn up at the Monastery of Louth or Armagh. These sometimes themselves draw entries from the lost *Book of Cuanu* which would appear to have a Louth provenance. What is especially interesting about the entries on the death of Aengus son of Nad Fraích is that they appear to coincide chronologically with the time of Patrick's mission in Ireland and especially his visit to Munster including his travels in parts of Co. Tipperary.

It is today largely accepted by scholars – and has been since the time of Professor James Carney¹² and before him Professor T.F. O'Rahilly¹³ who was writing in 1941 – that the preaching mandate of Patrick in Ireland coincided with the second and not with the first half of the fifth century AD. Today, it is believed by scholars on the whole that the holy man made his return journey to Ireland in 456 or 457 AD as against the generally believed tradition of 432. This latter date was designed, no doubt, to counter the preaching mandate of Bishop Palladius¹⁴, who arrived in the country in 431 with a view to preaching to those of the Irish already believing in Christ. It is today believed that there were pockets of Christians – possibly the remnants of slave trading – residing in the south eastern parts of Ireland, possibly in the area equating to modern Co. Waterford and parts of Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny and south east Tipperary. Bishop Palladius, who landed near Arklow, founded a number of churches in modern Co. Wicklow, including as far inland as Blessington, where he reputedly founded Killeen Cormac, but his mission is traditionally viewed as having ended in failure.

Not so that of St. Patrick which came to be regarded as a resounding success! Although he was not the only early Irish missionary he was by far the most outstanding, becoming the saintly avatar par excellence of the early process of the evangelisation of the Irish. The date of 432 might have been introduced by later biographers with a view to helping to undermine the efforts of Palladius, thereby exalting Patrick at his expense. This is the viewpoint of Professor T.F. O'Rahilly and he may well be right. However, given the nature of the sources it is difficult to be certain. Patrick is listed in the *Annals of Ulster* as having arrived in 432 while the post Patrician entries in the *Annals of Inisfallen* open with the year 433 (AD) and the beginning of the conversion of the Irish. This state of uncertainty with the early sources leaves the historian of the period feeling a little uneasy. But what is certain is that the 490 and 492 entries in the annals are in conformity with the conversion of Aengus Nad Fraích by St. Patrick if the saint was evangelising in Munster during the second half of the fifth century AD. Having been rejected by King Laoghaire, the High King at Tara, it is not unlikely that Patrick would have travelled south with a view to evangelising the King of Munster and his kinsfolk.

This is a view shared by Bishop John Fleming of Killala, a native of Ardpark, Co. Limerick who notes that St. Patrick's association with Ardpark¹⁵ derives not from later accretions, but from the saint having founded a church here close to existing prehistoric settlement and established it as his principal see in Munster over half a millennium, it might be noted, before Cashel was granted to the Church by Muirchertach O'Briain in AD 1101. By the eighth century Ardpark was busy collecting revenues from the province

of Munster for the See of Armagh which exercised jurisdiction over the Paruchia of St. Patrick but Dr. Fleming claims – and here I agree with him – that this derives from a genuine association with the saint and not as Doherty and others have argued from a contrived relationship.

In the ninth century *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*¹⁶, the saint is brought beyond Cashel – further south in Co. Tipperary to found a church at Kilfeacle – the Church of the tooth – and onto Ardpatrick, Co. Limerick, where he blesses Iar Mumhan or West Munster from a distance. He is alleged never to have set foot in what is modern day Co. Kerry and according to ancillary sources he is reputed to have travelled through Co. Clare to evangelise in Connaught. Bishop Fleming, in his succinct book on Ardpatrick observes, among other passages, the following piece dealing with St. Patrick's visit to Ardpatrick:

Past Ceann Feabhat of Sliabh Caoin, namely the Ballyhoura Hills and Slievereach to the southward, by the Tulach na Feinne or Hill of the Fianna which is now called Ardpatrick; where was Aengus's son, Eoghan Leith-Dherg, King of both Munster provinces and the nobles of the same with him.

Then his tent was unfurled over Patrick; the King of Munster came with the chief men of his people and laid his head on Patrick's bosom and made obedience to him. For a week the saint was there; raising the dead, healing them that had diseases or infirmities and relieving any other afflictions besides.

His own award was conceded to Patrick after which Eoghan made his way to Rosach-na-Ríogh, to his own strong palace and Munster's nobles sought their own several forts and good towns.

A force of Connaught men came in the meantime. Patrick said: 'Whence are you come young men?' 'Out of the province of Connaught to the Northwards', they said.

'What has set you in motion?'

'For Connaught's gentiles sent us to fetch thee, holy cleric, to convert us to the Gospel'.

Patrick said then: 'It is not right that the Church make any lagging but to disseminate it'.

Patrick then set out with his people and away and away they came from the south through mid-Munster, past Luimneach by Fídh na gCuan, which is called Cratloe.¹⁷

Although this entry may appear to be highly stylised or contrived, it may nonetheless contain a kernel of truth. Patrick was in demand for his graces in relation to the conversion of the Irish whether it be in Connaught, in Munster or elsewhere. While many contemporary historians would restrict Patrick's Irish mission to the north eastern part of the country or perhaps to parts of Co. Roscommon, it is not unlikely that his mission would

have encompassed parts of Munster, including large areas of Co. Tipperary if he was to seek the maximum number of converts including leading members of the Munster Royal Family. To suggest otherwise would be to undermine the very nature of that mission and even to cast cold water on his bona fides.

Patrick is also reputed to have visited such areas in Munster as Patrickswell Co. Limerick as well as Foynes and Knockpatrick, Co. Limerick with, according to one informant¹⁶, the saint having prayed at Foynes, where there is a holy well named after him and having travelled from Foynes to nearby Knockpatrick where he founded a church. Although tradition can be difficult to verify, neither should it be lightly dismissed. As noted above, according to the *Vita Tripartita*, or *Tripartite Life*, a ninth century account of the travels of St. Patrick, the saint never set foot in Kerry (or, for that matter, it would appear in Co. Cork) blessing West Munster from the heights of Ardpatrick. Co. Kerry may already have been subject to the evangelisation of St. Brendan, one of the traditional pre Patrician Saints, so that Patrick's presence there might not have been required. Why half invent? One might well consider that if the author of the *Tripartite Life* of St. Patrick was inventing Patrick's presence in Munster, he would have gone the whole way and brought him into counties Kerry, Cork and Waterford as well. The Waterford area was known to contain a population group known as The Décies, who were, traditionally, seen as having been evangelised by St. Declan of Ardmore.



*St. Patrick's Well, 1955 (before restoration)
(P. O'Connell from his publication "St.
Patrick's Well", Clonmel, Co. Tipperary,
Clonmel 1956.)*

There is a very fine holy well, known simply as St. Patrick's Well, situated just north of the town of Clonmel. Patrick is supposed to have been there. He is not reputed to have travelled much further south and west in the country where there would appear to be few if any holy wells with Patrician attributions. One might consequently deduce that the evidence for St. Patrick having set foot in Munster is somewhat stronger than has in recent times been believed and that one might tread carefully in any overall examination of the evidence.

References

- 1 See Bieler, L (ed.) *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 10 Burlington Road, Dublin 4, 1979 p. 163.
- 2 Pers. Comm. 1992.
- 3 Pers. Comm. 1992.
- 4 Lecture Given at U.C.D. 1990.
- 5 Pers. Comm. 1992.

- 6 See Duffy, Bishop Joseph, *Patrick in his Own Words* Veritas, Dublin, 1972.
- 7 See Bieler, op. cit.
- 8 See Bieler, *ibid.*
- 9 See Bieler, *ibid.*
- 10 MacAirt, S and MacNiocaill, G (ed.) *The Annals of Ulster* (To A.D. 1131) Part 1. Text and Translation, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1983 p. 55.
- 11 MacAirt, S (ed.), *The Annals of Inisfallen*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1977 p. 65.
- 12 Carney, J, *The Problem of St. Patrick*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1961.
- 13 O'Rahilly T.F., *The Two Patricks*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1942.
- 14 See also de Paor, L , *St. Patrick's World*, Four Courts Press, 1993.
- 15 See Fleming, J , Ardpatrik Co. Limerick, Published by the author, Limerick, 1978, pp. 8 to 13. Here the author note that St. Partrick may well have attempted to evangelise the Deis Becc who principal seat was at Ardpatrik.
- 16 Mulchrone, K, Bethu Phátraic- *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, Royal Irish Academy, 1939.
- 17 See Fleming, J op.cit. p. 127 citing Silva Gadelica, I-XXXI, Ed. S. O'Grady.
- 18 Pers. Comm. Johnathan Sheehy of Foynes, 1996.