

Who was St. Patrick?

By John Arnott

This past Sunday, the Anglican churches in Lloydtown Parish included Irish music in their Holy Communion services.

Be Thou My Vision, a long-time Irish favourite, served as the processional and during Communion another Irish favourite, Simple Praise, was played. Londonderry Air (Danny Boy) was also heard in the service as St. Patrick was remembered.

Young Patricius was the problem son of a prominent fifth century Roman British family who lived in a now lost town somewhere along the west coast of Britain. As a teenager skipping school, he was in the wrong place at the worst time and kidnapped by Irish pirates. Taken to Ireland he was sold as a slave to toil as a shepherd for a cruel tribal chief in central Ireland and always under threat of beatings or worse. His Christian upbringing, which he had scorned as a lad, now helped him survive and after five years and careful planning he made his escape. Hiding by day and travelling by night, narrowly missing recapture more than once, he finally reached the Irish coast. He then worked for his passage on a boat carrying hunting dogs to Britain.

Once safely home with his family, he attempted to continue his education; something he had also scorned as a lad. To his family's surprised delight, he decided to become a Christian priest. He travelled to France to train, even though he'd never completed his formal higher education, a fact he always regretted. And he always struggled with Latin. Despite these drawbacks he became a bishop.

All this time, the memory of Ireland had haunted him. When he announced, after much prayer and soul searching, that he believed firmly God wanted him to return to Ireland as a missionary, his family, friends and teachers, though shocked, supported his decision. Thus in 435 AD, he landed in Ireland for the second time, fully aware of the enormity of his undertaking and the danger it involved, especially if it was discovered he was an escaped slave. Being a Celt himself would prove invaluable in not only mastering varied Irish Gaelic, but in understanding the workings of the Celtic mind.

Patricius, the man we know as St. Patrick, would spend the remainder of his life teaching his fellow Celts and persuading them to embrace Christianity. Much of his time was spent in what is today Northern Ireland, making his headquarters at Armagh, where the mother church of the Church of Ireland (Anglican), Armagh Cathedral, stands on the site of Patrick's first church.

By the time of his death, around 463, in spite of much fierce opposition from powerful Druid priests and some powerful tribal kings, many Irish had become Christians. The saint is thought to be buried on the grounds of Downpatrick Cathedral (Church of Ireland) in the County Down.

Would it surprise you to know that blue, not green, is Ireland's national colour and the national symbol is the harp, not the shamrock?