

CHAPTER 2

What We Know

First of all, St. Patrick didn't banish the snakes from Ireland. We know that for a fact. Pliny the Elder, who wrote a giant encyclopedia of world knowledge (and died getting a closer look at the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79), mentioned as a fun fact about Ireland that there were no snakes in the island. That was three centuries or so before Patrick was born. And if that's not enough, modern paleontologists have gone through the fossil record with a fine-toothed comb. Their verdict: no evidence of snakes in Ireland.

Actually, the first time the story of a saint banishing the snakes from Ireland comes up in literature, the saint

isn't Patrick. It's St. Columba. Not until about 1200 do we find the story associated with St. Patrick.

So we can start the story of Patrick with one definite fact: he didn't banish the snakes from Ireland.

This turns out to be one of the few facts we know for certain about Patrick that Patrick didn't tell us himself.

In some ways, we know very little about St. Patrick. We don't even know when he was born, when he came to Ireland, or when he died. Various sources give us all those dates, but they give us different dates.

In another way, though, we know everything that's really important about St. Patrick. We know him from the inside—how he thought and how he felt. We know him because he put his heart and soul into his own writings. Those writings are a terrible frustration for historians, because Patrick never mentions dates and doesn't see the point of sticking to a chronological order. But for those of us who want to know the inner heart of a saint, the whole man is there in what he wrote.

From his own writings we have the main outlines of his life, although there are big gaps, and it's not always easy to tell what the order of events was. Much more importantly, though, we know his personality. We know what Patrick the man was like.

Two Letters from His Own Hand

Patrick wrote two things that everybody agrees are his. One is the little book known as the *Confession*, and the other is the “Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus.” Everyone agrees that they must be authentic, partly because they’re so badly written. The Latin is difficult and ungrammatical; sentences break off or lose their way; and the stories are often hard to follow and seldom complete. If you told Patrick he was a bad writer, he would certainly agree. “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,”¹ he tells us in one of his many apologies for his poor style.

But his poor style is exactly why we know him so well. Patrick seems to have written exactly the way he would talk—in the Vulgar Latin that was already on its way to becoming Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian, and the rest of the Romance languages. And not just the way he would talk in everyday life, but the way he would talk when he was really wrought up about something, as he was when he wrote both the *Confession* and the “Letter.” This is how we know we’re encountering the real Patrick.

1. St. Patrick, *Confession*, 10, as quoted in *St. Patrick: His Writings and Life*, ed. and trans. Newport J. D. White (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), p. 34.

If these two documents had been later forgeries, or if they had been substantially altered, someone would certainly have cleaned up the Latin. Later forgers would also not have put in so many declarations of the writer's inadequacy and sinfulness—only a saint would do that.²

Both of these writings give us Patrick at a vulnerable moment, when his emotions are stirred up and he is probably not thinking as clearly as he would like.

The *Confession* is a very brief life story, written to answer some criticisms of Patrick's ministry in Ireland. Apparently, some people had accused him of profiteering using his position as bishop and evangelist. We don't know exactly what the charges were, but refuting them leads Patrick to describe his work in some detail.

The "Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus" was written after a British warlord's raiding party had killed some of Patrick's newly converted flock and taken some others off to be sold as slaves. Patrick was understandably upset when he wrote it, and because he was so worked up, he reveals a lot of his personality. He also mentions a few facts about his own life and work that he didn't cover in the *Confession*.

2. William Declan Swan, "The Experience of God in the Writings of St. Patrick: Reworking a Faith Received" (PhD diss., Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2012), pp. 44–45.

Since Patrick wasn't writing for historians when he wrote these documents, he doesn't give historians the information they would like to have. It would have pleased historians if Patrick had written down dates, or even just one date. But he didn't. It would have pleased historians if Patrick had given them more names to work with, but he gives them almost none. He does give us one important name: the British warlord Coroticus. But there was more than one Coroticus, and historians have never managed to agree on which one Patrick meant.

We also wish he had given us more details about Ireland—where he went, what he saw there, what life was like. As far as historians know, there is precisely one person who saw Ireland in the 400s, wrote something about it, and left us a record that has survived to the present day. That one person is St. Patrick. He is our only eyewitness to fifth-century Ireland. But he isn't writing a travel guide to the island, so he doesn't give us much to go on.

The Other Sources

All the other chronicles, histories, and biographies that speak of the 400s in Ireland were written later, after all the people who lived through that time were dead. Those later chronicles and histories may have relied on things