

Imagination and the Irish  
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Today is the day before St. Patrick's Day, the day when we celebrate the Irish, described by Sigmund Freud as the only ethnic group whom psychoanalysis cannot help.

Because thirty-four million United States residents claim Irish ancestry, or nearly ten times the entire population of Ireland today, which is about four million, in bars across America today you can buy green beer. Irish decedents will hold parades in Boston, New York and many other cities. In Chicago, besides a parade, they dump green dye in the Chicago river and use the propellers on the motorboats to mix it. This year, thanks to the recent thaw, the river is clear of ice, and the annual tradition will continue. I lived in the Chicago area for eight years and, frankly, the Chicago river looked green to me every day of the year. On St. Patrick's Day it is *very* green. Not to be outdone by Chicago, in Tampa crews dye the Hillsborough River green.

A Unitarian may object to a sermon on the Irish before St. Patrick's Day, because Patrick was a Trinitarian Catholic. As I explained in the story, one of the most popular legends about him is that of the shamrock, which has Patrick explaining the idea of the Holy Trinity, three Persons in one God, to an unbeliever by showing him a three-leaved plant with one stalk. One Irish Catholic described the Unitarian view that Jesus was a human being as a "debased, simpleminded form of Christianity."

Another popular legend is that St. Patrick chased all the snakes in Ireland into the sea after they attacked him during a 40-day fast he was undertaking on top of a hill. However, the keeper of natural history at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, has searched extensively through Irish fossil collections and records. He says that "At no time has there ever been any suggestion of snakes in Ireland, so there was nothing for St. Patrick to banish."

Those who are reviving pagan religious traditions claim that the legend of Patrick driving the snakes of Ireland into the sea, is a symbolic story about Patrick's destruction of the earth-centered Druid religion. Druid is a Celtic word that means "Knowing or Finding the Oak Tree." Before Patrick arrived in 432 A.D., Druids visited oak forests and served as priests, teachers, and judges in Ireland. So modern pagans have their doubts about honoring Patrick.

On the other hand, the writer Thomas Cahill made a strong case in support of the idea that Patrick was a very important person in human history. In 1995 Cahill published a best-selling book called *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. The Irish, Cahill wrote, are part of a larger ethnic group call Celts. About 2,600 years ago one branch of the Celts settled in present day France and became the Gauls. A tribe of Celts traveled beyond France to Spain and became sea traders. About 350 B.C. some Celts traveled from what we now call Spain to Ireland. People were already living on the island. They had built great burial mounds and magnificently carved tombs. The invading Celts stripped before battle, and they rushed naked toward the local residents, carrying sword and shield but wearing only sandals and a golden neck ornament. In this way

they took control of the island. In Irish legend the inhabitants the Celts killed became the fairies and leprechauns haunting the ancient tombs and burial mounds.

Patrick arrived in Ireland about 900 years later in 432 A.D. to convert the people to Christianity. Patrick spoke out against slavery. Also Patrick ended the widespread practice of human sacrifice in Ireland by arguing that God had sacrificed Jesus for our sins and that they needed no additional human sacrifice.

After they converted to Christianity, Irish Catholics invented the confessional booth. Before this invention, priests expected Catholics to confess their sins in public, and forgiveness was limited. The Druids had a relationship called a soul-friend, a close friend in whom they could confide everything, trusting that the friend would keep the secrets. From this tradition the Irish introduced the Catholic Church to confessional privacy and unlimited forgiveness. The only unforgivable sin was the sin of a priest who broke the seal of the confessional. Still, today the Irish have a tremendous respect for personal boundaries. They are sensitive to each other's right to privacy, and do not impose or intrude on one another.

What I find most appealing about Irish culture is the way it has supported poets, writers and story tellers. Patrick introduced writing to Ireland. However, before writing there was an oral tradition. Every noble Irish family supported their own poets and these poets memorized poems and passed them down from one generation to the next, preserving the clan history. The splendor of the ancient epics, in striking contrast to the relative simplicity of life, suggests that the Irish used creative imagination to enhance the cold gray rain days.

About the same time that Patrick was introducing the Irish to writing, primitive groups of people were roaming across continental Europe. The Roman Empire was disintegrating into chaos and ruin. Illiteracy was becoming the norm, as savages destroyed the great libraries on the continent.

Meanwhile Patrick was creating an island of scholars. Operating on the fringe of Europe, beyond the reach of the invading savages, newly literate Irish monks preserved the written culture of Europe. Writing on sheep's skin these scribes copied every piece of Western literature they could uncover. Laboriously they preserved classical texts that had ceased to exist on the continent.

Starting in 557 A.D, the successors of these Irish scribes traveled to the European mainland. They carried their books to their newly established monasteries and reestablished literacy on the continent. In this way they restored the basis of classical civilization, providing a critical bridge between ancient Rome and medieval Europe.

Thomas Cahill in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* wrote:

The Hebrew Bible would have been saved without them, transmitted to our time by scattered communities of Jews. The Greek Bible, the Greek commentaries, and much of their literature of ancient Greece were well enough preserved at Byzantium, and might be still available to us somewhere. But Latin literature would almost surely have been lost without the Irish. And an illiterate Europe

would hardly have developed its great national literatures without the example of the Irish.

In this way Ireland was, for a time, the main source of information about the writings of classical Roman culture.

Perhaps because I have always loved reading, what I find most moving about this story is the passionate way the Irish took to writing. They highly valued words, stories, and poems. Poets were the only citizens allowed to move freely around the Island. The Irish protected poetry, even satirical poetry. They tell the story of a group of Christian leaders who were tired of having the poets make fun of them. The group proposed at a meeting that the church suppress the poets. A majority of priests defeated the motion. After the vote twelve hundred happy poets crowded into the meeting, singing the praises of their supporters. Poetry was an essential part of Irish life.

Over the centuries the Irish struggled to maintain this ethnic identity. It was not easy. The Vikings invaded and the Irish finally defeated them after 400 years of occupation. The English invaded and occupied the island until 1922. During this time of English occupation, priests whom French Catholics had expelled from France, came to Ireland and began to dominate the theology of the Irish church. The theology of these priests focused on the evil nature of people. The Irish Catholic Church, banned by the English, isolated from most outside influences, and possessed by this grim theology, became rigid, authoritarian, moralistic and powerful. Only the church offered institutional protection in the face of political oppression. The priests claimed to hold the key to salvation in a land of extreme poverty where the English controlled the few natural resources.

When famine hit the island in the 1840s and 1850s, millions emigrated from Ireland to the United States. Through parochial schools, the Catholic Church in America continued to have a pervasive impact on the social and cultural training of Irish children. Basic to the theology of the Irish-American Catholic Church was an emphasis on the sinfulness of human beings. The Catholic Church taught that humans will suffer deservedly for their sins. As a result, many Irish-Americans continued to struggle with a sense of sin and guilt. Reflecting this negative view of human nature, Patrick Moynihan said after President Kennedy's assassination: "I do not think that there is any point being Irish if you do not know that the world is going to break your heart one day."

Between 1962 and 1965 Vatican II created a revolution in the Catholic Church and has had a profound impact on Irish Catholics. For the first time, members of the Irish Catholic Church have the option of deciding issues for themselves. As a result, over the past forty years some guilt and rigidity that plagued the Irish for so many years has diminished. The aspect of Irish culture that I love--the storytelling and the writing--is still alive and strong. The poet continues to be an important member of Irish society. Irish novelists continue to publish bestsellers.

One Irish novelist has described the Irish as "struggling, through century after century, seeking a synthesis between dream and reality with a shrewd knowledge of the world and a strange

reluctance to cope with it.” Monica McGoldrick, an Irish psychologist, speculated on where this love of dreams came. She writes:

For hundreds of years the Irish lived an impoverished life on a misty island, which had very few natural resources and was dominated by a foreign oppressor. . . their ability to weave dreams was crucial to their survival. Historically they have valued fantasy and dreaming more perhaps than any other western European culture.

This is the culture that produced Frank McCourt who wrote in *Angela's Ashes*:

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the river Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. . . . From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. . . . In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey . . . The rain drove us into church—our refuge, our strength. Our only dry place. . . . we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.

This is the culture that produced James Joyce who wrote in *Dubliners*:

Snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, all the living and the dead.

This is the culture that produced William Butler Yeats who wrote:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams

On the eve of St Patrick's Day I give thanks to the Irish. I give thanks not for their beer or their parades, but for their words, their skill as story tellers and poets. The Irish enshrined poetry and stories as their central religious act. In doing so, they have shown the beauty of the human spirit.