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THE MEANING OF ST PATRICK

back to preach Christianity, later becoming a bishop. Up to this point, Ireland had been a pagan island divided into many warring kingdoms, worshipping various gods and spirits.

It appears that his preaching of the new Christian religion went down well, especially with influential upper-class women, who became his followers, many dedicating themselves to become nuns.

Although we know some parts of Patrick's life from two documents written by himself, there is still much conjecture about the details of his life. There is a small mountain (more like a hill) known as Slemish (near the place where my wife was brought up) where he is said to have been a sheep herder. The city of Armagh, where I was born, also lays claim to being his burial place, and is the seat of the archbishops of both the Catholic and Anglican churches in Ireland today.

I find it amazing that 450 years after Jesus Christ lived in Palestine, his teachings had become a religion that spread to the outermost edges of Europe and was adopted by the wild Irish tribes. Perhaps it was the gospel

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message of hope and peace, which was in stark contrast to the pre-Christian animistic beliefs, which attracted the people. Perhaps there is the need in humankind for the message of love, faith and hope.

Over the next five centuries, the Irish monks became the scribes who recorded and preserved documents in Latin, and the scholars who taught and spread the

gospel throughout Europe. Irish monks developed a tradition of writing down both the teachings of Christianity and Irish cultural tales.

These monks are responsible for preserving knowledge after the collapse of Roman education and bridging the gap between early oral history and written history. Their heritage can still be viewed in Trinity College Library, Dublin, as the Book of Kells, a ninth century illuminated manuscript of the gospels with lavish intricate illustrations on Vellum (sheep or cowskin). St Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century, and the monks preserved scripts and developed the tradition of asceticism so that Ireland was known as a centre of scholarship.

Fast forward to the fifteenth century when Martin Luther introduced Protestantism and Henry VIII made it the official religion of England, but the Irish refused to convert. The English (who dominated Ireland) then established a Protestant settlement in the northern tip of Ireland to counter the Catholic influence. In 1690, William of Orange, who had been installed with Mary as the Protestant king

of England, fought James II, the deposed Catholic king (who was also his father-in-law), in a battle in Ireland at the river Boyne.

Today, 335 years later, there are still 'Orangemen' from Northern Ireland who parade on July 12 with banners proclaiming, 'Remember 1690'.

This annual celebration is a demonstration of Protestant triumphalism which sparked off the conflict in the 1970s between Catholics and Protestants, which became known as 'the Troubles' and went on to claim 3,000 lives.

One can never separate religion and politics, but today most of the Irish treat Catholicism as a part of their culture rather than a strongly held religious belief. St Paddy's Day is a time to celebrate being Irish by drinking Guinness (the black stuff) and dyeing the rivers green.

The celebrations have spread all around the world, even reaching Uganda where there is a small but vibrant Irish community. Here, the St Patrick's celebrations have become the highlight of the Irish calendar with tickets for the ball selling out on the day they are released. St Patrick's Day is celebrated, not on the day of his birth, but on the day of his death and if he knew the wild parties that were being held and the amount of Guinness being consumed in his name, he would turn in his grave.

March 17th is St Patrick's Day, which is Ireland's national day. St Patrick is celebrated as the Patron Saint of Ireland because he introduced Christianity in the fifth century. Patrick lived somewhere in Anglo Roman Britain, but as a boy he was kidnapped by Irish raiders and taken to Ireland as a slave.

He worked as a sheep herder for several years, but then made his escape back to Britain. The experience made a deep spiritual impression on him, so he later became a priest. Subsequently, he felt that the Irish people were calling him back, so he travelled