

Irish Sacred Literature

The Book of Armagh and the Genuine Literature of St. Patrick

[197]

The curious manuscript collection known as the Book of Armagh may be not inaptly likened to a mirror, from which are reflected some of the most characteristic features of Irish literature. Exhibited with pride to the visitor, treasured justly as one of the gems of the famous library at Trinity College, this little volume, written partly in Irish and partly in Latin, bearing upon its worn and in some parts defective pages the marks of at least eight centuries' exposure to the chances of time, enables the careful observer to learn something about Irish calligraphy, and much about Irish ecclesiasticism.

It is not a very bulky tome, being a small vellum quarto, 72 inches high, 51 broad, and 21 thick. It contains now 221 folios, the writing being generally in two columns, and occasionally in three. The contents are of a somewhat miscellaneous character, and are remarkable mainly for the light they throw upon the life and history of the most famous name in Irish ecclesiastical story—St. Patrick. Some folios contain the Confession of Patrick, a document which the best authorities now concur in believing to be the genuine production of Patrick himself. Others contain what is known as the Tripartite Life, that is, a history of Patrick, written in three separate portions, which are constructed after the manner of homilies rather than systematic biographies. It is with these two sections of this composite volume that this paper has to do.

Authorities differ as to the date of the MS. Some place it as early as the tenth century, and there seems to be the strongest evidence for believing that it cannot be later than the eleventh. At the end of the Confession is written by the scribe: "So far from the volume which Patrick wrote with his own hand." This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the scribe copied from Patrick's autograph. This, of course, may have been so, and it appears probable that the eleventh century scribe thought so. It is certain that the exemplar before him was very

[p.198]

ancient, and there is no room for doubt that the Armagh text practically reproduces what Patrick himself wrote in the fifth century.

The Confession is very short, and occupies only three folios of the MS. In this respect, no less than in others, it presents a marked contrast to the later lives of the great man. It is a brief but tolerably complete sketch of the most important facts in Patrick's life. It exhibits very interesting features which all testify to the early date at which it was written. There is, for example, no trace of the papal system as developed later. In Patrick's day, priests were married, and he himself appears to have known nothing about a commission from the Pope to evangelize Ireland. If he did, he takes particular care to avoid all reference to it, even where such reference would be appropriate, had such a commission been given. He claims no miracle-working power. The Tripartite Life, and all the later sketches of the great missionary abound in the miraculous. They are full of wonder-workings, some of them amusing, some repulsive, and some—could we believe them true—absolutely destructive of the Christian character of the man to whom they are

R. Lovett, "Irish Sacred Literature: The Book of Armagh and the Genuine Literature of St. Patrick," *Sunday at Home* No. 1822 (March 30th 1889): 197-199.

attributed.

We have no space to refer at length to this Confession, by far the most valuable and interesting part of the Book of Armagh, but we quote one specimen of its style. Patrick has related the story of his captivity in Ireland, his escape, and his subsequent adventures; and he thus describes his own view of his commission as Apostle of Ireland.

"And again, after a few years, I was in the Britains with my parents, who received me as a son, and earnestly besought me that now at least, after the many hardships I endured, I would never leave them again. And there I saw, indeed, in the bosom of the night, a man coming as it were from Ireland, Victoricus by name, with innumerable letters, and he gave one of them to me. And I read the beginning of the letter containing, 'The voice of the Irish.' And while I was reading aloud the beginning of the letter, I myself thought indeed in my mind that I heard the voice of those who were near the wood Foclut, which is close by the Western Sea, and they cried out then as if with one voice, 'We entreat thee, holy youth, that thou come, and henceforth walk among us.' And I was deeply moved in heart, and could read no further, and so I awoke. Thanks be to God, that after very many years the Lord granted to them according to their cry."

It is one of the sure evidences of the early date of this production that the writer refers to Great Britain by its Roman designation, viz.: "the Britains;" not Britain.

A strong contrast to the simplicity and humility of the Confession is the extravagant and superabundantly miraculous story of the Tripartite Life contained in the Book of Armagh. "Many miracles," it states, "and marvels did God perform through Patrick in his boyhood; but we will declare only a few of the many of them." Then follow stories of how he kindled fires with his fingers, converted icicles into firewood, restored his sister when she was at the point of death, and raised from the dead his foster-father. Here is a specimen: "The children of the place in which Patrick was reared used to bring to their mothers honey out of the combs. Then said his foster-mother to Patrick: 'though every other brings honey to his foster-mother, you bring none to me.' Then Patrick took a vessel to the water, and filled it, and blessed the water, so that it was turned into honey, and it healed every disease and every ailment to which it was applied."

And yet the Tripartite Life narrates many of the facts of Patrick's life, and with such careful sifting as it gets in Dr. Whitley Stokes' edition yields a rich harvest to the careful student. Embedded in it are some very striking and suggestive incidents, which, although not free from the suspicion of later accretions and ecclesiastical redaction, do yet describe genuine deeds and words of the great missionary.

The following incident not only possesses a strong claim to authenticity, but also presents a very vivid picture of habits of thought and modes of religious action which belong to a very remote past. We quote from Dr. Stokes' edition, published in the Rolls series. The scene is Cruachan or Croghan, the site of an ancient palace of the Kings of Connaught, not very far from the town of Roscommon.

"Thereafter Patrick went at sunrise to the well, viz., Cliabach, on the sides of Cruachan. The clerics sat down by the well. Two daughters of Loeghaire, son of Niall, went early to the well to wash their hands, as was a custom of theirs, viz., Ethne the Fair, and Fedelm the Ruddy. The maidens found beside the well the assembly of the clerics in white garments, with their books

before them. And they wondered at the shape of the clerics, and thought that they were men of the elves or apparitions. They asked tidings of Patrick: 'Whence are ye, and whence have ye come? Are ye of the elves or of the gods?' And Patrick said to them: 'It were better for you to believe in God than to inquire about our race.' Said the girl who was elder, 'Who is your god? and where is he? Is he in heaven, or in earth, or under earth, or on earth? Is he in grass, or in streams, or in mountains, or in glens? Hath he sons and daughters? Is there gold and silver; is there abundance of every good thing in his kingdom? Tell us about him; how he is seen; how he is loved; how he is found? If he is a youth, or if he is in age? If he is ever-living; if he is beautiful? If many have fostered his son? If his daughters are dear and beautiful to the men of the world?' Then answered holy Patrick, filled with the Holy Spirit: 'Our God is the God of all things: the God of heaven, and earth, and sea and river; the God of sun and moon and all the stars; the God of high mountains and lowly valleys; the God over heaven and in heaven and under heaven. He hath a dwelling both in heaven and in earth and sea and all that are therein. He inspires all things; He quickens all things; He surpasses all things; He sustains all things. He kindles the light of the sun and the light of the moon. He made springs in arid lands and dry islands in. the

[p.199]

sea, and stars He appointed to minister to the greater lights. He hath a Son co-eternal with Himself, and like unto Him. But the Son is not younger than the Father, nor is the Father older than the Son. And the Holy Spirit breathes in them. Father and Son and Holy Spirit are not divided. Howbeit, I desire to unite you to the Heavenly King, for ye are daughters of a king on earth.' And the maidens said as it were with one mouth and with one heart: 'How shall we be able to believe in that King? Teach us most diligently that we may see the Lord face to face. Teach us the way and we will do whatsoever thou shalt say unto us.' And Patrick said, 'Believe ye that through baptism your mother's sin and your father's sin is put away from you?' They answered: 'We believe.' 'Believe ye in repentance after sin?' 'We believe.' And they were baptized, and Patrick blessed a white veil on their heads. And they asked to see Christ face to face. And Patrick said to them: 'Ye cannot see Christ unless ye first taste of death, and unless ye receive Christ's body and His blood.' And the girls answered: 'Give us the sacrifice that we may be able to see the Spouse.' Then they received the sacrifice,-and fell asleep in death; and Patrick put them under one mantle in one bed; and their friends bewailed them greatly."

That this story is largely based upon fact is the opinion of many scholars. The ritual is as old as the fifth century. The baptismal creed described, with its reference to the white cloth, the chrisom, upon the head, widely as it differs from the Evangelical belief, was held then. The preference for death as better than life, since it brought the soul at once face to face with Christ, is a habit of thought of which there are traces in early Church history. Even if we incline to the view that the story as it has come down to us is legend built up upon facts much simpler than itself, the incident is full of interest and even warning; showing us how early and how far the church had departed from the simplicity of apostolic belief about the Lord's Supper and Christian baptism.

This three-fold life of Patrick has many beautiful and true touches. Even its wildest excursions into the region of the miraculous are transparently due to a desire to magnify God by the exhibition of the prowess of His servant. And the history of Patrick makes it probable that the man who penned the MS. was not far wrong when he thus describes his hero: "A just man, with

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purity of nature like the patriarchs. A true pilgrim, like Abraham. Gentle, forgiving of heart, like Moses. A praise-worthy psalmist like David. A shrine of wisdom like Solomon. A vessel of election for proclaiming the truth like Paul the Apostle. A man full of grace and of the knowledge of the Holy Ghost, like John the child. A fair garden with plants of virtues. A branch of a vine with fruitfulness. A bright fire with power of heating and warming the sons of life, as to kindling and inflaming Charity. A lion through strength and power. A dove for gentleness and simplicity. A serpent for prudence and cunning, as to good. Gentle, humble, mild towards the sons of life. Gloomy, ungentle as to sons of death. A laborious and serviceable slave to Christ. A king for dignity and power, for binding and loosing, for freeing and enslaving, for killing and quickening."

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