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The classical historian J.B. Bury (1861–1927) was the author of a history of Greece which served as a standard textbook for over a century (and of which the first edition is also reissued in this series). His interests ranged over a very wide period, and in this 1905 work he apparently abandons the classical world altogether, to consider the life of St Patrick, patron saint of his native Ireland. However, as he points out in his preface, Bury was drawn to Patrick through study of the lives of other missionaries across the later Roman empire, and his first chapter surveys the context of the diffusion of Christianity. He considers the various accounts of the life of Patrick, and puts these into the context of what is known of the ancient Irish kingdoms and the coming of Christianity. An appendix supplies details of the original sources, including Patrick's own writings.

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The Life of St Patrick and his Place in History

JOHN BAGNELL BURY



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John Bagnell Bury
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1905

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HON. D.LITT., OXON.; HON. LITT.D., DURHAM; HON. L.D., EDIN.; GLASGOW, AND ABERDEEN;
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IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

J. B. BURY, M.A.

BY

HIS PLACE IN HISTORY
AND
ST. PATRICK
THE LIFE OF

PERHAPS the scope of this book will be best understood if I explain that the subject attracted my attention, not as an important crisis in the history of Ireland, but, in the first place, as an appendix to the history of the Roman Empire, illustrating the emanations of its influence beyond its own frontiers; and, in the second place, as a notable episode in the series of conversions which spread over northern Europe the religion which prevails to-day. Studying the work of the Slavonic apostles, Cyril and Methodius, I was led to compare them with other European missionaries, Wulfilas, for instance, and Augustine, Boniface, and Otto of Bamberg. When I came to Patrick, I found it impossible to gain any clear conception of the man and his work. The subject was wrapt in obscurity, and this obscurity was encircled by an atmosphere of controversy and conjecture. Doubts of the very existence of St. Patrick had

PREFACE

been entertained, and other views almost amounted to the thesis that if he did exist, he was not himself, but a namesake. It was at once evident that the material had never been critically sifted, and that it would be necessary to begin at the beginning, almost as if nothing had been done, in a field where much had been written.

This may seem unfair to the work of Todd, which in learning and critical acumen stands out pre-eminent from the mass of historical literature which has gathered round St. Patrick. And I should like unreservedly to acknowledge that I found it an excellent introduction to the subject. But it left me doubtful about every fact connected with Patrick's life. The radical vice of the book is that the indispensable substructure is lacking. The preliminary task of criticising the sources methodically had never been performed. Todd showed his scholarship and historical insight in dealing with this particular passage or that particular statement, but such sporadic criticism was no substitute for methodical *Quellenkritik*. Hence his results might be right or wrong, but they could not be convincing.

It is a minor defect in Todd's *St. Patrick* that he is not impartial. By this I mean that he wrote with an unmistakable ecclesiastical bias. It is not

implied that he would have ever stooped to a misrepresentation of the evidence for the purpose of proving a particular thesis. No reader would accuse him of that. But it is clear that he was anxious to establish a particular thesis. He does not conceal that the conclusions to which the evidence, as he interpreted it, conducted him were conclusions which he wished to reach. In other words, he approached a historical problem, with a distinct preference for one solution rather than another; and this preference was due to an interest totally irrelevant to mere historical truth. The business of a historian is to ascertain facts. There is something essentially absurd in his wishing that any alleged fact should turn out to be true or should turn out to be false. So far as he entertains a wish of the kind, his attitude is not critical.

The justification of the present biography is that it rests upon a methodical examination of the sources, and that the conclusions, whether right or wrong, were reached without any prepossession. For one whose interest in the subject is purely intellectual, it was a matter of unmixed indifference what answer might be found to any one of the vexed questions. I will not anticipate my conclusions here, but I may say that they tend to show that the Roman Catholic conception of St. Patrick's

PREFACE

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 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

work is, generally, nearer to historical fact than the views of some anti-Papal divines.

The fragmentary material, presenting endless difficulties and problems, might have been treated with much less trouble to myself if I had been content to weave, as Todd has done, technical discussions into the story. It was less easy to do what I have attempted, to cast matter of this kind into the literary shape of a biography—a choice which necessitated long appendices supplying the justifications and groundwork. These appendices represent the work which belongs to the science of history; the text is an effort in the art of historiography.¹

It should be needless to say that, in dealing with such fragmentary material, reconstructions and hypotheses are inevitable. In ancient and mediæval history, as in physical science, hypotheses, founded on a critical examination of the data, are necessary for the advancement of knowledge. The reconstructions may fall to-morrow, but, if they are legitimate, they will not have been useless.

¹ I may be permitted to remark that in vindicating the claims of history to be regarded as a science or *Wissenschaft*, I never meant to suggest a proposition so indefensible as that the presentation of the results of historical research is not an art, requiring the tact and skill in selection and arrangement which belong to the literary faculty. The friendly criticisms of Mr. John Morley in the *Nineteenth Century and After*, October 1904, and of Mr. S. H. Butcher in *Harvard Lectures on Greek Subjects* (1904), Lecture VI., show me that I did not sufficiently guard against this misapprehension.

The future historian of Ireland will have much to discover about the political and social state of the island, which is still but vaguely understood, and the religion of the Scots, about which it may be affirmed that we know little more than nothing. These subjects await systematic investigation, and I have only attempted a slight sketch (Chapter IV.), confining myself to what it seemed possible to say with tolerable safety on the chief points immediately relevant to the scope of this monograph. But, notwithstanding the dimness of the background, I venture to hope that some new light has been thrown on the foreground, and that this study will supply a firmer basis for the life and work of Patrick, even if some of the superstructures should fall.

The two maps are merely intended to help the reader to see the whereabouts of some places which he might not easily find without reference to the Ordnance Survey. I consulted Mr. Orpen's valuable map of Early Ireland (unfortunately on a small scale) in Poole's *Historical Atlas of Modern Europe*. But he has used material which applies to a later period, and I have not ventured to follow him, for instance, in marking the boundary between the northern frontiers of the kingdoms of Connaught and Meath.

PREFACE

J. B. BURY.

It was fortunate for me that my friend Professor Gwynn was engaged at the same time on a "diplomatic" edition of the records contained in the *Codex Armachanus*, which constitute the principal body of evidence. With a generosity which has placed me under a deep obligation, he put the results of his labour on the difficult text at my disposal, and I have had the invaluable help and stimulus of constant communication with him on many critical problems arising out of the text of the documents.

Since the book was in type I have received some communications from my friend Professor Rhys which suggest a hope that the mysterious Bannauenta, St. Patrick's home, may perhaps be identified at last. I had conjectured that it should be sought near the Severn or the Bristol Channel. The existence of three places named Banwen (which may represent Bannauenta) in Glamorgan-shire opens a prospect that the solution may possibly lie there.

LIFE OF ST. PATRICK

x

CONTENTS

	CHAPTER I	
page	ON THE DIFFUSION OF CHRISTIANITY BEYOND THE ROMAN	1
	EMPIRE	
	CHAPTER II	
	THE CAPTIVITY AND ESCAPE OF PATRICK	16
	§ 1. Parentage and Capture	16
	§ 2. Captivity and Escape	27
	CHAPTER III	
	IN GAUL AND BRITAIN	37
	§ 1. At Lerins	37
	§ 2. At Home in Britain	41
	§ 3. At Auxerre	48
	§ 4. Palladius in Ireland (A.D. 431-2)	54
	§ 5. Consecration of Patrick (A.D. 432)	59
	CHAPTER IV	
	POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITION OF IRELAND	67
	CHAPTER V	
	IN THE ISLAND-PLAIN, IN DALRADIYA	81
		xi

PATRICK'S PLACE IN HISTORY 212

CHAPTER X

WRITINGS OF PATRICK, AND HIS DEATH 187
 § 1. The Denunciation of Coroticus 187
 § 2. The Confession 196
 § 3. Patrick's Death and Burial (A.D. 461) 206

CHAPTER IX

FOUNDATION OF ARMAGH AND ECCLESIASTICAL ORGANISATION 150
 § 1. Visit to Rome (*circa* A.D. 441-3) 150
 § 2. Foundation of Armagh (A.D. 444) 154
 § 3. In South Ireland 162
 § 4. Church Discipline 166
 § 5. Ecclesiastical Organisation 171

CHAPTER VIII

IN CONNAUGHT 126

CHAPTER VII

IN MEATH 93
 § 1. King Loigaire's Policy 93
 § 2. Legend of Patrick's Contest with the Druids 104
 § 3. Loigaire's Code 113
 § 4. Ecclesiastical Foundations in Meath 116

CHAPTER VI

page

LIFE OF ST. PATRICK xii

APPENDIX A—SOURCES

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE 225
PAGE

I. WRITINGS OF PATRICK, AND DOCUMENTS OF THE FIFTH CENTURY:—

1. The *Confession* 225
 2. The Letter against Coroticus 227
 3. *Dicta Patricii* 228
 4. Ecclesiastical Canons of St. Patrick 233
 Note on the *Liber de Abusionibus Saeculi* 245
 5. Irish Hymn (*Lorca*) ascribed to Patrick 246
 6. Hymn of St. Sechnall 246
 7. Life of Germanus, by Constantius 247

II. LIVES AND MEMOIRS OF PATRICK:—

1. Memoir of Patrick, by Tirechan 248
 Additions to Tirechan in the *Liber Armaehanus* 251
 2. Additional notices in the *Liber Armaehanus* 252
 3. Life of Patrick, by Muirchu 255
 4. Hymn *Genair Patraicc* (Hymn of Fiacc) 263
 5. Early Acts in Irish 266
 6. *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta* 268
 7. *Vita Treparrtia* 269
 8. *Vita Tertia* 272
 9. Life by Probus (*Vita Quinta*) 273
 10. Notice of Patrick in the *Historia Brittonum* 277

III. OTHER DOCUMENTS:—

1. The Irish Annals 279
 2. The *Catalogus Sanctorum Hiberniae* 285
 3. The *Liber Angueli* 287

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-08214-3 — The Life of St Patrick and his Place in History
 John Bagnell Bury
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

LIFE OF ST. PATRICK

xiv

APPENDIX B—NOTES

288	CHAPTER I.
289	II.
294	III.
299	IV.
300	V.
302	VI.
306	VII.
307	VIII.
313	IX.
321	X.

APPENDIX C—EXCURSUS

322	1. The Home of St. Patrick (<i>Bannamenta</i>)
325	2. Irish Invasions of Britain
331	3. The Dates of Patrick's Birth and Captivity
334	4. The Place of Patrick's Captivity
336	5. Tentative Chronology from the Escape to the Consecration as Bishop
338	6. The Escape to Gaul. The State of Gaul, A.D. 409-416
342	7. Palladius
344	8. Patrick's Alleged Visit (or Interrupted Journey) to Rome in A.D. 432
347	9. Patrick's Consecration
349	10. Evidence for Christianity in Ireland before St. Patrick
353	11. King Lotgaire and King Dathi
355	12. The <i>Senchus Mór</i>
358	13. Patrick's Visits to Connaught
360	14. King Armoingaid: Date of his Reign
367	15. Patrick at Rome
369	16. Appeal to the Roman See
371	17. Patrick's Paschal Table

PART OF KINGDOM OF ULIDIA (DALARADIA AND DALRIADA),
WITH ORIOR 84
KINGDOMS OF MEATH AND CONNAUGHT 104

MAPS

INDEX 393

18. The Organisation of the Episcopate 375
19. The Place of Patrick's Burial 380
20. Legendary Date of Patrick's Death 382
21. Professor Zimmer's Theory 384

CONTENTS