

Green shenanigans and pagan snakes

Last year, I surveyed my friends and posed the question: What exactly are we celebrating when we party on St. Patrick's Day?

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Saint Patrick. Even the name sounds like a chortle. When we think of him it is not of piety and penance but of boisterous Irish and found-in wannabes celebrating the wearing of the green and slurring through frothy lips: "Mind yer hats goin' in!"

A year ago, I was propped amid the oak and uproar of a heaving Irish pub on Toronto's Yonge Street. There were yells of "Fine girl y'are," and, on a mini-stage, someone was squeezing shrill notes from pipes pumped by his elbow and played from his lap; another laid into a bodhran drum. Flute, mandolin, harp and fiddle were in the mix.

It was the stuff of insurrection, cannon fire and rousing exploits. But around me in the bar was the Canadian rainbow coalition: black, white, brown, turbans, suits, a sari and at least one Stetson. All revelling in memory of an all-star saint.

My head, a spinning match for the traditional high-steppers dancing on straw strewn for the occasion, tried to make sense of it. I am of Scottish extraction, but only after 1846. Before that, my forebears were buried in Irish sod. I surveyed my friends in the bar: One Italian, another Saudi and a third Austrian-Filipino. I posed the question: What exactly are we celebrating on St. Patrick's Day? They stared, shrugged and merrily resumed drinking. Leaving no pint unturned, I simply asked the bartender.



"It's a celebration of Irish patriotism, he said, "but you don't have to be Irish to celebrate. You just have to love the Irish."

God loves the Irish. Anyone from there will tell you that. St. Patrick, of course, is the patron saint of the place and, as such, is clasped not only to the hearts of Erin but beloved worldwide. All but the most intransigent of Ulster loyalists would agree that St. Patrick is not reviled in Belfast's Protestant strongholds. (This may be because, while he made his name in Ireland, many say he was born in Scotland). And there are those who will not be dissuaded that, while he may not have picked the team, his blessed hand was at work in the modern miracle of Ulster's inter-denominational rugby team.

We know much from his autobiographical writing; that he was born probably at Kilpatrick in central Scotland toward the end of the fourth century. In his early teens, he was abducted into slavery by Irish marauders. He was also imprisoned for six years, for what we do not know.

He wrote that God spoke to him in a dream and urged him to flee to the coast, where he was picked up by fishermen and, on being given his liberty, was subsequently ordained a priest. On becoming a bishop, an angel told him to return to Ireland as a missionary. At the time, Ireland was largely populated by Druids and pagans.

Familiar with the language and local customs, his unite-and-convert strategy was simple. First, it's said he made an impression by befriendng a local chieftain who suddenly regained use of a long-immobilized arm and was soon two-handing tankards of porter. He incorporated pagan ritual: the locals honoured their gods with fire, so he used bonfires to celebrate Easter. He superimposed the sun, a powerful symbol, on to the Christian cross, an adaptation acceptable to the Irish and the prototype for the Celtic cross.

Ah, but what about those snakes? Did he not banish them from all of Ireland simply by flourishing his staff? Unlikely. Irish culture, though, is thick with oral legend and myth. Perhaps what he cast from Ireland was pagan idolatry. Within two centuries of his arrival, Ireland's conversion was complete and the story is this: death and the passage of time notwithstanding, St. Patrick personally baptized each one.

March 17 marks the anniversary of his death and the religious feast day. The Catholic Church makes no big deal of it but the Irish have been celebrating it as a religious holiday for centuries, no-meat Lenten prohibitions being suspended for a day of frolic, drink and traditional fare of potato, bacon and cabbage. The inaugural St. Patrick's Day parade in New York in 1762, however, was an improvised affair. It began when, suitably fortified, Irish soldiers serving in the English military reconnected with their Irish roots and exiled countrymen, re-igniting Irish patriotism among American immigrants.

The potato famine of the mid-1800s, combined with the opportunistic land-clearing schemes of absentee aristocracy, drove shiploads of impoverished Irish to America. There, as in their homeland, they encountered bigotry and disdain from the ascendant Protestant majority. They were caricatured as shillelagh-wielding drunks and louts.

But in numbers lies strength and the Irish were quick to organize. The "green machine" became politically relevant and the annual marches symbolized Hibernian strength and unity. Today, millions of people, eager for a glimpse of the procession, bleed green through the streets of New York. Marching, walking, watching or imbibing, much of the rest of the world also hails the day.

The Irish claim that wisdom comes eventually and the best place to wait is in a bar. So I hail our shamrock-sporting bartender and order a round of Guinness, secure in the knowledge that the Irish do cradle the world on St. Patrick's Day. The shenanigans embrace goodwill and the best of patriotism, heritage and storied tradition. It is a party of brother and sisterhood, mirth and tolerance, an occasion when all eyes are Irish and smiling.

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