

## Praise for *Ireland's Saint*

"Bury proves to be more than a mere dry historian; he turns out to be a fine storyteller as well, and his accounts of Patrick's spiritual duels with Druid priests for the heart and mind of the Irish king are quite gripping."  
—History Book Club

"Editor-writer Sweeney gives Bury's 1905 biography of the legendary St. Patrick a greater contemporary context in this meticulously researched and presented work. . . . Bury wrote what Sweeney calls the 'ideal modern biography' of Patrick. . . . Sweeney assembles and rearranges material from Bury's original work and incorporates more of Patrick's own words, from his *Confession* and *Letter against Coroticus*. Sweeney's light edits to Bury's text clarify exactly what Patrick did in Ireland, noting that although he did convert some pagan kingdoms, he also was responsible for organizing Christians who were already there and connecting the island with the church of the Roman Empire."

—*Publishers Weekly*

**Jon M. Sweeney** is an independent scholar, culture critic, and book publisher. He is the editor and author of many books including *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of St. Francis*, *The St. Francis Prayer Book*, and *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation*, which was recently optioned by HBO, Inc. He lives with his wife and daughter in Evanston, Illinois.

**J. B. Bury** (1861–1927) was an Irish historian and an expert on the Greek and Roman Empires. He grew up in County Monaghan the son of an Anglican rector and was made a fellow of Trinity College in Dublin at the young age of 24. In 1902, Bury was appointed the prestigious Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, a position he held until his death. He wrote many scholarly works, including *History of the Later Roman Empire*, *Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, and this biography of St. Patrick of Ireland.

# IRELAND'S SAINT

*The Essential Biography of St. Patrick*



Mosaic of St. Patrick, Westminster Cathedral, London

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*The Essential Biography of St. Patrick*

BY J.B. BURY

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION AND ANNOTATIONS BY  
JON M. SWEENEY



PARACLETE PRESS  
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

FOR  
Sarah-Maria and Joseph,  
who remind me of Patrick's words in the *Confession*,  
"I ought to give thanks to God without ceasing."  
—J.M.S.

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2013 First Printing This Format

2010 First Paperback Printing

2008 First Hardcover Printing

*Ireland's Saint: The Essential Biography of St. Patrick*

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ISBN: 978-1-61261-333-8

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:  
Bury, J. B. (John Bagnell), 1861–1927.

Ireland's saint : the essential biography of St. Patrick / J.B. Bury ; introduction  
and annotations by Jon M. Sweeney.—[New ed.].

p. cm.

Rev. ed.: The life of St. Patrick and his place in history, 1905.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-55725-557-0

1. Patrick, Saint, 373?-463? 2. Christian saints—Ireland—Biography. 3.

Ireland—Church history—To 1172. I. Bury, J. B. (John Bagnell), 1861–1927.

Life of St. Patrick and his place in history. II. Title.

BX4700.P3B8 2008

270.2092—dc22

2008017071

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

[www.paracletepress.com](http://www.paracletepress.com)

Printed in the United States of America

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## INTRODUCTION

First published in 1905, John Bagnell Bury's (1861–1927) biography of St. Patrick of Ireland was the most influential study of the saint ever written up until that point. Bury's scholarship and conclusions directed the understanding of Patrick for at least a half century. Almost immediately, for instance, he overturned long-standing tradition that held that Patrick's mission lasted sixty years and the saint died in 493. Bury said Patrick's mission was only thirty years, the additional thirty were added by early hagiographers, and Patrick passed away in 461.

The original title of Bury's book was *The Life of St. Patrick and His Place in History*. Bury was an Irish historian, and an expert on the Greek and Roman Empires. He was also a Protestant, which might be unnecessary to mention under other circumstances; however, in the case of Irish history, it is unavoidable. He grew up in County Monaghan, the son of an Anglican rector. He was made a fellow of Trinity College in Dublin at the young age of twenty-four, and became recognized as expert in ancient, medieval, and modern history over the course of the next decades. In 1902, Bury was appointed the prestigious Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, a position he held until his death. *Modern*, in this instance, refers to all but ancient. Subsequent holders of the title have included George Macaulay Trevelyan, Herbert Butterfield, and William Owen Chadwick. A senior professorship by the same name exists at Oxford.

As he mentions in the first sentence of his original preface, Bury was attracted to the subject of St. Patrick "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." Bury's earlier writings spanned the ancient Greeks and Romans, throughout the Middle Ages, and into Victorian history. But he was considered expert, most of all, on the later Roman Empire. Some of his many writings on the subject include *History of the Later Roman Empire* (still in print in 2 volumes), *Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (recently reissued), and *History of the Eastern Roman Empire*. One of the primary emphases of his biography of Patrick is to place the Ireland of Patrick's day in the proper historical context, as influenced by the Germanic and Scandinavian invasions of the third to ninth centuries, but also, in many ways, to portray it as stubbornly apart from the empire. His biography of Patrick has been accurately described as "a postscript to the author's history of the later Roman Empire, dealing with the final episode in the spread of Roman civilization (which by this time happened to include Christianity also) among the barbarian peoples" (Binchy, 10).

Many scholars today argue with Bury's conclusions, saying that we cannot know as much as he claims to have discovered in the sources. "[The] Patrick of current mythology has been put together . . . mainly from an oblique inheritance from a long series of Lives," writes one of these (Thomas, 309). In other words, Bury may have brought Patrick scholarship into the modern era, but he still contributes to the perpetuation of stories we cannot fully substantiate. According to this line of thinking, only the writings of Patrick—the *Confession*, written when Patrick was an old man responding to charges made against him by British priests, and the *Letter Against Coroticus*, written somewhat earlier—are reliable witnesses to the facts of

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Patrick's life and work. This is all that such scholars say that we can know for certain about Patrick's life:

- He was an old man when he wrote his *Confession*, and his Latin was unskilled.
- Patrick's father was named Calpornius. He was a deacon.
- Patrick's grandfather was named Potitus, and a presbyter in his village in Britain.
- At 16, Patrick was kidnapped by pirates and taken to Ireland.
- His faith was kindled while in captivity in Ireland.
- He worked as a shepherd while in captivity, and he heard the "voice" of God speak to him.
- After six years, he fled Ireland stowed away on a ship. The ship traveled for three days until reaching land.
- After a harsh time with no food, Patrick and his companions found a herd of pigs and also ate honey from discovered hives.
- Patrick visited his parents in Britain a few years after he escaped from Ireland.
- He claimed to have baptized thousands of people while in Ireland.

Bury would agree with all of these items, but he also fills in additional details and challenges many others from legend and tradition and other medieval texts, creating a portrait that tells us far more than these simple "facts," and yet, stops far short of hagiography. His is the ideal modern biography.

Bury was one of the leaders among historians at the turn of the twentieth century who desired to transform scholarship and modern understanding of the past using critical tools of analysis. In this way, he was in solidarity with two generations of contemporaries, such as the great Ernest Renan (d. 1892),

author of *Life of Jesus*, and Paul Sabatier (d. 1928), author of the influential biography of Francis of Assisi recently republished as *The Road to Assisi*. In one of Bury's most influential works, *A History of Freedom of Thought* (1913), he articulates how superstition, custom, and intellectual laziness have always hindered the progress of knowledge:

If the social structure, including the whole body of customs and opinions, is associated intimately with religious belief and is supposed to be under divine patronage, criticism of the social order savors of impiety, while criticism of the religious belief is a direct challenge to the wrath of supernatural powers.

The psychological motives which produce a conservative spirit hostile to new ideas are reinforced by the active opposition of certain powerful sections of the community, such as a class, a caste, or a priesthood, whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of the established order and the ideas on which it rests.

Let us suppose, for instance, that people believe solar eclipses are signs employed by their Deity for the special purpose of communicating useful information to them, and that a clever man discovers the true cause of eclipses. His compatriots in the first place dislike his discovery because they find it very difficult to reconcile with their other ideas; in the second place, it disturbs them, because it upsets an arrangement which they consider highly advantageous to their community; finally, it frightens them, as an offense to their Divinity. The priests, one of whose functions is to interpret the divine signs, are alarmed and enraged at a doctrine which menaces their power.

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In prehistoric days, these motives, operating strongly, must have made change slow in communities which progressed, and hindered some communities from progressing at all. But they have continued to operate more or less throughout history, obstructing knowledge and progress. (Bury, 9–11)

Bury is a clear and precise writer. But he is also one for metaphor and the delicate turn of phrase. At times, such as this one from chapter 3, he sounds almost like a poet: "But as Patrick grew up, the waves were already gathering, to close slowly over the island, and to sweep the whole of western Europe." We see in the same chapter a good example of Bury's ability to tell a story; he chronicles the invasions of the Picts, Scots, and Saxons upon the British isle in the fourth century, foreshadowing what must have been felt by Patrick's father, Calpurnius, when he "shared in the agonies that Britain felt in those two terrible years when she was attacked on all sides by Pict, by Scot, and by Saxon, when Theodosius, the great Emperor's father, had to come in haste and use all his strength to deliver the province from the barbarians. In the valley of the Severn the foes whom the Britons dreaded were Irish freebooters, and surely in those years their pirate crafts sailed up the river and brought death and ruin to many."

Still, as one Irish historian has put it, "this sturdy Rationalist [meaning, Bury] shows a curious tenderness towards the legendary material as a whole" (Binchy, 10). In other words, this biography is critical, but also sympathetic to the tradition and legends surrounding the saint.

A more recent biographer of Patrick has written, "Bury was possibly the most learned historian produced by the British Isles

in the twentieth century. He knew all the European languages except three; and his familiarity with the scholarly literature of Europe was unmatched. . . . The result was such a work of scholarship as seemed to be the last word on Patrick" (Thompson, 176). But, of course, it wasn't, and subsequent researchers have found much to add and amend in Bury's famous account.

### *Additions and Changes to This Edition*

Most contested among Bury's assumptions is the idea that the seventh-century biography of Patrick written by Muirchu is to be trusted. As mentioned above, recent historians often argue that the only truly reliable sources for knowing Patrick's life and beliefs come from the saint's own writings. For this reason, the present edition of Bury's important book includes many sidebar notes that add the thoughts (and occasional corrections) of more recent historians on various issues. Also, in the spirit of Bury's account, several sidebars provide portions of Patrick's own writings that have a bearing on the points being made. I have also plumbed the wealth of novels, poems, legends, art, theology, and other writings that serve to fill in the picture of Patrick drawn in Bury's account.

Other changes have been made to the original edition in creating the present one. For example, I have taken what was originally Bury's excellent summary chapter, "Patrick's Place in History," and made it his first. The style of biographical writing a century ago was different than it is today. It used to be that the biographer would tell his tale from beginning to end, only to unleash his most detailed opinions in a concluding chapter, followed by a voluminous amount of additional material, including refutations of other scholars, discursive analyses of

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key points, and so on, in various appendices. I have tried to cull the best of this latter material from the original edition and disperse it throughout where it properly belongs today, speaking straightforwardly to the reader. Many sentences and paragraphs that originally appeared in the notes and appendices sections of Bury's biography have been incorporated into the main body of the biography.

I have updated the language of Bury's prose, altering the style and sentence structure only when necessary to suit a more contemporary reader. Bury's ubiquitous double negatives have been altered whenever it seemed reasonable to do so. In some cases, I have used more recent, agreed-upon spellings, such as Pechenegs instead of Patzinaks for the nomadic people of the Asian steppes once converted by St. Bruno of Querfurt. Throughout the work, I have added dates after the names of important figures and made other invisible additions aimed at an appreciation of the biography for today. I have tried to provide the source of quotations made by Bury without attribution because he was writing for an audience that had a much larger religious literacy than we do today; a few of these are quotations from the Bible, and in these cases, I have changed the renderings to the New Revised Standard Version translation. I have also quietly changed a very few mistakes that Bury made, in the judgment of later scholars. For instance, in the chapter on Patrick's sojourn in Gaul after his escape from slavery in Ireland, Bury tells of his staying at the monastery of Lerinus. The Lerins islands, off the coast of France at Cannes, were made famous in the fourth century by St. Eucherius of Lyon, who was married before he became a hermit on the neighboring island of Lero. Bury mentions Eucherius's wife, Galla, but probably makes the mistake of assigning her to living together with her husband in

hermit life. Later scholars seem to universally agree that it was only after his wife's death that Eucherius became a hermit.

I also have no doubt that today's reader wants to read more of Patrick's two writings—the *Confession* and the *Letter Against Coroticus*—in his own words. I have incorporated some of these into the book; they are taken from the translation given in the classic work published in New York in 1880, *The Most Ancient Lives of Saint Patrick, Including the Life by Jocelin, Hitherto Unpublished in America, and His Extant Writings*, by Rev. James O'Leary, D.D., fifth edition, modified only slightly. I have also included a prose translation of the bulk of the "Hymn of St. Seachnaill," in chapter 10.

### *Bury's Balanced Perspective*

In his original preface, Bury wrote, "When I came to Patrick, I found it impossible to gain any clear conception of the man and his work. The subject was wrapped in obscurity, and this obscurity was encircled by an atmosphere of controversy and conjecture. Doubt of the very existence of St. Patrick had been entertained. . . . 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."

He went on to explain that the present biography was necessary because of the way the author methodically examined the original sources—perhaps for the first time by a modern scholar. Bury described his attempt to be impartial by referring to himself as "one whose interest in the subject is purely intellectual." Such a comment says more about his era than about the man. It is impossible to read this biography

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without feeling the passionate interest that the author had for his subject. And the fact that the author was a Protestant is perhaps what led him to also write in his original preface, "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 work is, generally, nearer to historical fact than the views of some anti-Catholic clergy." All in all, this is a portrait for the ages.

As a modern historian writing at the beginning of modern religious history writing, Bury makes very few comments about Patrick's direct influence on the spiritual life of the Irish, or anyone else. Bury was quite modern in this respect, trying to keep fact apart from feeling, and the spiritual away from

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"Patrick's mission to the Irish had only been a limited success when he died, and since his greatness was not appreciated by the generation or two which followed—they did not even remember where his body was buried—it is not surprising that there are no early representations of him." (Thompson, 160)

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the ecclesiastical, in his accounts. My concerns are somewhat different, and I have added some sidebars with reflections on the spiritual import of Patrick throughout the work.

Why does the study of St. Patrick matter today? If you have come to this book with questions and curiosity of your own, I hope you will find much to engage you here. One of the best summaries of Patrick's spirituality that I have encountered is this: "One of our most ancient manuscripts, the *Book of Armagh*, tells us that Patrick wished the Irish to have two phrases ever on their lips, *Kyrie Eleison* and *Deo Gratias*; Lord have mercy, and Thanks be to God. It was between these two prayers that Patrick lived out his own full and saintly life. It is where we,

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too, will find the fullness of life—trusting in the forgiveness of the One who loves us, and eternally grateful for everything" (O Riordain, 20).

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Patrick's Place in History*

There are two extreme and opposite views about the scope and dimensions of St. Patrick's work in Ireland. The older view is that he introduced the Christian religion and converted the whole island. The more recent view holds that the sphere of his activity was restricted to the one, small province of Leinster on the eastern seaboard. This second opinion is refuted by a critical examination of the sources and by its own incapacity to explain the facts. The first view, meanwhile, cannot be sustained either

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### **More about Leinster**

because clear evidence exists that there were Christian communities in Ireland before Patrick arrived.

Foundations had been laid for the faith sporadically here and there before Patrick ever arrived. This does not, however, deprive him of his eminent significance. Patrick did three things. He organized the Christianity which already existed. He converted kingdoms which were still pagan, especially in the west. And he brought Ireland into connection with

Leinster has probably always been the most populated of the four provinces of Ireland (Connaught, Leinster, Munster, Ulster). It is the closest in proximity—just across the Irish Sea—from England. Dublin, the capital of the Republic of Ireland, is located in Leinster, as is Maynooth, the location of the national seminary. Leinster House is the seat of the National Parliament of Ireland. St. Brigid of Ireland was also from Leinster. Her mother was a Pictish slave who was baptized by St. Patrick, and her father was at one time the pagan Scottish king of the province.

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the church of the empire, making Ireland formally part of universal Christendom.

These three aspects of his work will be illustrated in the following pages. Patrick's achievements as organizer of a church and as propagator of his faith made Christianity a living force in Ireland never to be extinguished. Before him, it might have been in danger of extinction through predominant paganism. After him, it became the religion of Ireland, though paganism did not completely disappear. He did not introduce Christianity so much as he secured its permanence, shaped its course, and made it a power in the land.

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**Pytheas—the First Explorer  
of the Isle of Ireland**

Pytheas was the first explorer from the continent of Europe to see Ireland. Sometime between 330 and 300 BC, the merchant-explorer left his home city of Marseilles, made his way around Spain, and set out westward. In those ancient days, the lands of Britain, Ireland, and Scotland were the undiscovered north and west. Pytheas circumnavigated the entire island of Britain. "This enabled him to report, correctly enough, that the island was shaped like a triangle. . . . He established the location of Britain ('it extends obliquely along Europe') and probably of Ireland, and made several visits into the interior of the former to observe the inhabitants" (Casson, 138).

No less significant, though more easily overlooked, Patrick played a role in bringing Ireland into a new connection with Rome and the empire. Ordinary communication, as we will see, had been maintained for ages with Britain, Gaul, and Spain; but now the island was brought into a more direct and intimate association with western Europe by becoming an organized part of the Christian world. There had been constant contact before, but this was the first link.

The historical importance of this new bond, which marks an epoch in the history of