



## Celebrating St. Patrick in Irish style

[by Lillian Africano]

On March 17, the whole world is Irish - or so it seems, when parades, fireworks and other celebrations abound all over North America and Europe, in Asia and even in Russia. But it is Dublin that throws the world's biggest St. Patrick's Day party, a weeklong celebration featuring carnival-style parades, concerts, visual arts and dance events, outdoor theater, exhibitions, open-air markets, spectacular fireworks and even a treasure hunt.

Yet though the day is known for revelry, merrymaking and drinking, it began as a solemn religious holiday marking the death of Ireland's patron saint.

Patrick, whose given name was Maewyn, was born in Wales about A.D. 385. Patrick was a pagan until the age of 16, when he was kidnapped by Irish marauders and sold into slavery. During his captivity, he became closer to God, and when he escaped six years later he went to Gaul, where he studied in a monastery for 12 years and became convinced that his mission was to convert the pagans of Ireland to Christianity.

As bishop of Ireland, he proved quite successful, and though he was arrested several times by the Celtic Druids, he always managed to escape. For 30 years, he traveled throughout Ireland, establishing monasteries and setting up schools and churches. He retired to County Down and died on March 17, A.D. 461 - that day has been commemorated as St. Patrick's Day in Ireland ever since.

For thousands of years, the Irish observed the anniversary of Patrick's death by attending church in the morning, then going home for a hearty meal of cabbage and Irish bacon and generally enjoying the day's relief from the Lenten fast.

"When I was a boy, the pubs were closed on St. Patrick's Day, just as they were on Christmas," coach driver and guide John Byrne told me during a recent visit to Dublin. "I went to church with my family, we watched the parade and then we went home to dinner."



as 7 in the morning. After seeing March 17 celebrations in New York that were positively bacchanalian in nature, I had assumed that it was "more so" in Patrick's Ireland.

"But what about all the drinking and partying?" I asked. "Where did that come from?"

"Why, it came from America," John replied sweetly.

And when I did a little research, I discovered that indeed it had come from America, just as the first parade had also originated in America, in 1762. (The first civic and public celebration of the day took place in Boston in 1737.) Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City on March 17 - it was a way of celebrating their roots and joining with fellow Irishmen in the army. Over the next few decades, Irish patriotic societies like the Hibernian Society and the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick would hold parades featuring bagpipes and drums.



When the Great Potato Famine hit Ireland in 1845, almost a million poor, uneducated Catholic Irish fled

I found this information startling, especially in a city where the pubs open as early

to America to escape starvation. Despised for their religious beliefs and odd accents by American Protestants, the immigrants worked at the most menial of jobs - when they could find any work at all. And when they celebrated their patron saint in America's cities on March 17, they were viewed as drunken louts, and worse.

That changed as the Irish began to organize and create a serious voting bloc known as the "green machine," which became an important swing vote for ambitious politicians. The March 17 parades became not only an occasion to show Irish-American strength and solidarity, they became showcases for political candidates of every party and stripe. When President Harry Truman showed up for the parade in 1948, that was a clear signal about the importance of the green machine.



When St. Patrick's Day celebrations grew in number and scope, not only in New York, but also worldwide, Dublin took notice. In 1996, the Irish government began a campaign to promote March 17 as a way of attracting tourists and showcasing Ireland. Last year almost a million people from all over the world showed up to celebrate St. Patrick's Festival and to generally have a grand time.

Though Dublin has the most extravagant celebrations, it is in the small northern village



of Downpatrick, where Patrick is buried, that he is remembered in the traditional way, with

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ecumenical church services and the laying of a wreath on his grave. Downpatrick is also home to the award-winning St. Patrick Centre, a new interpretative exhibition that tells the story of Patrick and the development of Christianity in Ireland. Here, on March 17, there's a full day of activity that includes music, dancing, storytelling and entertainment for adults and children alike.

Whether in the north or the south, from Killarney to Downpatrick, from Cork City to County Donegal, there will be St. Patrick's Day celebrations in all the cities, towns and villages of Ireland. Take your pick, and join other merrymakers wearing the green.

**SIDEBAR**

Why the Shamrock?

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A traditional March 17th icon is the shamrock, which, according to Irish legend, was used by Patrick to explain the Trinity to the pagans of his country by representing how the Father, the Son and the Holy Trinity could exist as separate elements of the same entity. His followers adopted the custom of wearing a shamrock on his feast day.

**IF YOU GO**

For more information on visiting Ireland and St. Patrick's Day celebrations throughout the country, visit: [www.tourismireland.com](http://www.tourismireland.com); [www.stpatricksdays.ie](http://www.stpatricksdays.ie); [www.saintpatrickcentre.com](http://www.saintpatrickcentre.com); [www.st-patricksdayfestival.com](http://www.st-patricksdayfestival.com).

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