



St Patrick's Holy Mountain

Patrick Claffey

In our time, St Patrick's Day, like many other events has lost much of its original religious sense. The feast itself always falls during Lent and in the past sometimes seen was a little break from the rigours of that time. However, the penitential side of Patrick's life and mission are of great importance and notably the two great Patrician pilgrimages sites of Croke Patrick and St Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg in Co Donegal.

Croagh Patrick and Caher Island from Inisturk, PMC 2018

Cruach Phádraig, known in pre-Christian times as

Cruachán Aigle, near Westport, Co Mayo, rises to a height of 762m/2,500 feet; and, as Peter Harbison so nicely expresses it, "it looks down in a benign yet patriarchal fashion over the drowned drumlins of Clew Bay", a small 'mountain' in world terms perhaps, but certainly more than a 'hill'.

St Patrick is said to have gone up the already sacred mountain at the time of the pre-Christian festival in the late spring or early summer of 441 CE, perhaps even during Lent, spending a scriptural forty days in penance and prayer on the summit, recalling both Israel's forty years in the desert, recounted in the Book of Exodus, but probably more precisely Jesus' forty days of struggle with temptation in the desert, including a direct confrontation with Satan (Matthew 4:1-11), which we recall early in Lent..

A Penitential tradition

In terms of the study of religions Croagh Patrick and St. Patrick's Purgatory can be classified as 'archaic' pilgrimages, meaning that they "have come down from very ancient times, and little or nothing is known of their foundation, however, they bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols". That this is also a very ancient Christian pilgrimage is well supported by the evidence, which puts it back before the seventh century, when Saint Patrick's prayer and fast on Croagh Patrick is mentioned as an already well-established tradition in the *Book of Armagh*. This is the memoir of Tírechán, "a native of Connacht who wrote a memoir in Latin of St. Patrick's travels and foundations in Connacht and Meath, some two hundred years after Patrick's death." Tírechán tells us that "Patrick proceeded to the summit of Cruachán Aigli and stayed there forty days and forty nights. The same account tells us that the birds were troublesome to him and "he could not see the face of the sky and land and sea." This vision is the earliest recorded tradition of Croagh Patrick, which McNally tells us "is re-echoed in the Dindshenchas poem on *Find-Loch Cera*, where it is said "a flock of birds of the Land of Promise came there to welcome St. Patrick when he was on Cruach Aigle. They struck the lake (with their wings) 'till it was white as new milk, and they sang music there so long as Patrick remained on the Cruach".

The evidence is of a largely unbroken tradition of religious ritual and pilgrimage of one kind or another, going back thousands of years to Druidical times and surviving up to the Christian era and into the present, more secular, day. There are significant links between the two. In the Christian era both the spirit of the pilgrimage and the ritual are based in the strongly penitential tradition of Irish Catholicism, which can itself be traced to a Celtic understanding of penance. The theologian Janet Tanner provides an interesting analysis of this, identifying three models of penance: "as healing, as restitution for an offence, and as journey." She situates this within "what is known of the Celtic legal system, the Celtic social context and the Druid religion," concluding that "ideas of Christian penance as healing, as restitution and as journey can be seen to have developed from within this local Irish context into the

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worked-out system that comes to us [today]." Tanner cites Hugh Connolly, former professor of Moral theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, who notes the "contribution of the Druids to the healing and wholeness model of penance found in the later Irish penitentials." Connolly points out similarities between Christian and Druid understandings and writes about the Druidical idea of health as achieving the mean-point between two poles. This can be interpreted as a mental and spiritual equilibrium, a reconciliation with God, the *other* and the *self*.

Religious practice seeks to give voice to the needs of the faithful, and often to their fears and discontents. Peter Harbison observed: "For Ireland pilgrimage is a pious exercise that has helped to fulfil religious needs and yearnings for more than 1,400 years."

John Cunningham, writing of both Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick suggests: "Perhaps Lough Derg answers a need in the Celtic soul which might be summarised as "no gain without pain". The other ancient Irish pilgrimage which [used to involve] the climbing of [the] mountain at night (preferably in bare feet) echoes Lough Derg in its uncompromising attitude to reparation for sin."

Pilgrimage is rooted in the deep human desire to encounter what the great scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) called the *ganz andere*, or the *totally other*, which he also refers to as *the really real*. In terms of a more contemporary spirituality, it can also express the desire to encounter the parts of the self with which we have lost touch, *the real self* that lies behind the persona we have constructed for ourselves. While the official July pilgrimage to the Reek has much diminished from its peak in the early part of the 20th c, the mountain remains a significant place of pilgrimage. Today's pilgrims bring to the pilgrimage what *they are*, even if they are not always able to articulate it. They bring the various and disparate threads of their lives and seek to reconcile them into a whole that will make some kind

of sense in a changing world that often seems confused. As Seamus Heaney so well expressed it, pilgrimage in all its various forms is, one way or another, a journey along *the stations of the soul*.

Source: Patrick Claffey, *Atlantic Tabor: The Pilgrims of Croagh Patrick*, Dublin, Liffey Press, 2016

Free Online Advent Retreat.

The Priory Institute Easter Triduum retreat

'Bright Sadness and Solemn Joy: The Easter Triduum'.

The course consists of four recorded presentations that will become available from Holy Thursday, the last one on Easter Sunday. So on Holy Thursday there will be access to one recording and on Good Friday access to two recordings and so on. Participants can watch the films whenever suits them, and revisit films they have already viewed. It's free of charge and people can register to participate at any time during Lent.

For more information

See our Website

prioryinstitute.com

Masses Times

Sundays: 9.30am, 11am, 5pm

Weekdays: 10am

Rosary following 10am mass

French Mass 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month

Collections Last Sunday

First Collection: €945

Share: €630

THANK YOU

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Mass Intentions.

Recently Deceased

Lila Wadsworth

Late of Shelbourne road

Funeral Tuesday, 10am