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INTRODUCTION

Patrick of Legend and of History

SAINT PATRICK WAS never formally canonised. Nor, for that matter, were the other two saintly luminaries of early medieval Ireland, Colum Cille and Brigit. It was only in 1190, twenty years after the papacy assumed exclusive authority over canonisation, that Ireland received its first papally sanctioned saint, Archbishop Malachy (d. 1148) of Armagh. Yet, unlike Patrick, Saint Malachy is far from being a household name. Patrick's renown, on the other hand, has long since extended beyond the confines of Ireland as his fame grew in tandem with his continual association with myths and legends, from the tale of his ridding Ireland of snakes to that of his unlocking an entrance to purgatory. His greatest claim to fame, however, always lay in an achievement that was not supernatural but equally astonishing: being the apostle of the Irish, the man who brought Ireland into the fold of the Christian faith. Although some modern historians of earlier generations did indeed believe that Patrick single-handedly converted Ireland to Christianity, with one historian, George Stokes, going as far as to style his mission 'the national conversion of Ireland', it is nowadays clear that whatever Patrick actually accomplished, he could not have effected a 'national conversion' all by himself. Nevertheless, he did make an enduring

contribution to the formation of Ireland's religious identity. Assessing the extent of this contribution and separating the historical Patrick from the Patrick of myth are two objectives of this book, while a third objective is to reconstruct the wider historical context in which he lived.

Commonly depicted with green robes, a mitre, and a crozier, Patrick is recognised internationally as an iconic Irish symbol, an ambassador of Ireland's postcard-perfect rolling hills and green meadows, ever flowing with sheep and shamrocks. But it is not to be taken for granted that Patrick should be regarded as quintessentially Irish, because he wasn't. Born in Britain, he was recently styled an immigrant, even the 'patron of immigrants', by then-taoiseach Enda Kenny in his Saint Patrick's Day address on 17 March 2017, delivered in the company of the American president, Donald Trump, whose immigration policies he was parabolically criticising. Patrick, it seems, continues to be topical even in the world of current international politics.

Patrick is first and foremost a historical figure. That he originates from Britain is an undisputed fact, and so is his long sojourn in Ireland, where he most likely died. As a native of Roman Britain or of Britain in the period shortly after the Roman legions left in 410, he is unique for straddling two cultures, the Romano-British and Irish, forming a live link between them. As such, he is an important bridge connecting the late antique culture of the empire, with its sophisticated political, social, and intellectual attributes, to the more rural- and kin-based society of Ireland, an island sometimes described as 'barbarous' by contemporaries writing with a Roman bias, and even by Patrick himself, who spoke of dwelling among barbarians (*inter barbaras itaque gentes habito*).¹

Although the exact years of Patrick's birth and death are unknown, the mere fact of his existence is unequivocally confirmed

by his own writings, two of which survive. One is the *Confessio*, an apologetic text containing a large number of autobiographical anecdotes that he wrote towards the end of his life, framed—to an extent—as a response to accusations against him. The other text is the Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus, essentially a public condemnation of a British warlord and slaver who captured some of Patrick's recent converts and killed others.

Yet, apart from being attested in genuine writings that he himself penned, Patrick is also a figure of legend, or indeed legends. These took shape over time through a combination of oral traditions and edifying reverential biographies belonging to the genre of saints' Lives or, by another name, hagiographies. As an imagined persona, Patrick's identity was further augmented through centuries of folklore and popular tales, which crafted an ideal portrait of him as a miracle worker, church founder, and all-round saintly role model. The image that hagiography constructed for Patrick endured in popular culture despite the best efforts of scholars to attenuate it by concentrating on the historical and more human features of his personality, insofar as these are discernible from the rather scant biographical material available. Anyone who has ever attempted to redress historical misconceptions knows how challenging and—all too often—frustrating this can be.

Writing the biography of a late antique figure is invariably a different exercise from writing about a modern personality. The paucity of sources is a perennial obstacle, but even when sources are available, their testimony is moderated by their stated or unstated biases, the subtleties of their rhetoric, and the absence of corroborating material. All these hamper our ability to make use of them in an uncomplicated manner. Consequently, the detail that we are able to glean about the life of the historical Patrick is rather patchy, and there is much that is entirely obscured from

view, especially the most mundane and trivial details, which remain hopelessly irrecoverable. We will never know, for example, what he looked like. Nor will we know exactly when he was born and when he died. Likewise, it is unknown whether he was ever married or had children, even though (as has recently been revealed) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folkloric traditions from Ireland venerated a certain Sheelah as his wife and even commemorated a feast day in honour of this imagined lady, a day after Patrick's own. And, finally, it is unknown where exactly he was buried, although, as we shall see in the following chapters, medieval hagiographers laid claim to having 'identified' the whereabouts of his remains.

Speculations and fanciful interpretations flourish when accurate information is scant or ambiguous. But one would like to minimise the need to resort to imaginative fiction to make up for the gaps in the story. An alternative way of compensating for the evidential deficit, and of reconciling ourselves with it, is to accept that in Patrick's case we can only hope to be able to draw the outline of a figure whose subtle features will forever remain obscured from view. This outline comes into focus when we concentrate not so much on the person himself but rather on his background. This is, by analogy, the sort of exercise to which a painter may refer as painting 'negative space': it is the exercise of concentrating on, say, the wallpaper around a blurred figure or the shadow that the figure casts, rather than the figure itself. In doing this, the contours of a figure do eventually emerge, albeit faintly in some places, but nevertheless visible, unique, and recognisable. To a large extent, this is the method that the present book follows: it outlines the figure of Patrick by reading his own writings in the context of surviving contemporary sources, as well as early medieval sources and archaeology, which can shed light on the conditions of Patrick's

time. A reading of this kind will allow us to make educated guesses about certain obscure aspects of Patrick's life—for example, the standard of living he enjoyed in Ireland, the type of dwelling his family had in Britain, and even the extent of his education. This book is by no means the first to take this approach, but it is the first to do so by examining how Patrick's own words chime with Roman law and how they should be interpreted with recourse to both the Roman rhetorical tradition that he imbibed in his education and the biblical exegetical conventions that were the staple of a literate cleric's training. Helpfully, the past couple of decades have witnessed a shift in the critical approach to interpreting late antique texts: previously advocating a predominantly philologically driven approach confined to the positivist binary of true versus false, currently the historiography in the field has become more refined, more theoretically aware, and just as concerned with investigating the rhetorical methods and posturings of late antique authors as it is with the facts of their accounts. This study has also benefitted from several recent publications, both historical and archaeological, that led to important advances in our understanding of contemporary Britain and Ireland. Here I attempt to make the most of these contributions while fully acknowledging a debt to the works of past scholars on whose shoulders any modern biography of Patrick inevitably stands. These include, in chronological order, J. B. Bury's *Life of St. Patrick and His Place in History* (1905), Ludwig Bieler's *Life and Legend of St. Patrick* (1948), R.P.C. Hanson's *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career* (1968), James Carney's *Problem of St. Patrick* (1973), E. A. Thompson's *Who Was Saint Patrick?* (1985), David N. Dumville and contributors' *Saint Patrick: A.D. 493–1993* (1993), and the works of many other eminent scholars who, while they did not publish monographs on Patrick, contributed to the study of

his biography through articles or book chapters, many of which are cited in the pages of the present book. Apart from scholarly works about Patrick, there has been a constant trickle of popular books, like Philip Freeman's insightful *St. Patrick of Ireland* (2004); more discursive, yet perceptive, interpretations of Patrick's biography written with subtle confessional leanings, like Eoin MacNeill's *Saint Patrick: Apostle of Ireland* (1934, for which MacNeill sought an imprimatur from the auxiliary bishop of Westminster) or Thomas O'Loughlin's *Discovering Saint Patrick* (2005, which says in the preface that reading Patrick is a means by which Christians can discover their identity); and new translations of Patrick's works, listed in the bibliographic essay for this chapter. There have also been and continue to be more speculative publications in print and online that sport hypotheses that range from the plausible to the outright barmy. Though, in fairness, it must be acknowledged that any radical departure from the received wisdom on Patrick runs the risk of being dismissed as fatuous, and this risk applies to some of the hypotheses that I shall advance here. Bearing in mind this risk, I set out to write a biography that falls somewhere in between the academic and the popular: written in non-specialist language accessible to both experts and the wider public, this is a work by an academic historian that showcases the findings of original research and offers an up-to-date synthesis of the historiography. The chapter plan is systematic, beginning with two chronological chapters that follow Patrick's journey from Britain to Ireland, and continuing with thematic chapters concentrating on major themes in Patrick's biography and its historical background: captivity, religion, and missionary work. The book concludes with a chapter on the building of Patrick's saintly image in the Middle Ages, followed by a discursive reflection on the manner in which Patrick's memory has been

framed since the early modern era and the impact of his legacy on more recent historical events, both in Ireland and abroad.

But before we can rethink Patrick's biography, we must first have an idea of the received wisdom to which this book responds. In the remainder of this introduction, therefore, I shall give an overview of the standard narrative of Patrick's biography—which is largely informed by his own writings—and draw attention to a number of problems that it raises and that this book will address. Our starting point will be Patrick's writings, the *Confessio* and the Letter, which are the two central texts that underpin this (and indeed every) study of Patrick's life and career. I shall ask how best to interpret them in their historical, but also their literary, context, taking into account both Patrick's Christian intellectual background and his Roman one. This discussion will set the scene for the questions that will be debated throughout this book and give the reader a sense of the methodological approach taken here.

Let us therefore begin by revisiting the chief sources for Patrick's biography, his two genuine writings: the *Confessio* and the Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus. The earliest copy of the Letter is preserved among a collection of saints' Lives in a tenth-century manuscript, now Paris Bibliothèque nationale de France Ms. latin 17626; and the earliest copy of the *Confessio* is found in the famous Book of Armagh, a small manuscript measuring 195 × 145 mm, which has been kept at Trinity College Dublin's library since 1892 (TCD 52; see Figure 1). The manuscript was written mostly by the scribe Ferdomnach (d. 846), who signed his name in five places, although two more hands, according to Richard Sharpe, can be discerned. It was compiled under the patronage of Abbot Torbach, 'Patrick's heir' (*comharba*) at Armagh, whose death in 808 is commonly treated as an upper limit for the manuscript's date. In 937 the manuscript was

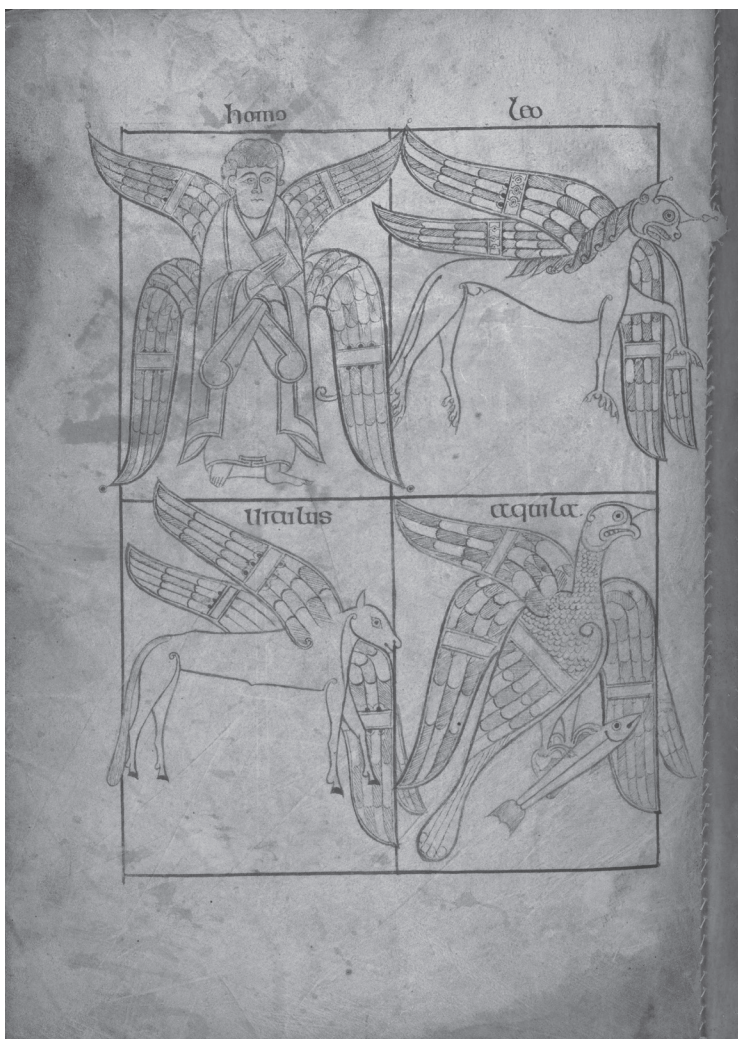


FIGURE 1. The four Evangelists from the Book of Armagh (Trinity College Dublin, MS 52 fol. 32v), by permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin

enshrined in a casket (*cumdach*) by Donnchadh, son of Flan Sinna, High King of Ireland. This was not unusual for a time when manuscripts were venerated as relics on the belief that they were written by saints. I shall return to this topic in chapter 6 on hagiography. On a visit to Armagh in 1005, King Brian Bórama (Brian Boru) signed his name on folio 16v of the manuscript and added the outlandish epithet *Imperator Scottorum* as he placed twenty ounces of gold on the altar, a token of his patronage. By the twelfth century the manuscript passed into the hands of a hereditary keeper (*maor*).

The texts contained in the manuscript are diverse: the earliest (nearly) complete copy of the New Testament in Ireland, Sulpicius Severus's Life of Saint Martin, Patrick's own *Confessio*, and seventh-century material relating to Patrick consisting of a Life by Muirchú, the *Collectanea* by Tírechán, the *Liber Angeli*, the so-called *Additamenta*, and various abbreviated notes commonly known as the *Notulae*. In addition, there are extracts from Pope Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*. This combination of texts forms the codicological context in which the *Confessio* can be found. The group of texts relating to Patrick in the Book of Armagh is sometimes referred to by scholars—and in the present book—as the 'Patrician dossier'. This dossier will be discussed further in chapter 6.

Returning now to the *Confessio* and Letter. Close textual correspondences confirm that the two were indeed written by the same author. The author of the *Confessio* was based in Ireland and wrote for an Irish audience. His whereabouts are specifically given in the concluding chapter, which states that he 'wrote in Ireland' (*Hiberione conscripsit*), and his intended audience is designated clearly in an earlier chapter in which he says, 'You know, and so does God, how I have lived among you from my youth in the faith of truth and in sincerity of the heart.'² His familiarity

with the Irish landscape is reinforced by his use of an Irish place-name, ‘the forest of Voclut by the western sea’ (*silva Focluti quae est prope mare occidentale*).³ As for the Letter, in the form that we have it, it is said to be the second letter to the soldiers of Coroticus, who is depicted as a British leader who was Christian, albeit a ruthless and depraved one.

Like many a late antique letter, it is difficult to determine whether the version of the text that has come down to us is faithful to the original that was (or, at least, purports to have been) sent to the soldiers, or whether it is a reworking of the original that was meant to proclaim the author’s condemnation of Coroticus and his men to a wider contemporary audience or to posterity. Interestingly, very few details are repeated in both the Letter and the *Confessio*, and never the crucial details: for instance, the *Confessio* makes no mention of the capture of Patrick’s converts by Coroticus. The differences suggest that Patrick chose what to say and how to say it based on the audience for which each text was intended. For example, the Roman administrative office that Patrick’s father held, the decurionate, only appears in the Letter, which was addressed to a group of self-proclaimed Roman citizens whom Patrick sought to impress by flashing his own Roman credentials. In the *Confessio*, on the other hand, the father’s only epithet is ‘deacon’.

What do the *Confessio* and Letter tell us about Patrick’s life and career? According to the *Confessio*, Patrick’s family owned a *vilula* near a *vicus* called Bannavem Taburniae, which has never been securely identified. Patrick’s father, Calpornius, was a deacon and his grandfather, Potitus, a *presbyter* (priest). Around the age of sixteen, Patrick’s life changed suddenly when he was taken captive ‘with so many thousands of people’ (*cum tot milia hominum*). After six years of servitude near the Wood of Voclut (County Mayo), during which he grew more steadfast in the

Christian faith, he deserted his master and was reunited with his kinsfolk in Britain, who welcomed him with open arms. Although no other sources about slavery in Ireland at this period survive, we may nevertheless query Patrick's version of events, not least because of what he himself says about the perils facing a foreigner travelling alone in Ireland: according to him, when he returned to Ireland later in life, he had to be accompanied by a costly retinue and also needed to secure his protection by paying off kings.⁴ This testimony seems at odds with the prospect that an unredeemed slave could escape captivity, travel two hundred miles or so from the west to the east coast of Ireland, and then cross the Irish Sea to Britain without being captured or harmed. Whereas Patrick's version is not impossible, to a sceptic it is nevertheless improbable. But it has the virtue of possessing the quality of verisimilitude, which I shall return to shortly when discussing Patrick's debt to classical rhetoric. It is clear, however, that Patrick was aware that some of his contemporaries found his story fanciful, since he himself admits in the *Confessio* that there were those who called him out for leaving Britain of his own free will (see chapters 1 and 3 on the Romano-British background and on captivity).⁵ And even if his readers or hearers believed him, they could nevertheless have considered him to be unfree because he was not formally freed by his master. It would appear that doubts about his free status even dogged his posthumous reputation, until by the seventh century we witness traditions that sought to put things right by claiming that Patrick retrospectively attempted to redeem himself and convert his former master.⁶

If Patrick was indeed titivating the record, he could easily have found justification for doing so in the tradition of classical rhetoric that he would have been exposed to as a young boy who received a literate education within the bosom of elite

Romanised society. Patrick's early education would, at the very least, have consisted of a combination of subjects that would later be known as the 'trivium' (in Cassiodorus's sixth-century coinage)—namely, the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Certainly by the seventh century Ireland became a prominent European centre for the teaching of grammar, the primary requisite for acquiring proficiency in biblical exegesis, and attracted swarms of students bent on a future as Christian clerical scholars.⁷ But all this was still a while away from Patrick's time.

Although he may not—as he himself admits—have been trained for a shining career in the courts or for holding high political office, he would nevertheless have had an introduction to the rudimentaries of the subject of rhetoric.⁸ Our best guides on the fundamentals of the subject are Cicero (d. 43 BC) and Quintilian (d. AD 35), whose instructions and observations were at the heart of the 'textbook manuals' for late antique rhetorical training. And, indeed, some scholars, like Daniel Melia, have argued that Patrick shows familiarity with Quintilian. In the classical tradition, all rhetorical creations, be they speeches or texts for public performance like Patrick's own, were understood to contain a narrative. In Cicero's treatise on rhetoric, *De inventione*, the term 'narrative' (*narratio*) is defined as comprising three subcategories: *fabula*, *historia*, and *argumentum*.⁹ The *fabula* is defined as a 'term applied to a narrative in which the events are not true and have no verisimilitude'. This, in short, could be a myth, a legend, or a fantasy of any kind that makes no pretence for having the appearance of anything real. The category of *historia* is then defined as 'an account of actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our age'. In other words, events narrated by *historia* are such that actually happened but were not experienced by the author or his or her

contemporaries. And the final category, *argumentum*, is ‘a fictitious narrative which nevertheless could have occurred’. Hence, unlike *fabula*, the *argumentum* possesses verisimilitude.

Quintilian, whose didactic works articulated some of the fundamentals of classical rhetoric, made allowance for an *argumentum* that deploys falsehoods in stating cases, provided that the occasion required it. An occasion of this kind would have been rather frequent since, as Quintilian conceded, humans have never lived in a perfect world in which the truth is always valued and in which the truth could, by itself, convince audiences, particularly not in the Roman courts or at political assemblies. Too often an audience is itself biased or given to misconceptions and cannot be expected to show unflinching commitment to the truth. Hence, an *argumentum* that contains falsehoods is a legitimate strategy so long as it has the quality of verisimilitude and so long as it is employed in service of a good and higher cause.¹⁰ When, in court or the assembly, the gloves are off and ruthlessness is the order of the day, one would be irrational to choose a more mild rhetorical course than a sharp *argumentum*. We will soon see how, in addition to being pursued by various allegations in his youth, Patrick also had to contend with being put on trial, a situation in which even the most righteous were advised to resort to shrewd rhetorical tactics in order to be heard and to prevail. In such a confrontation, the righteous could be excused for deploying a creative *argumentum* in the service of a good cause. And Patrick could also have been justified in doing so in the defence that he mounts in the *Confessio* against his detractors, who would not have shied away from falsehood themselves. This defence, addressed both to his contemporaries and to posterity, could certainly count as a good cause. How so? Because unless he redeemed his reputation, the readers’ or listeners’ attention would be distracted

from the higher purpose of hearing about his religious mission and his vision for the formation of a Christian society. There was, therefore, a higher truth that Patrick was aiming for, but the malicious blathering clutter around it needed to be silenced for it to be heard properly.

We rejoin Patrick's narrative as he tells of his release from captivity, following which he remained in Britain for a number of years and was ordained deacon. However, the *Confessio* goes on to say that he experienced a vision that had persuaded him to return to Ireland, which he did, taking with him sufficient funds to enable him to pay Irish kings and judges. Indeed, he devoted himself to the missionary life, baptised thousands, converted nobles and sons of kings, and trained clerics who could succeed him. He also endured many hardships, including a two-week imprisonment, during which his property was taken away from him but later restored. At no point does he say what his property consisted of, nor does he say of what value it could have been in Ireland's nonmonetary economy, where wealth was based primarily on the ownership of land and cattle, neither of which Patrick could transport across the Irish Sea from Britain.

Patrick was to return again to Britain later in his life, when he was already bishop. It was then that he was put on trial by his *seniores* (elders) on a charge that is not specified. According to Patrick, the trial was only an *occasio* (pretext) that his elders used to settle an open score with him: 'After thirty years they found a pretext for their allegations against me in a confession which I had made before I was a deacon. In a depressed and worried state of mind I mentioned to a close friend what I had done as a boy one day.'¹¹ The offence for which he was charged had therefore been committed thirty years earlier, before Patrick reached the age of fifteen, and the friend to whom he confessed it later betrayed his trust. We are not told what punishment he was

given, if any, only that he subsequently returned to Ireland, where he wrote his *Confessio*.

The Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus, to which we now turn, adds nothing to the *Confessio*'s account concerning the trial or the nature of the offence, which remains a mystery. But it does shed light on episodes from Patrick's later life and allows us to augment his biography with important details. At the outset we learn that Patrick was already bishop when he wrote the Letter.¹² As such, he was in a position to excommunicate the soldiers, who are understood to be Christian. From the fact that he says that he refuses to address them as his 'fellow citizens' or 'citizens of the holy Romans' because of their wickedness, one may surmise that they were in fact Roman citizens, or at least self-proclaimed citizens.¹³ Alternatively, as suggested by David Dumville, one can interpret this passage metaphorically and take 'citizens of the holy Romans' to mean 'Christians'. Later in the Letter we learn that in addition to being a Roman citizen himself, Patrick was *ingenuus* (free-born) and that his father was a decurion, and not just a deacon as he was styled in the *Confessio*. In the same sentence Patrick says that he sold his own nobility and declares that he is not ashamed of this.¹⁴ Eventually, according to his own account, Patrick was stripped of his freedom when he was abducted from Britain. His captors, we are told, 'harried the male and female slaves of my father's house' (*devastaverunt servos et ancillas domus patris mei*), which can be taken to mean that they were either killed or dragged away by force to a worse servitude overseas.

Being a teenager at the age at which he says he was taken captive, he would already have been steeped in Roman culture and, therefore, can be assumed to have achieved a certain proficiency in Latin. Nevertheless, some modern readers have relished finding fault with the standard of Patrick's Latin prose, regarding it as

rather mediocre. To some extent, disparaging judgements about his Latin are owed to Patrick's own deprecatory statements—for example, his admission in the *Confessio* that he was untaught and that, unlike his more erudite contemporaries, his first language was not Latin but—one may guess—a British dialect.¹⁵ And then there is the curious revelation that his language had been corrupted: 'I have changed my language and my speech for a foreign tongue, as may easily be proved from the flavour of my writing' (*nam sermo et loquela nostra translata est in linguam alienam, sicut facile potest probari ex saliva scripturae meae*).¹⁶ By playing down his linguistic abilities, Patrick may simply have been rehearsing a trope of humility that was common among contemporary authors. Indeed, in recent years scholars have begun to look beyond Patrick's 'stumbling barbarous Latin' (as Daniel Binchy put it) and have grown more aware of his unique yet carefully crafted rhetoric, which exhibits a sophisticated use of biblical allusions and metaphors. Consequently, one no longer accepts that all of Patrick's narrative can be taken at face value, nor that he speaks the entire truth, despite his insistence that he does.¹⁷ The narrative he offers is widely acknowledged to be defensive, apologetic, replete with rhetorical tropes, employing evasive language, and deliberately obfuscating uncomfortable truths, such as the nature of the offence or sin of which he was accused. This is not to say that Patrick's sole objective in the *Confessio* was to rewrite his life story by concocting falsehoods. Rather, in the spirit of classical rhetoric that was described earlier, he was simply writing to promote an agenda to which the factual details were subservient: they could be bent or obscured as the circumstances required. What exactly this agenda was, what he might have tried to hide, and how he crafted his narrative to suit his objectives are the subject of chapters 1–3 and 5 of this book. Curiously, Patrick was not the

only missionary to modify his biography in this way. If we take a huge leap forward in time, we find an analogous example of a 'revised' missionary narrative in the legacy of the famous nineteenth-century missionary and adventurer David Livingstone (d. 1873). The eventful autobiographical tale he penned of his time in Africa was judged as misleading by some of his biographers, but others have stressed the importance of considering it within the contemporary conventions of its genre. To his apologists, Livingstone was simply telling his readers what they expected to hear in an account about a missionary adventure in a faraway land. By the same token, Patrick should not be thought of as either honest or dishonest, because accuracy and comprehensiveness were not the main objectives of his literary project. He was writing within certain literary and rhetorical conventions that allowed the author a degree of poetic license. This authorial freedom was justified by the understanding that visible reality and the plain wording of texts are both open to interpretation and can have multiple meanings. In other words, the truth may lie not only in what we see and read but also in what lies behind the text. This proposition could easily be justified by principles of classical rhetoric of the sort that we have seen Quintilian advocating. In Patrick's time such classical principles continued to hold currency but acquired a Christian twist. They were now complemented by an epistemological theory that enabled the stretching of the boundaries of what could be perceived as the truth and how this 'truth' ought to be communicated. This theory drew on foundations from classical antiquity, rooted in the idea that the truth may be found outside visible reality, ultimately going back to Plato. The proposition that the truth may lie beyond what we see forms the core of Plato's theory of 'ideas', which (through later Platonic apologists and Neoplatonists) exerted a strong influence on the

development of Christian theological thought in late antiquity. It also informed one of the most influential approaches to Christian biblical interpretation: allegorical biblical exegesis. This form of biblical interpretation was so pervasive and so deeply ingrained in the curriculum of an educated Christian that for many a Christian scholar it began to frame not only his or her approach to reading the Bible but also his or her perception of the world at large. This perception may conveniently be called the ‘exegetical reflex,’ and it can also be detected in Patrick’s approach to biographical writing. It is this ‘exegetical reflex’ that I wish to expand on now.

Acknowledging the significance of biblical exegesis to the late antique Christian curriculum and to the Christian scholarly mind-set is key to a contextual understanding of the message of many an early Christian text. The Bible—consisting in this period of the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament, especially the prophets—was the core text that defined a Christian education and laid the preamble for virtuous Christian living. But only rarely could the biblical text be followed at face value. Interpretation was necessary first and foremost in order to distil rules of conduct from the New Testament, which, unlike the Pentateuch of the Old Testament, did not contain a code of law. Second, interpretation was necessary for making sense of obscure and ambiguous biblical verses. Third, interpretation provided an essential tool for extracting and following the prophetic message of the Old Testament concerning the end of times. And fourth, it was indispensable in vindicating the truth of Christian providential history, which shows how events and personalities of the New Testament had been foretold in the Old Testament by means of prophecy. This foretelling, or foreshadowing, was achieved through ‘types,’ each type prefiguring (to use the technical term) something in the New Testament. For

example, Melchizedek's offering bread and wine to Abraham in Genesis 14:18 prefigures the Last Supper and also the Christian priestly ministry, and Moses's raising his arms in the battle against Amalek in Exodus 17:11–12 prefigures Christ's passion. The foundations for the method of identifying types were understood to have been laid by Saint Paul in his letters to the Colossians and the Galatians, both of which are quoted in Patrick's *Confessio*. In Colossians 2:16–17 we read, 'Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect of a festival day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.' In other words: the law of the letter of the Old Testament need not be followed any longer, for it is merely a prefiguration of the body of Christ. And in the letter to the Galatians 4:21–31, we read the following parable, which, once more, stresses that Christians are dead to the old law and should, instead, submit to a new spiritual law:

Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, have you not read the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a slave-woman, and the other by a free woman. But he who was of the slave-woman, was born according to the flesh: but he of the free woman, was by promise. Which things are said by an allegory. For these are the two testaments. The one from mount Sinai, engendering unto bondage; which is Agar. For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia, which hath affinity to that Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But that Jerusalem, which is above, is free: which is our mother. For it is written: 'Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not: break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that hath a husband'. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he, who was born according to the flesh,

persecuted him, who was after the spirit; so also it is now. But what says the scripture? Cast out the slave-woman and her son; for the son of the slave-woman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, we are not the children of the slave-woman, but of the free: by the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free.

Here Paul explicitly sets out the principle of allegorical exegesis, choosing to interpret the son of Hagar as servile, representing the Old Testament law of this world, and the son of Sarah (only he is mentioned by name) as free, representing the liberating New Testament gospel of the spirit. Matching types to their analogues in the New Testament was the main business of allegorical exegesis (also known as figurative exegesis), as distinct from literal exegesis (also known as historical exegesis), which concerned itself with the plain wording of the text. The two approaches are conventionally identified with two distinct exegetical schools: the literal with the 'Antiochene school' and the allegorical with the 'Alexandrian school', which could trace its roots through Origen (d. 245) to Philo (d. 50), a Hellenistic Jewish scholar who incorporated contemporary Platonism into his teachings. Literal and allegorical exegesis were not mutually exclusive but could be treated as complementary. For example, one can read Christ's healing miracles literally and at the same time follow Origen in interpreting them allegorically as representing the healing of a disorder in the soul.¹⁸

As for Patrick, his use of the Bible is exemplary, despite his claim that he did not receive formal training in *sacrae literae*.¹⁹ It is the only source in his works that can be identified with certainty, and passages from the Bible, or allusions to it, are often used in order to add eloquence to the author's own thoughts, much as someone in the modern era may cite a poem to

embellish one's own words. In particular, Patrick drew inspiration from Paul's defence of his own ministry in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, from which (as Joseph Nagy cogently argued) 'Patrick derives the thematic framework for the *Confessio*'. A comprehensive list of Patrick's biblical references in both his texts was compiled by Ludwig Bieler. Altogether there are 319 references, of which 80 are direct quotations and the remainder are allusions to the Bible or modified biblical passages. The majority of references, 244, are to the New Testament, and 75 to the Old Testament. Most of the biblical references, 245, are in the *Confessio*, with only 74 in the Letter. Nevertheless, the ratio of direct quotations to allusions is higher in the Letter (43 percent) than in the *Confessio* (20 percent). Perhaps the gap in the ratios suggests something about the different audiences for which each text was intended. Thus, the recipients of the Letter, the soldiers of Coroticus, could not be expected to pick up on subtle biblical allusions as much as the readers of the *Confessio*, a text that exhibits Patrick's literary ingenuity and was aimed, perhaps, at a better-educated readership.

Biblical quotations are sometimes used as a means of garnishing Patrick's prose, but they may also serve to give deeper meaning to his account, signalling to the readers to keep an eye open for an additional dimension beyond the trivial descriptive level of the text. A case in point is Patrick's unusual exclamation that, while preparing to sail to Britain, he refused to 'suck the breasts' (*reppuli sugere mamellas eorum*) of the pagan sailors.²⁰ Apart from being, perhaps, a contemporary colloquial expression for denoting deference, or apart from alluding (as some scholars wrongly believed) to an obscure Irish ritual of homage, Patrick appears to be echoing a biblical verse, Isaiah 60:16: 'And you shall suck the milk of the gentiles, and you shall be nursed with the breasts of kings' (*Et suges lac gentium, et mamilla regum lactaberis*).²¹ How he deploys

this as a metaphor for conversion, when contrasted with the nourishment that he himself provides them, we shall see when this episode is considered in detail in chapter 3 (on captivity). Another example of a biblical allusion hinting at a hidden meaning, also discussed at length in the same chapter, is Patrick's description of his emancipation after six years of captivity.²² Commenting on this, an exegetically aware scholar of the eighth century, whose comments are preserved as glosses in a manuscript, pointed out that Patrick's release after six years was 'after the manner of the little jubilee of the Hebrews' (*fo intamail na hiubile Ebreorum*). This is a reference to Exodus 21:2 (repeated in Jeremiah 34:14): 'If you buy a Hebrew servant, six years shall he serve you, but in the seventh he shall go free without owing anything.'²³ For this particular glossator, the biblical allusion was self-evident and suggested that Patrick was not necessarily intending his readers to take him literally but, rather, was consciously invoking a biblical text. Why he would choose to do so will be examined in chapter 3.

Two other frequent uses that Patrick makes of the Bible are as a prescriptive text—namely, a source of divine command that prompts him into action—and as a store of prophecy that either is continually fulfilled throughout history (also in his own time) or anticipates future events. I shall take these two in turn. As a prescriptive text, Patrick crucially attributes his calling to embark on a mission to the Bible. In chapter 40 of the *Confessio*, he incorporates a series of biblical quotations, principally from the New Testament, urging the spread of the Gospel, among them Matthew 4:19, 'And he said to them: "Follow me, and I will make you to be fishers of men"', and Matthew 24:14, 'And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come'. The latter verse also highlights another motif in Patrick's prose—namely, its eschatological hue—which is closely tied to Patrick's

motivation to evangelise in expectation of the ‘imminent coming’ of Christ (*expectamus adventum ipsius mox futurum*), which will bring with it a terrible judgement.²⁴

Patrick’s use of the Bible as a prophetic text is closely linked to his extraordinary ability to receive prophecy directly and to communicate with angels, as well as other divine apparitions. Before escaping his captivity, for example, he heard a voice prophesying, ‘You do well to fast, since you will soon be going to your homeland.’²⁵ When he is tested by the devil, he is able to call on Christ and in response hear God speak to him, but also have God speaking prophetically *through* him.²⁶ And in an artful description of his closeness to God, he says, in the spirit of Proverbs 10:1 (‘A wise son is his father’s pride’), that he is the pride of the Father for having succeeded in his mission.²⁷ God appeared to him and strengthened him in his quest to evangelise, a quest he follows in fulfilment of a number of biblical prophecies, which he cites, beginning with a paraphrase of an eschatological prophecy from Joel 2:28: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says the Lord, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions.’²⁸

The frequent references to the Bible in Patrick’s prose are a reminder to the reader that Patrick’s words and the Bible’s are often inseparable. One complements the other with the effect of mutually enhancing the sense of either. Following from this, I would argue, the text of the *Confessio* as we have it (and, to some extent, that of the Letter too), can be understood on different levels, in the same manner that the Bible can be interpreted according to different senses, be it allegorical, literal, moral, or spiritual. Patrick’s prose style is an invitation to the readers to engage in exegesis of the *Confessio* itself. And the present book rises to this challenge.

To some extent, an informed ‘exegesis’ is what this very book aims to offer. Let me give one example in anticipation of several others that will be discussed in the following chapters. Take the phrase from the Letter ‘harried the male and female slaves of my father’s house’ (*devastaverunt servos et ancillas domus patris mei*).²⁹ This is what Patrick says in describing the deeds of the slavers who raided his home and captured him. But when examined from another angle, the phrase can be interpreted metaphorically by taking *servos et ancillas domus patris mei* to mean ‘fellow Christians’. Metaphors of this kind, which portray Christian believers as slaves of the Father, were used by other late antique authors. For instance, in his commentary on Paul’s letter to Titus, Jerome says that ‘the apostle, who was not a slave to sin, is rightly called the slave of God the Father and Christ’ (*apostolus igitur, qui peccati non fuit servus, recte Dei patris vocatur servus et Christi*).³⁰ This is not to say that Patrick has read his Jerome, but rather that such slavery metaphors, helpfully collected by Isobel Combes in her *Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church*, were common in late antiquity. They echoed similar metaphors found in the Bible, often embedded in parables in which Christ invokes slavery, such as the parable of the faithful servant, in which Christ asks, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom the master put in charge of his household, to give them their food at the appropriate time?’³¹ Here, as in the example from the Letter, the literal and metaphorical meanings of ‘slave’ are not mutually exclusive.

Where do interpretations of this kind leave the plain meaning of Patrick’s own account? When the literal and allegorical are consistent with one another, there is no problem. But what happens when our ‘allegorical exegesis’ replaces a literal understanding? For example, if we take Patrick’s six years in captivity

strictly as an allusion to the book of Exodus (as our eighth-century glossator pointed out), does this mean that Patrick was not taken captive? This is a possibility, although the proposition that his captivity was merely an alibi also rests on other forms of evidence, outlined in chapters 1 and 3.

Patrick's prose can be interpreted in a range of ways. Like any late antique text with an agenda, it cannot be read simply as a factual account of his career and of the historical circumstances in which he lived. That Patrick wrote with an agenda, which included redeeming his own reputation, does not diminish the fact that he had other, higher motives, such as conveying a didactic message about the impending end of times, the need for a mission in anticipation of it, the ideal course of a mission, the righteous way of Christian living, and the behaviour expected of the newly converted. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that a central objective of his *Confessio* was to mount a defence against accusations that pursued him, the details of which will be considered in the following chapters of this book. In combining all these different objectives, we see Patrick employing rhetorical tactics that, as I have attempted to argue here, drew on principles of classical rhetoric and of biblical exegesis that gave him license to depart from a factual account.

A famous example of the exegetical recognition of the gap between text and reality comes from the giant of Christian theology, Saint Jerome, whom we have already encountered in another context. In his *Adversus Helvidium*, written in the 380s, he observed in regard to the question of Christ's paternity in the New Testament, "Therefore, except Joseph, and Elizabeth, and Mary herself, and a few others besides—if we can believe that we hear them from these [words]—everyone believed that Jesus was Joseph's son, so much so that even the Evangelists, expressing

the common opinion (*opinio vulgi*), which is the true rule of narration (*vera lex historiae*), said that he is the Saviour's father.³²

The question that vexed Jerome was the difficulty of reconciling the idea of Mary's virgin birth with the text of the genealogies of Christ in both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, according to which Joseph was Christ's father. Jerome's solution was that the Gospels were merely expressing a 'common opinion' (*opinio vulgi*). But does this not imply that the Gospels are being deliberately mendacious? Not according to Jerome, who explains that their narrations are framed according to what he styles the 'true rule of narration' (*vera lex historiae*), an enigmatic expression that attracted considerable attention from scholars (especially for the way in which it was employed in the eighth century by the Northumbrian historian Bede), which I take to mean that an author can claim to have been operating in good faith so long as he or she faithfully reiterated a received narrative, irrespective of whether it was true or false. By the seventh century the idea will have developed such that an Irish biblical exegete could even say that the six days of creation should not be understood literally, but that 'the *narrator historiae* ("biblical narrator") afterwards divided in his account that which God did not divide in the perfection of his work.'³³

Patrick cannot be shown to have followed Jerome directly. However, both examples from Jerome (on the metaphor of slavery and the virgin birth) illustrate a central feature of the Christian exegetical mind-set—namely, that a text can be made to convey different meanings to different readerships, who may be distinguished from one another by such criteria as their level of learning, religiosity, partisanship with the author, or proximity to the events that are being described. Following principles of interpretation of the kind that Jerome applied to the Gospels, Patrick was at liberty to address his words to different readerships

simultaneously and to position his narrations at varying degrees of separation from the truth. This was not deceit, but a way of tightly controlling what was being said and of directing the reader towards what the author believed to be a higher truth.

Notes

1. Letter § 1.
2. *Confessio* §§ 62, 48.
3. *Confessio* § 23.
4. *Confessio* §§ 52, 53.
5. *Confessio* § 10.
6. Muirchú, Life of Patrick I.11(10), in Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 76.
7. Aldhelm, Letter 5, to Heahfrith, in D. R. Howlett, ed. and trans., 'Aldhelm and Irish learning', *Bulletin de Cange* 52 (1994): 50–75, lines 59–70.
8. On the deprecatory reflection on his own education, see *Confessio* § 13.
9. This and the following quotations are from Cicero, *De Inventione* 1.19.27, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA, 1949), 54–57.
10. See especially Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.17.19–29, 36; 3.8.63, trans. Donald Russell, in *Quintilian: The Orator's Education*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 1: 384–90, 392; 2: 146.
11. *Confessio* § 27.
12. The account that follows is based on Letter §§ 1, 2, 10, 21.
13. Letter § 2: 'Non dico civibus meis neque civibus sanctorum Romanorum' (I do not say to my fellow citizens, nor to the citizens of the holy Romans).
14. Letter § 10: 'Vendidi enim nobilitatem meam, non erubescō' (For I have sold my nobility, I am not ashamed [of it]). The expression 'fellow citizens' in Letter § 2 implies, by association, that he himself was Roman.
15. See, respectively, *Confessio* §§ 12, 9.
16. *Confessio* § 9. Translation is by Jean-Michel Picard, 'The Latin language in early medieval Ireland', in *The Languages of Ireland*, ed. Michael Cronin and Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin (Dublin, 2003), 44–56, at 46n17.
17. E.g., *Confessio* §§ 44, 54, 61.
18. Origen, 'Commentary on the Gospel of John' 13:3, in *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC, 1993).
19. *Confessio* § 9.
20. *Confessio* § 18.
21. *Confessio* § 18.

22. *Confessio* § 17.

23. The scholar was a glossator of Fiacc's Hymn, an edition and translation of which is W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1901–3), 2:307–21. The gloss is on p. 309, lines 13–14.

24. *Confessio* §§ 4, 8.

25. *Confessio* § 17.

26. *Confessio* § 20.

27. *Confessio* § 47.

28. *Confessio* §§ 34, 36, 40.

29. Letter § 10.

30. Jerome, *Commentarii in iv epistulas Paulinas*, in PL vol. 26, cols. 307–618, at col. 592.

31. Matthew 24:45.

32. Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, in PL vol. 23, cols. 183–206, at col. 187: 'Denique excepto Ioseph, et Elisabeth, et ipsa Maria, paucisque admodum, si quos ab his audisse possumus aestimare, omnes Iesum filium aestimabant Ioseph, intantum, ut etiam Evangelistae opinionem vulgi exprimentes, quae vera historiae lex est, patrem eum dixerint Salvatoris.'

33. Augustinus Hibernicus, *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae libri tres*, PL 35:2149–2200, at 2151: 'post namque historiae narrator divisit in sermone, quod Deus non divisit in operis perfectione.'

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