

designed to keep the jaws of wolves closed and the mouths of the village gossips shut.

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St. Patrick's Day

Type of Holiday: Religious (Christian)

Date of Observation: March 17

Where Celebrated: Ireland, United States

Symbols and Customs: Bonfires, Drinking, Harp, Leprechaun, Parades, Shamrock, Shillelagh

Colors: St. Patrick's Day is associated with the colors green, white, and orange. In addition to being a symbol of spring and fertility, green has been Ireland's national color since the nineteenth century. Whether they're Irish or not, many Americans wear something green on this day. In Ireland, young girls wear green hair ribbons, and boys often wear a green badge with a golden HARP on it. Everyone wears sprigs of green SHAMROCK on St. Patrick's Day. The three broad stripes on the flag of the Republic of Ireland are green, white, and orange: green for the Gaelic and Catholic majority, orange for Ireland's Protestants (after William of Orange, the Protestant son-in-law of the British King James II), and white for peace between the two groups.

Related Holidays: Beltane, Reek Sunday, St. Bridget's Day, Vernal Equinox

ORIGINS

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was not actually Irish. He was born on March 17 around 385 somewhere in Roman Britain, possibly near Dumbarton in Scotland. At the age of sixteen he was captured by Irish raiders looking for slaves and carried off to Ireland, where he spent much of his time tending his master's sheep. He was lonely and homesick there, but he believed that he deserved to be punished for ignoring God's commandments.

After six years of slavery, he heard a voice telling him, “Thy ship is ready for thee.” He ran away, heading for the coast, and was taken aboard a ship as a crew member. He ended up deserting his shipmates and wandering through southern Gaul (France) and Italy. After spending several years in Europe making up for the education he’d never received, he had a vision from God telling him to return to Ireland and convert the pagans to Christianity.

St. Patrick landed in County Wicklow, south of what is now Dublin, around 432. He made his way through the country as a missionary, visiting the Irish chieftains and telling them about the new religion he represented. Although his life was in constant danger, he somehow managed to survive to old age, and when he died in 464, the entire country went into mourning. He is probably best remembered for ordering all the snakes to leave Ireland—an event that, according to legend, occurred on the mountain later known as Croagh Patrick. On the last Sunday in July every year, hundreds of pilgrims gather there to commemorate their patron saint (*see* **REEK SUNDAY**).

The basis of saint day remembrances—for St. Patrick as well as other saints—is found in ancient Roman tradition. On the anniversary of a death, families would share a ritual meal at the grave site of an ancestor. This practice was adopted by Christians who began observing a ritual meal on the death anniversary of ancestors in the faith, especially martyrs. As a result, most Christian saint days are associated with the death of the saint. There are three important exceptions. John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus are honored on their nativities (birthdays). Many who suffered martyrdom are remembered on saint days in the calendars of several Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant sects.

The first St. Patrick’s Day celebration in the United States was held in Boston in 1737. The potato famine of 1845-49 brought many Irish immigrants to the United States, where St. Patrick’s Day became an opportunity to express pride in their national heritage. In cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, it was observed with **PARADES**, banquets, speeches, and Irish plays, pageants, and dancing. People wore green and displayed the **SHAMROCK** and the green Irish flag with the gold **HARP**.

Today, there are more people of Irish descent in the United States than there are in Ireland, and the holiday has become a time for the Irish everywhere to show their unity and express their feelings about freedom—particularly freedom from British rule. In Ireland, it is a far less rowdy and commercial event than it is in the United States. People in Ireland attend sporting events or stay home and watch the New York St. Patrick’s Day Parade on television, but they don’t drink green beer, wear green derbies (an English invention), or put green carnations in their lapels. Popular foods served in the U.S. on St. Patrick’s Day include corned beef and cabbage, mulligatawny soup, Irish stew, and Irish soda bread. In Ireland, the preferred dish is colcannon, made from mashed potatoes combined with shredded kale or cabbage, minced onion, and melted butter.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Bonfires

According to legend, St. Patrick was driven out of County Wicklow not long after he arrived. He sailed north and ended up in Tara, the legendary seat of Ireland's high kings. He arrived just as **BELTANE** was being celebrated, and all the fires had to be extinguished until the king had kindled his fire on the hill of Tara. St. Patrick lit his own campfire, and the flames were spotted by the king, Laoghaire. Outraged at this show of disrespect, he took a group of Druids to St. Patrick's camp to confront the missionary. But the Druids were afraid of Patrick's power and advised the king not to enter the camp. Instead, Patrick came out and settled the dispute, delivering a sermon during which he picked a **SHAMROCK** and used it to demonstrate the concept of the Holy Trinity.

St. Patrick was wise enough not to try to eliminate pagan rites and customs altogether. Instead, he tried to find a way to combine them with Christian customs. Since the Irish had traditionally honored their gods with bonfires on the hilltops in the spring, St. Patrick instituted the custom of lighting **EASTER** fires as a symbol for the Christian faith, which could never be extinguished.

Drinking

Drinking is a popular activity on St. Patrick's Day. St. Patrick is said to have brought the art of distilling spirits to Ireland, and the traditional cottage dweller's drink known as *poteen*, made from Irish white potatoes, has long been regarded as a way of warding off the ills associated with the country's damp climate. In the traditional custom known as "drowning the Shamrock," families with servants would put **SHAMROCKS** in a bowl and cover them with Irish whiskey, giving the remainder of the bottle to the servants. Nowadays, pub-crawling has become a popular way to spend the holiday.

Although the Irish are only moderately heavy drinkers by European standards (Belgians and Germans both consume more beer), the stereotype of the drunken Irishman remains common in America. In Ireland, both the churches and the government have tried to discourage the custom in recent years by putting more emphasis on the religious aspects of the holiday.

Harp

The harp is a symbol of St. Patrick's Day and of Ireland itself. It appears on Irish coins and on some Irish flags. It is also part of the national coat of arms, the presidential flag, and the royal arms of the United Kingdom. Harp music is often played in Irish castles that are open to the public, as well as in hotels and other public

places. One of the world's oldest musical instruments, the harp has a long history in Irish mythology and legend.

The old Irish harp, known as the *clarsach*, was relatively small, with a sound box carved from a solid block of wood. The harpist held it on his or her knee and plucked the heavy brass strings with the fingernails of the other hand. Irish stone carvings and early Christian metal work often show people playing harps, so it is likely that the harp was a popular instrument by the time St. Patrick arrived in Ireland. Kings, church officials, princes, and poets often gathered to recite tales about Ireland to the accompaniment of harp music. The well-known Irish song, "The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls," written by the Irish poet Thomas Moore, describes such a gathering in the hall of the Irish kings at Tara, a hill in County Meath.

Leprechaun

The legendary creatures known in Ireland as leprechauns were part of a group of fairies known as *Luchorpan*, which means "the wee ones." Over the years, the name *luchorpan* became confused with an Irish word meaning "one-shoemaker." Since shoemakers had a reputation for living alone and having a grumpy nature, the leprechaun was depicted as a solitary creature, usually working on a single shoe rather than a pair. He was a wizened, bearded dwarf who wore a green suit and cap and worked day and night mending the shoes of the other fairies.

The Irish were generally afraid of fairies, who could kidnap brides and snatch babies from their cradles. They believed that listening to fairy music could make a person lose all sense of human sympathy, after which the person might become a seer, a great poet, or a musician. Some scholars believe that fairies were the gods of ancient Ireland and that when the Christian gods took their place, they dwindled in both status and size to the miniature beings they are today.

Parades

The St. Patrick's Day Parade is largely an American invention. It was well established in Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Cleveland, and many other American cities by the 1850s; by the 1870s, there were enough Irish living in Los Angeles to make the parade there an annual event. Today there are parades on March 17 in at least thirty states. The largest takes place in New York City. It began in 1763, when small groups of Irish settlers banded together and followed the cobblestone streets to celebrate at their local taverns. Such informal marches became more organized after the Revolutionary War, when a veterans' group called the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick began advertising their ancestry on March 17. The growing number of Irish immigrants who poured into New York following the 1840s potato famine gave rise to religious and political tensions, particularly with British Protestants,

and the St. Patrick's Day parade often erupted in fights and violence. It was the Ancient Order of Hibernians who finally converted the parade from a rough, informal social outing to a large, well-organized civil rights demonstration. As the Irish became more influential in New York City politics, the parade gradually quieted down. But even today the parade often provokes controversy, as it did when gay and lesbian Irish-Americans wanted to march as a group up Fifth Avenue.

No matter where the parades take place, they usually feature marching bands, fife and drum corps, and musicians wearing kilts and playing such favorite Irish songs as "Danny Boy," "The Minstrel Boy," and "Garryowen." Local dignitaries in morning coats and top hats wear green, white, and orange sashes and carry SHILLELAGHS. There are green hats, green banners, and green carnations everywhere.

Shamrock

Shamrock is an English name for the plant known in Gaelic as *seamrog*. It is a small, three-leaved plant similar to clover. The ancient Druids associated it with the coming of spring and the rebirth of the natural world at the **VERNAL EQUINOX**. Even today, it is customary in Ireland to plant something new in the garden each day during "Patrick's Week," the week following March 17.

St. Patrick is said to have used the shamrock when he explained the theological doctrine of the Holy Trinity (three persons in one God) to the unconverted Irish pagans, pointing out that the shamrock has three separate leaves but is a single plant with a single stem. This legend may have arisen after the fact to justify the high esteem in which the shamrock was traditionally held by the Irish people.

The shamrock still grows freely all over Ireland, where the mild climate keeps it green all year. Although it started out as a symbol of St. Patrick and his teachings, over the centuries it became symbolic of the way the Irish felt about their country. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it became an emblem of Irish rebellion and, more than ever, a symbol of national pride.

Shillelagh

Shillelagh is an old Irish word for a short, stout club or cudgel made of oak. It is also the name of a famous oak forest that once stood in County Wicklow. A club or cudgel cut from one of these oaks was referred to as a "sprig of shillelagh." Eventually the name was used to describe any cudgel made of oak, and it served as an apt symbol of the staunch spirit of the Irish.

The shillelagh was often used as a weapon. Ancient feuds between families were often fought with shillelaghs at county fairs. Sometimes two of the clubs were used, so that the fighter could strike with one hand and fend off his

opponent with the other. The typical Irishman is often depicted swinging a shillelagh, even though a real shillelagh was never swung but was grasped in the middle.

When the English cut down most of Ireland's oak trees, Irishmen started cutting their clubs or walking sticks from blackthorn hedges. Tourists today bring back mock shillelaghs made of blackthorn bound with green ribbons as souvenirs. In St. Patrick's Day PARADES, officials often carry blackthorn walking sticks, while children in the crowd wave toy shillelaghs made of green plastic.

WEBSITES

Library of Congress

www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/modern/stpatric_1

St. Patrick's Festival of Dublin, Ireland

www.stpatricksday.ie

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St. Stephen's Day *(Boxing Day)*

Type of Holiday: Religious (Christian)

Date of Observation: December 26

Where Celebrated: Australia, Austria, Canada, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Sweden, and other Christian nations

Symbols and Customs: Christmas Box, Horse, Wren

Related Holidays: Christmas