



The three-quarter moon casts its glow on the still water as the day breaks. I can just make out the groups of swans further downstream. They drift closer. A group of 14 glide up the wide Blackwater River. One gives a “whoop” and another answers the call, before their strong wings flap vigorously against the water as they pull their large heavy bodies out of the river and rise slowly into the air.

Then “whoop” again and a group of 10 swans slowly approach and fly away. Then five followed by two groups of 22,

which make V formations as they take off. After nearly an hour the river falls quiet again. Then “whoop, whoop”. A single swan calls again and again to the others as it takes to the air.

The whooper swans migrate from their breeding grounds in Iceland to Ireland for the winter. They arrive at the end of September and leave again in March. Since my family first moved to this area of Ireland in the 1980s, I’ve always seen the whooper swans grazing further upstream during the day.

At dusk they return to this particular spot on the river, just below

Dromana, a Georgian house built on the foundation of a Norman castle, perched on a high cliff. The same family has lived in this place for 800 years and I’m staying in one of the apartments they rent out. It’s almost dark when I hear the next “whoop”. I rush outside and watch the swans returning. They fly in groups again and the valley reverberates with the sound of their webbed feet and wide wings hitting the water. They call to one another before settling to sleep on the river, gently paddling up and down through the long night.

ST PATRICK & *the* WHOOOPER SWANS

You’ve heard of St Patrick’s Day but what is its significance? We trace the path of Ireland’s national apostle and discover how his legacy lives on.

WORDS / ROSAMUND BURTON



MYTHICAL SWANS

One of Ireland's best-loved legends is the Children of Lir. Lir was the god of the sea when the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the gods, ruled Ireland. He and his wife Eve had two children, Finola and Aed, before she died giving birth to twin boys, Fiacra and Conn. Then Lir married Eva, Eve's sister. Eva soon became jealous of Lir's love for his children, so she took them to a lake and turned them into swans for 900 years. As swans, the children had to spend 300 years on Lough Derravaragh, 300 in the Sea of Moyle and 300 on the west coast of Ireland



Whooper swans settle in to their seasonal home.
Right: A statue of Patrick, Ireland's spirited saint

Photography Bill Flynn

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Slemish Mountain, where St Patrick tended sheep when he first came to Ireland.

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near Inishglora. The spell would not be broken until they heard the sound of the Christian bell.

Near the end of the 900 years, a holy man came to the island of Inishglora and told the swans about the new, Christian, god and Patrick bringing Christianity to Ireland. He made a bell and when it tolled the children were turned back into human form. He quickly baptised them before they turned into wizened old people and died.

The Children of Lir were renowned for their beautiful singing and, because of the whooper swans' haunting call and melodious death cry, it's believed this myth is associated with them.

When this particular flock of swans fly from Iceland to the Blackwater River near Ireland's south coast, they stop overnight at Carlingford Lough in Ulster. Other flocks of whooper swans spend the winter at Carlingford Lough and also further north at Strangford Lough, a much larger sea lough and one of only three marine nature reserves in the UK. Over 80,000 wetland birds winter here, including the whooper swans and also brent geese from Arctic Canada.

It was to Strangford Lough that St Patrick came when he returned to Ireland as a bishop. It was also where I was born, but I haven't revisited it since I left at the age of six months.

REVISITING THE PAST

I take the opportunity to explore the area of my birth with a friend, Katy English, who lives in Ulster, but first we go with another friend to Slemish Mountain in

nearby County Antrim, where Patrick tended sheep when he first came to Ireland, aged 15, as a slave.

This 600-million-year-old lava plug that rises up out of the surrounding land is known as the Irish Uluru. It's a cold wet day in January and we are alone climbing the mountain. We clamber over angular granite rocks and slide on the wet grass. It's a still day, but there's a breeze as we near the top. As we walk up through the heather, the long views over the fields below are lost in a veil of mist.

At the summit we're hit by icy cold wind and rain. We reach an outcrop of flat rocks and walk along the ridge of the mountain to the steep edge. It was up here on Slemish that Patrick first began to pray to his parents' god — the Christian god in whom he'd had little interest until that point.

We make the steep slippery descent over the wet rocks and boggy grass and emerge out of the mist. The walk up and down Slemish has only taken us an hour and a half but I feel as if time has stood still on this mystical sacred mountain.

After six years as a slave, Patrick heard a voice telling him he was going home to Great Britain and that his ship was ready. He started to walk, was not stopped or followed and finally found a ship. Patrick returned to his family and then started to have dreams about going back to Ireland, this time to spread the word of God. He undertook a theological education, was ordained in Rome and came to Strangford Lough to begin his mission in Ireland.

Katy and I drive from Belfast to Newtownards at the northern end of the lough. We pass the Newtownards Hospital, a grey stone building that was originally built as a workhouse in 1842. This was where I was born.

From here, we follow St Patrick's Trail along the east of the lough down the Ards Peninsula. We stop at Mount Stewart House and Garden and walk around the magnificent garden that Edith, Lady Londonderry, started planting in the 1920s. This garden is a cornucopia of topiary, stone statues and many rare exotic species from all over the world, but it's the Australian eucalypts that dominate this Northern Irish haven. Tall Tasmanian blue gums sway in the wind, their leaves making a distinctive crackle as the branches shake in the high breeze and their resinous scent fills the air. I wonder whether early exposure to this garden of eucalypts was in some way instrumental in me being drawn to live in Australia.

Further south are the Grey Abbey ruins, the beautiful gothic arched windows and doorways evidence of this once splendid Cistercian abbey. It was built in 1193 by Affreca, the wife of the Anglo-Norman John de Courcy, and she is buried here. Headstones stand cock-eyed in front of the wide-arched entrance and crows wheel above the roofless walls, calling out at the end of the day.

At Portaferry, the small town at the southern end of Strangford Lough, we stay at the Portaferry Hotel. Our room overlooks the water and we sit on our beds drinking tea and watching the lights of the ferry twinkling in the darkness as it crosses the narrow channel to Strangford on the far shore.

THE SPIRIT OF ST PATRICK

The following morning we walk along the sea front. The pinkish dawn sky hovers over the painted houses on the waterfront. Tied up to the stone quays and pulled up on the slips are colourful wooden fishing boats. Herring gulls ride



Saul Church and (right) the ruins of Grey Abbey at County Down.



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the breeze. A pair of grey herons rise up from behind the seawall, lazily flapping their wings. Terns circle in the wind and a cluster of oyster catchers, with their long red beaks, take off in formation.

A car ferry has crossed this narrow channel at the mouth of Strangford Lough since 1969, the ferryman tells us, but there's been a ferry crossing here for 500 years. It's a short trip to Strangford, but the currents are strong as huge amounts of water surge through the channel.

It's said that, when St Patrick came to Ireland in 432, strong currents swept his boat up this narrow channel and he landed where the River Slaney flows into the lough. A local chieftain called Dichu was the first person Patrick converted to Christianity and he gave him a barn in which to hold his services.

This barn was where Saul Church, a small stone church with a round tower attached to it, stands today. The present building was built in 1932 to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of the original wooden church. It was at this site that Patrick spent four years preaching, teaching and establishing a Christian community. This is also believed to be the place where Patrick died on 17 March (St Patrick's Day) in 461. When he was close to death, an angel told him, "Return to the place from which you came, that is, to Sabhall."

Next to the church in a small stone building is a prayer room. It's cold and

dark inside but has an inviting serenity. The corner of a map covered in prayer requests has come unstuck from the wall and hangs down. There is a candle on the altar, which I go to light, but I can't find any matches. On the table is a prayer written by John O'Donohue from his book *Benedictus*, entitled *For Time with Yourself...* This beautiful piece by the Irish priest, poet and author is a call to value ourselves, to realise that each of us has a special destiny and to recognise our individuality and uniqueness.

Close by is Slieve Patrick. A walk up the steep hill passes the Stations of the Cross and set in the rock is a statue of the Virgin Mary. At the top of the hill, with sensational views over Strangford Lough, stands the largest statue of St Patrick in the world, built in 1932 to commemorate Patrick's arrival in Ireland. This statue is carved with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh's robes and the face of the Protestant Archbishop of Armagh at the time, in order to unite the two faiths.

The bringing together of the two faiths epitomises the spirit of St Patrick. Ireland is the only country in which Christianity was introduced without bloodshed. Patrick changed the Celtic values of loyalty, courage and generosity into faith, hope and charity. St Patrick's gift was a Christianity that was not Roman but truly Irish. He related the sacred, which the Irish saw in all of nature, to God's creation.

CONFESSIONS & CELEBRATIONS

At the St Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick we meet the curator, Dr Tim Campbell, who shows us around. Patrick was not the first Christian bishop in Ireland, but the reason he is held in such high esteem is that through him the whole country became Christian. And, his confession is Ireland's first written word, Campbell explains.

The centre's exhibition draws hugely on St Patrick's confession and, with its video re-enactments of his life, it is visually captivating as well as being highly informative. The final room is a large auditorium where we sit and watch a 20-minute video. It's another example of the power of Patrick as a bringer of peace and reconciliation that a portion of the narration is spoken by the controversial Unionist leader and Protestant minister Reverend Ian Paisley. The national apostle is revered by the Catholic community in Ireland and, according to Campbell, "There has been a huge sea-change over the last six years of people from a Unionist tradition who want to learn about St Patrick and be more involved in his celebrations."

Campbell explains how the centre focuses on making the celebration of St Patrick's Day far more than a reason to wear green, sport a shamrock and drink copious amounts of Guinness. One of the St Patrick's Centre's initiatives is the founding of the Friends of St Patrick in America. This charity has six chapters in America and Canada and helps hungry and homeless people.

Our host then takes us up to the Hill of Down where St Patrick is buried and on which stands the imposing Down Cathedral. A stunning stained-glass window depicts Patrick as a slave and a bishop. Outside in the graveyard is a large flat granite boulder among the headstones. An ornate cross and the word "Patraic" are carved in the stone. It's here that the bones of St Patrick are believed to lie.

Just outside Downpatrick we stop beside the River Quoile. As I gaze at the flowing water, feeling so privileged to have been born on Strangford Lough, four swans float to the bank and wade up through the mud towards us. 🌊

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