ST PATRICK’S DAY AND IRISH TRADITIONS

FOR

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Hello everyone. Each year on March 17th, the world appears to be a little greener for the day. No, I don’t mean more environmentally aware, although that always is a plus, and I don’t mean that people get more innocent and less experienced-just for the day, but what we **DO** know is that March 17th is the day we observe St. Patrick’s Day. We all love to celebrate and sing songs, tell tales from Irish folklore, and eat our fill of corned beef and cabbage, but have we ever asked ourselves, “Who was St Patrick?” What are we celebrating? What is the history behind this holiday? Let’s take a look and see what we can learn.

In the book, **Shamrocks, Harps and Shillelaghs: The Story of St Patrick’s Day Symbols** by Edna Barth, we learn that, oddly enough, St Patrick wasn’t even born in Ireland, nor was his name Patrick. He was born with the name of Maewyn Succat, a Roman name, but he referred to himself, in his Confessions, written towards the end of his life, as **Patricus,** or “Well born Latin.” It is believed he was born in the British Isles, not necessarily Ireland, and lived somewhere around 385-460 AD. At the time, that territory was under Roman rule and, as that empire was crumbling, there was fighting and strife. Patrick was taken captive at sixteen, and while imprisoned, in his isolation, he discovered comfort from prayer. He also began to hear voices that guided him to action. He followed the guidance he was receiving and it is believed that Patrick heard “the voice of the Irish, crying as with one mouth, ‘Come hither and walk among us,’” He believed this was a command from God to return to Ireland. Although the Roman Empire was near collapse, the Roman church was growing as the Pagan culture, who worshipped nature, was diminishing in popularity. As Patrick faced the Druids in an attempt to overcome them, he said, “Some put their faith in chariots and horses, others in God.” It is not certain how much of the story of St. Patrick is legend and how much of it is truth. The only real guide is his writing, “Confessions.” He spent his life in dedication to spreading the word of Christianity. He became renowned for his missionary work and today we celebrate his commitment to his faith and to the Irish people. Upon his death, all of Ireland mourned for twelve days, paying tribute with candles and torches. Some say, the experience was as if there was “no night” for that period as the flames constantly burned bright in his memory.

There are several symbols that are traditional in the celebration of St Patrick’s Day. One symbol is the snake, and although we are not certain of a snake problem in Ireland, it is believed that the snakes are a metaphor for the way that St Patrick worked to banish pagan culture from the land. The shamrock is considered a sacred plant and in ancient Ireland was known as the sign of spring. Irish music has always been a vital form of communication. Because early Celtic culture relied on oral history in the form of songs and stories, music was critical to the Irish heritage. Although cabbage is a traditional Irish food, corned beef is believed to have been added to the holiday tradition from celebrations of St Patrick’s Day in New York at the turn of the 20th century. We must remember that at that time in New York, there was a huge wave of immigration and many Irish people came to the new world and settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Nostalgic for the traditions of the old country, they probably wanted to ‘spice up their cabbage” with a little corned beef and a boiled potato. That is also around the time that New Yorkers began to celebrate the day and the saint with a parade. Leprechauns have been part of the Irish culture since the ancient Celts who believed in fairies. Although we may have a picture of fairies being sweet and good, apparently leprechauns were a bit cranky and were responsible for mending the soles of the shoes of other fairies. In the book, **Irish Wonders** by D. R. Mc Anally, Jr, leprechauns are considered to be a “relic of pagan mythology.” The book goes on to say, “By birth, the ‘Leprechawn’ is of low descent, his father being an evil spirit and his mother a degenerate fairy… by nature, he is a mischief maker.” There does not seem to be a direct relationship between leprechauns and St. Patrick, but perhaps they too, represent the paganism that St. Patrick banished as Catholicism took hold and gained in popularity in Ireland.

I want to thank you for taking this time to learn about St Patrick and Irish traditions, and I’d like to give you some Gaelic wisdom. There is an Irish saying that goes, “It is easy to be pleasant when life flows by like a song, but the man worth while is the one who will smile when everything goes dead wrong. For the test of the heart is trouble, and it always comes with years, and the smile that is worth the praises of earth is the smile that shines through the tears.”

Thank you St Patrick, for your contribution to Irish culture and tradition, and thank you all too!