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OVER THE WHITE-CAPPED SEA: EIGHT LATE ANTIQUUE IRISH POEMS

The following poems are courtesy of Patricia Egan, who says: The first is a very early poem about St. Patrick, perhaps from the 5th century, but found in a 7th-century manuscript. It purports to be druidic prophecy but more likely was written after he came as it is an accurate description of Roman tonsure, the paenula worn for travel, and the bishop's crook. Its emphasis on "head" probably reflects the Celtic veneration for the head and is another indication of its very early date. The seven poems that follow date from the 8-9th centuries; some are long familiar in Irish collections, others less so. Poems II and VII, attributed to St. Columcille, are actually later.

I

He will come, Adzed-head,
Over the white-capped sea,
His cloak, hole-headed,
Crook-headed, his staff.

He will chant heresy
From an altar in the east of his house;
All his people will respond:
'Amen. Amen'

— VERSION: PATRICIA COLLING EGAN

II

On some island I long to be,
a rocky promontory, looking on
the coiling surface of the sea.

To see the waves, crest on crest
of the great shining ocean, composing
a hymn to the creator, without rest.

To see without sadness the strand
lined with bright shells, and birds
lamenting overhead, a lonely sound.

To hear the whisper of small waves
against the rocks, that endless sea-
sound, like keening over graves.

To watch the sea-birds sailing
in flocks, and most marvellous
of monsters, the turning whale.

To see the shift from ebbtide
to flood and tell my secret name:
'He who set his back on Ireland.'

— ATTRIBUTED TO COLMCILLE, BUT CERTAINLY LATER.

III

Clamour of the wind making music
 in the elms:
 Gurgle of the startled blackbird
 clapping its wings.

I have lost three settled places
 I loved best:
 Durrow, Derry's ledge of angels,
 my native parish.

I have loved the land of Ireland
 almost beyond speech;
 to sleep at Comgall's, to visit Canice,
 it would be pleasant!

— VERSION BY JOHN MONTAGUE

IV

9th century: Apologia Pro Vita Sua

I read or write, I teach or wonder what is truth,
 I call upon my God by night and day.
 I eat and freely drink, I make my rhymes,
 And snoring sleep, or vigil keep and pray.
 And very 'ware of all my shames I am;
 O Mary, Christ, have mercy on your man.

— SEDULIUS SCOTTUS (TRANSLATED FROM LATIN BY HELEN WADDELL)

V

Pangur Ban (White Pangur) is a very well known 8th-century hermit poem.

I and Pangur Ban my cat,
'Tis a like task we are at:
Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill will,
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry thing to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way;
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den
O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our tasks we ply,
Pangur Ban, my cat, and I;
In our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made
 Pangur perfect in his trade;
 I get wisdom day and night
 Turning darkness into light.

VI

Learned in music sings the lark,
 I leave my cell to listen;
 His open beak spills music, hark!
 Where Heaven's cloudlets glisten.

And so I'll sing my morning psalm
 That God bright heaven may give me
 And keep me in eternal calm

And from all sin relieve me.

– 8TH CENTURY

VII

What woeful fold are they, my friend,
 These clerics at the world's last end!
 In every church this latter band
 Are false to Patrick's high command.

My word it is a goodly word
 Such as from Patrick Eire heard;
 Such Brendan preached; and such the rule
 Of Comgall's and of Ciaran's school.

The saints of Eire long ago
 Wrought miracles this truth to show;
 'Tis evil done to leave their ways
 For Latin speech in these last days.

For every school will soon, I vow,
 Be following Latin learning now;

Old wisdom now they scorn and song,
And babble Latin all day long.

The best of Latin has no might
To stablish holy Church upright;
We need pure hearts in these bad days,
Piety, charity and praise.

Latin ye love and take no heed
To keep your hearts from evil freed;
But when your Latin speech is done
God's child shall judge you every one!

— ATTRIBUTED TO COLMCILLE, BUT ALSO 8TH CENTURY.

VIII

When holy Patrick, full of grace,
Suffered on Cruach, that blest place,
In grief and gloom enduring then
For Eire's women, Eire's men.

God for his comfort sent a flight
Of birds angelically bright
That sang above the darkling lake
A song unceasing for his sake.

'Twas thus they chanted, all and some:
'Come hither, Patrick, hither come!
Shield of the Gael, thou light of story,
Appointed star of golden glory!'

Thus singing, all those fair birds smite
The waters with soft wings in flight
'Till the dark lake its gloom surrenders
And rolls a tide of silvery splendours.

— 9TH CENTURY



Earliest known printed image of St. Patrick from the first Irish catechism, Teagasc Criosdaidhe, published in Antwerp in 1611. Courtesy of Pat Egan.