

ALL THINGS IRISH

The month of March is a celebration for everything Irish. On March 17, Saint Patrick's Day is celebrated as a religious and secular event. It is a time when everyone wears green whether they are Irish or not.

Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains somewhat of a mystery. Many of the stories traditionally associated with Saint Patrick, including the famous account of his banishing all the snakes from Ireland, are false, the products of hundreds of years of exaggerated storytelling.

It is known that St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around 460 A.D. Although his father was a Christian deacon, it has been suggested that he probably took on the role because of tax incentives and there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity.

After more than six years as a prisoner, Saint Patrick escaped to Britain. In Saint Patrick's writings he reported that he received a vision from God to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after, Saint Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than fifteen years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish.

There are many symbols and traditions that are associated with celebrating the Irish month of March.

The first Saint Patrick's Day parade took place not in Ireland, but in the United States. Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City on March 17, 1762. Along with their music, the parade helped the soldiers to reconnect with their Irish roots, as well as fellow Irishmen serving in the English army.

Over the next thirty-five years, Irish patriotism among American immigrants flourished, prompting the rise of the "Irish Aid" societies. Each group would hold annual parades featuring bagpipes and drums.

The shamrock was a sacred plant in ancient Ireland because it symbolized the rebirth of spring. By the seventeenth century, the shamrock had become a symbol of emerging Irish nationalism. As the English began to seize Irish land and make laws against the use of the Irish language and the practice of Catholicism, many Irish began to wear the shamrock as a symbol of their pride in their heritage and their displeasure with English rule.

Each year, thousands of Irish Americans gather with their loved ones on St. Patrick's Day to share a "traditional" meal of corned beef and cabbage.

Though cabbage has long been an Irish food, corned beef only began to be associated with St. Patrick's Day at the turn of the century. Irish immigrants living on New York City's Lower East Side substituted corned beef for their traditional dish of Irish bacon to save money. They learned about the cheaper alternative from their Jewish neighbors.

Belief in leprechauns probably stems from Celtic belief in fairies, tiny men and women who could use their magical powers to serve good or evil. In Celtic folktales, leprechauns were cranky souls, responsible for mending the shoes of the other fairies. Though only minor figures in Celtic folklore, leprechauns were known for their trickery, which they often used to protect their much-fabled treasure. (www.history.com)

**May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face.
And rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the hollow of His hand.**

Irish blessing

