
Following St. Patrick

An off-cut from the book *Huia Come Home* by J. Ruka

Like The Celts

Just in case you're wondering, the pilgrimage into indigeneity that I'm talking about is not just a brown thing. Indigenous worldviews are embedded within European cultures too. Prior to the advance of Pax Romana¹, Europe was tribal - take the Germanic, Celtic and Saxon peoples for example. Thankfully however, there was one little Celtic island the Romans didn't bother to force their "peace" on: little ol' Ireland was spared.

It's been said that the Irish are the Māori of the North; and Māori the Irish of the South.² We have much in common. The love for song is central to the social gatherings of both cultures and there is also a shared style of circular based artistic design. The Māori tangi and the Irish wake are almost identical: the deceased remains at home with the family until burial and someone is present with the body the entire time. Also, like Māori the Celts honoured and remembered their deceased when Matariki (Pleiades) appeared in the winter sky.³ Such similarities between Irish and Māori stem back to times before both island peoples were colonised.

Going back to the early fifth century, Ireland was almost completely rural. Villages didn't even exist. It was a society based in tribal-familial groups, located in their own regions throughout the land. Ireland was not a nation-state and there was no one ruler over the country. Celtic tribes had kings, chieftains, warriors, and the aes-dana, druids: men of special gifts such as bards, doctors and historians. These tribal societies read almost identical to Māori hapū and iwi in pre-European times. Māori tribal

¹ The Peace of Rome.

² I have heard this idea for a long time, but simply cannot find the source of it.

³ Rangi Matamua, *Matariki: The Star of the Year* (Huia Publishers, 2017) 9.

groups were also lead by chiefs under the guidances of recognised tohunga, those with special expertise, like priests, artists and healers.

Saint Paddy

Every year on March 17 we celebrate the Irish on what is called St Patrick's Day. But in the Guinness-tribute, we have forgotten the exceptional person St Patrick was and how he passionately worked amongst the chiefs and druids of Irish society. From a Christian history perspective, Paddy has been called the "second missionary" (St Paul being the first) because he took the gospel beyond the boundaries of Paul's Greco-Roman world.⁴ Historian Thomas Cahill writes, "What is remarkable is not that Patrick should have felt an overwhelming sense of mission but that in the four centuries between Paul and Patrick there are no missionaries."⁵ Patrick started out as a nonchalant Roman citizen, a disinterested Christian-kid, then, in a dramatic turn of events, was kidnapped to Ireland and thrown into harsh slavery conditions, constantly naked and hungry. In a strange turn of events, he escaped slavery and went home only to then later return to Ireland as a missionary. He eventually became a national hero who released an exceptional reorientation of indigenous Irish culture into the world.

The beauty of Patrick was not the fact that he changed Ireland, but in the *way* he changed it. As an anti-stereotype priest, he did not roam Ireland with the thundering of reprimanding rhetoric. Instead, he worked *with* the cultural paradigm using the Irish way of life as the means to translate the stories and work of Christ. In this he had a profound effect planting churches and paving the way for monastic orders. "His success in this seems to have resided in his willingness to accept the indigenous traditions and conform his teaching to them."⁶ Patrick did this without losing a high vision for the person and ways of Christ. He had to change his own thinking to understand the way the Irish did.

Patrick's orientation into indigenous ways of thinking, garnered by living with the Irish, became evident in his theology and deep devotional expression:

Our God is the God of all men, the God of Heaven and Earth, of sea and river, of sun and moon and stars, of the lofty mountain and the lowly valley, the God above Heaven, the God in Heaven, the God under Heaven; He has his dwelling round Heaven and Earth and sea and all that in them is. He inspires all, he quickens all, he dominates all, he sustains all. He lights the light of the sun; he

⁴ Thomas Cahill, *How The Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) 108.

⁵ *Ibid*, 107.

⁶ Bamford & Marsh, *Celtic Christianity*, 18

furnishes the light of the light; he has put springs in the dry land and has set stars to minister to the great lights...”⁷

This way of thinking did not come from Patrick’s Roman schooling in Briton as a boy. No, the inherent connection to earth came from his time on Irish land as a slave, and understanding the druids and the way they had shaped Celtic culture.⁸ It was the schools of druid lore that eventually were transformed into the famous Celtic monasteries. “The Druids, Bards, being converted, learnt Latin and incorporated their own traditions in the existing Christian ones... Like all aristocratic societies they had set great store on memory, learning, genealogy.”⁹ Patrick laid the foundation in this movement with a humble and powerful apostolic spirit that saw Christ emerging from *within* Celtic culture. He took what was already there, what had always been there, and interpreted Irish spirituality with the lens of Christ. He was an outstanding Englishman who accepted the indigeneity of the foreigners he lived with and in doing so became their most famous son.

As European New Zealanders, Patrick is worth following. The indigenous way is actually rooted in what it means to be European too. The pursuit of an indigenous identity is to be found within the European psyche. We just need help finding it again. The Māori world is here to help us do that.

Bibliography

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⁷ Quote from H.J. Massingham, *Tree of Life*, 37; in Bamford & Marsh, *Celtic Christianity*, 19.

⁸ The word *druid* means the “Oak Ones”.

⁹ Bamford & Marsh, *Celtic Christianity*, 20.