

ST. PATRICK AND THE SNAKES

Snakes are found in deserts, forests and mountains - almost everywhere in the world. Except New Zealand, Hawaii, Iceland, Greenland, Antarctica and, of course, Ireland. Legend has it that St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, exterminated all of the island's snakes by driving them into the sea where they drowned.

While it is true that apart from zoos and pet shops there are no native snakes on the Emerald Isle, the island's geography shows us that the infamous reptiles never actually arrived there in the first place. During the most recent ice age, the country was too cold for most animals to survive, and furthermore, when the climate of Ireland finally became warmer and the ice started to melt, the land bridge between Ireland and the rest of Europe had already become flooded before any snakes were able to cross it. So how did the legend of St. Patrick and the snakes originate? Most scholars agree that the reptiles symbolise evil and paganism, which St. Patrick also banished from the island.



Interestingly, St. Patrick also known as the Apostle of Ireland, was not Irish himself. He was born in Roman Britain around the 5th century AD into a family of Roman clergymen. When he was 16, he was kidnapped by Irish pirates and taken to Ireland as a slave, where he was made to herd sheep. During his six years of slavery, Patrick became deeply religious and decided to give his life to God. Eventually, he managed to escape and find his way home to his family, and then he studied religion and became a priest.



Even though he was a free man again, Ireland remained in his heart, and according to his own account, he would often hear the cries of the Irish in his dreams at night-time; the cries were calling for him to return and free the people from paganism. When St. Patrick was ordained as a bishop, he returned to Ireland to spread the word of God and within thirty years of his missionary work he had converted most of the island's inhabitants to Christianity. He helped build churches throughout Ireland and the communities he had founded gave rise to many new cities and villages.

Saint Patrick is credited with not only bringing Christianity to Ireland, but also with using the shamrock, which later became Ireland's most recognizable symbol. According to legend he used the three-leaf clover to explain the idea of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the pagan Irish.

Saint Patrick's Day, which falls on March 17th, the day of the saint's death, is Ireland's official national holiday, and it is celebrated in a number of other Western countries, including the USA and Canada, where many descendants of Irish immigrants live, although the style of celebration nowadays is not quite as holy as it used to be.