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# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# CROAGH PATRICK: THE GLORIOUS CLIMB OF IRELAND'S HOLY MOUNTAIN

*Road to Emmaus* staff first met Michael Gibbons on a pilgrimage to west Ireland with the Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona in September of 2009. As Michael guided us around the Derry Peninsula in a sunny but blustery September, we spent lovely long days tramping dirt roads, skirting peat bogs, and clambering over stony green fields to investigate ancient churches, abandoned cemeteries, and little-known holy wells. Armed with vast archeological and historical knowledge, a living faith, and deep love for his country, Michael illumined Ireland's Christian past. As a member of the Croagh Patrick Archaeological Research Team and one of Ireland's most respected archeologists, he has spoken on Ireland's heritage at home and abroad, including Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and the National Geographic Society, and we were delighted when he agreed to spend an evening talking to us about Croagh Patrick, Ireland's Holy Mountain. As one pilgrim remarked, "To meet Michael Gibbons is to meet Ireland."

"Croagh Patrick is the glorious, singing, laughing climb of an Ireland young in spirit and truth and enthusiastic in performance."

Patrick Kavanagh

*Opposite: Michael Gibbons.*

RTE: Michael, will you tell us about yourself, your work and about Connemara's pilgrimage sites.

MICHAEL: I'm Michael Gibbons, an archeologist from Connemara, and this area of west Ireland has a long pilgrimage tradition that continues to the present.

Christianity was introduced to Ireland in the fifth century by captured slaves from the west coast of Britain during the breakup of the Roman Empire. St. Patrick, a Roman citizen from Britain was the most famous of these



*Croagh Patrick in snow. Courtesy of Michael Gibbons.*

slaves, and Connemara people frequent two great pilgrimage sites associated with him: Mám Ean in the Maumturks and Croagh Patrick. By the early seventh century, monks had founded important monasteries on our remote and rugged islands of Inishark by St. Leo, on High and Omey islands by St. Fechin, Inis Ní by St. Mathias and on Oilean Mhic Dara by St. Macdara. A major monastery was founded on Inishbofin by St. Colman, a monastic exile from Lindisfarne and Iona, who brought with him numerous Saxon followers.

In all, seventeen islands off the Connemara coast have monastic remains. These islands provided an important retreat and a home for hermits away from the bustling world of early Christian Ireland. The Irish name for the town of Clifden is Clochán, a beehive cell. This may indicate an early Christian association with today's Clifden, but the ancient site has yet to be found.

While Croagh Patrick is the most known site, the locals still go on a number of different pilgrimages, including to the Patrician sites I just mentioned. Mám Ean (meaning “The Pass of the Birds”) is a high pass in the Maumturk Mountains (“The Pass of the Wild Boar”). On the 8th of August every year,



*Pilgrims in the early morning light. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

there is a small local pilgrimage to Mám Ean, attended mostly by mountain people who live on the sides of the Maumturks. Further south, where my mother's family is from is St. MacDara's Island. MacDara is the most important local saint in Connemara and St. MacDara's was an island monastery. Every 16th of July, there is a maritime pilgrimage along the south Connemara coast to this site, where we were brought as children.

My first pilgrimage experience as a child was at St. Cailín's Well (pronounced Call Ean), one of the older pilgrimage sites with a tiny well and an

old children's burial ground next to it, overlooking the ocean. St. Cailín was the brother of MacDara and MacDuach. Even today the local boatmen venerate Macdara as the "Fisher MacDara" by dipping their sails three times as they pass the island. This is a tradition not from history as we think of it, but from folklore, which is a parallel source of information. There is a beautiful pilgrimage on the 11th of November with dancing and sometimes a boat row or a regatta. Right out from Cailín's Well is Chapel Island, with an 11th-century medieval church. So, the three pilgrimages of Mám Ean, MacDara's Island and St. Cailín's Well are the three in this part of Connemara.

Just north of us is a pilgrimage on the Feast of the Assumption, the 15th of August, to Caher (Fortress) Island, where there is a wonderful local pilgrimage to an abandoned monastic site. We think that this was once the endpoint of a much larger pilgrimage with many stops that started in the center of Mayo at an early church site called Ballintubber Abbey and stretched westward across a wonderful sixty mile transect of the Irish landscape, of which Croagh Patrick is a sort of ritual centerpiece. From Croagh Patrick, the pilgrims continued westward to Kilgeever, another church site, and onwards to Caher Island, owned by the people of Inishturk, where they hold one of the most beautiful maritime sea pilgrimages in Ireland, mostly attended by the people of Southwest Mayo, Inishturk, Inishbofin, Clare Island and the Renvyle Peninsula. I attended the pilgrimage on the 17th of August 2010 along with almost 500 other people, the largest attendance in its modern history.

### Climbing Croagh Patrick

The most important regional pilgrimage site, of course, is Croagh Patrick. This is very much a rural pilgrimage that still survives among small farmers—people with deep old values, an earthy sort of people who may not be regular mass goers, but they wouldn't miss Croagh Patrick. Very little research has been done on this pilgrimage, because although Irish academics might be Catholic, they aren't part of the rural pilgrimage scene and have never bothered to study it. Even with the general decline of religious vocations and church attendance, rural pilgrimage is still very strong in Ireland, and here in Connaught, the attendance at Sunday mass is still high, probably over 60%.

As St. Patrick is our national saint, any site associated with him has a high status, and Croagh Patrick is a beautiful, iconic mountain. Pilgrims come here from all over Ireland, but mostly Connaught and Ulster, the western

and northern provinces. The original Patrician heartland, of course, was Ulster, which, as far as we know was where Patrick came in the fifth century, captured on a raid when the Irish expanded eastward in a brief imperious burst and brought captured Christian slaves back with them. Patrick is credited with founding a whole series of churches in East Ulster. Croagh Patrick persists as a major church site and has been so throughout the centuries.

Croagh Patrick (which we call “The Reek” colloquially, a reek being a steep-sided stack of turf) is partly owned by the farmers around it, but much of it belongs to the Archbishop of Tuam, the patron of our pilgrimage. Tuam is our big diocese founded by St. Jarlath in the 6th century. Although it is a small town now, in the times of the early church, it was a very large and important monastic centre, and Jarlath is still a common first name in this area.

RTE: What do you remember of your first climb up Croagh Patrick?

MICHAEL: Climbing the Reek in 1974 was my first experience of a mountain pilgrimage. It was an amazing night: a whole gaggle of teenagers leaving Clifden, where the buses converged after the pubs closed (the traditional time for starting out). Most people didn’t have a car so they travelled from all over on buses. We stopped to pick up pilgrims in villages all along the way and by the time we got to Westport, we were part of a throng of literally tens of thousands of people.

Climbing the Reek is still done by a whole cross-section of people, from the very young to the very old. You’ll get children as young as three up Croagh Patrick, all the way to the top. Sometimes they’re dragged crying and screaming, sometimes they’re way ahead of Mom and Dad. You also have parents and grandparents, whole extended families going up. You’re part of a much wider community and that’s what gets most people to the top. It’s quite an arduous climb when you’re not experienced and most people aren’t hill walkers, they don’t have proper gear, they don’t often have raincoats. (You know Irish people still haven’t adapted well to our weather. When the rain comes, we’re always surprised—we’d be extinct in any other climate). But there’s an extraordinary excitement about the climb because you’re meeting people you may not have seen for a whole year. It’s a great time of people pulling together.

RTE: Why did you climb it?

MICHAEL: I climbed it because it was the most exciting thing you could do as a teenager. Climbing the Reek was a rite of passage. Of course, there were no parents around to supervise—you couldn't possibly supervise in that crowd—and making it to the top marked your entrance into adulthood. You were conscious that the big lads and girls could climb it, and you'd find yourself fierce religious at fourteen about doing it yourself... "Sean's gone, Mary's gone, why can't I go?"

So, we teenagers—15- to 17-year-olds—are all watching each other on the bus, all nervous about going up. When we arrived, there were all sorts of hawkers about selling rosary beads and walking sticks for the Reek. The



*Beginning of the ascent. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

hawkers have been there, selling this, that, and the other for centuries, all the way up the trail to the top, and there was already a huge gathering of locals: hill farmers and their families. The oldest person that I've met up there was 82, a hill farmer, who'd been in the hills all his life. There was a huge array of people, and lots who shouldn't be there as well. Some are obviously extremely unfit and ill, but want to do it anyway, and there are always large numbers of Irish Travellers, whom we would have called Irish Tinkers at



the time. They are an Irish people, nomadic from the dawn of history, much misunderstood and badly treated.

I'd always heard about the excitement of the Reek itself—people crying, people falling, people praying : there's continuous prayer all the way up, out loud; mostly the rosary, and rightfully so because the rosary focuses you on the climb which is very dangerous in places. It's not a nice hill walk, it's a narrow beam of people on an arduous track, and if you fall, you fall 1000 feet. If you get off the trail, you can find yourself in serious trouble, so people pack in tight. There's this tremendous movement upwards, and then the rush of people coming down on the other side of the track.



*Night pilgrimage, 1963. (Owen Campbell, Pat Langan)*

RTE: And all of this in the dark?

MICHAEL: Pitch black. Most people used to start as soon as it got dark, which in July is about 10:00, because everyone wanted to be at the top for the first mass at midnight. Though I was fit because I played football, the climb just never seemed to end. What makes it even harder is that traditionally you climb fasting—nothing for twelve hours before the climb. Although it was

dark, you had a stream of light to carry you on because people carried torches. You couldn't see your feet, but you could see the general route as it zig-zagged and snaked its way up the mountain. The first fifteen hundred feet is quite a tricky sinuous path winding up through rocks and around a large corrie (a hollow in a hillside), then there's a saddle where you walk about a kilometer on an undulating route, and then the summit cone, which is not quite vertical but very steep. It's loose scree, so you're walking up three feet and falling down four. And remember, people are doing this in their bare feet, slipping and sliding, pulling themselves up with sticks. There are even fellows carrying huge crosses on their back to fulfill a vow, all the way to the top.

It was a massive relief to get to the top. The summit itself is 150 meters across and maybe 50 meters wide, with the church in the center. It's like a huge footprint on top. Years later we discovered that the footprint was the outline of the remains of a hilltop fort enclosing the very summit of the mountain and an early monastery. Midnight mass was the big mass to be at the summit for, and then there were masses on the half-hour all through the night. The summit is amazing, thronged with 25,000 people, absolutely elbow-room only. Today, people still climb at night, but the masses only begin at 8:00 in the morning now, as the Church has been trying to encourage daylight climbing.

When we got to the summit that night, mass was going on with dozens of priests queuing up to hear confession. There's a huge push and queue to get to confession, because it's important to have confession on the Reek. Meanwhile, one of the hawkers is trying to sell you tea at exorbitant prices.

We waited there until dawn. When dawn breaks on Croagh Patrick it's the most beautiful sight, overlooking Clew Bay with its dozens of islands. You can see all the islands of Inishboffin out to the west, Achill to the north, mountains north and south, and then when you look inland, you see a rolling tapestry of Irish countryside. As the sun came up, the whole lot was bathed in the most beautiful light, and then slowly the mountain itself and Clew Bay. It was and is an extraordinary sight.

After mass, there's a tumult, a river of people coming down the mountainside. Everyone is in great form, of course, with the excitement of having made it. There are tea-sellers everywhere, and all of the pubs along the road at the bottom of the mountain are thronged with people. This was one of the criticisms made by respectable 19th-century authors.

RTE: But you would have to celebrate the climb.

MICHAEL: Yes, and I remember us all walking the four miles into Westport in the morning to catch the bus back. After that first climb I was in bed all the next day—more from the excitement than the climb. As a teenager it's the emotion that hits you harder than the physical climb. It was fabulous.

The modern pilgrimage is amazing too, because now at the bottom you have a whole series of evangelical Northern Irish Protestant tents trying to convert the Catholics and giving out orange juice and little pamphlets that say, "Patrick was a Protestant." The sort of animosity that still dominates parts of Northern Ireland isn't part of southern Irish life anymore, so people are quite happy to take the orange juice, take the pamphlets, and have a chat with these Baptists, Adventists, and all the shades of Protestants that you have in Northern Ireland. This is the missionaries' big chance, but the pilgrims just take it in good humor. It's a jolly pilgrimage.

I often thought in the middle of the troubles, "Why don't they just grab the politicians and bring them down to show them that all of these ordinary Catholic people can tolerate extreme Protestant sects proselytizing at one of the most sacred Catholic sites in Ireland. They gladly drink their orange juice."

## Irish Travellers

RTE: You mentioned the Travellers as an integral part of the pilgrimage. Aren't they native Irish gypsies?

MICHAEL: Native Irish gypsies, but they're not related ethnically to the Romani gypsies, although they share the same hostility from settled people. But they're very interesting because they've got all the traditions, the rites, the prayer sequences, and a great devotion to the saints and the holy wells. They are old Ireland. Sometimes near these sites, when American tourists are coming, I hear people say, "Oh Lord, the Travellers are camped there, don't let the visitors see them." Instead, I stop the car to look and say, "This is old Ireland you're looking at."

They are a very interesting element of the whole Croagh Patrick experience, because on the night of the climb there have always been large numbers of Irish travellers, and they've all climbed barefoot. Most Travellers live a harsh life and they have the lowest life-expectancy of anyone in Ireland, mostly as a result of alcoholism, heart disease, fighting and increasingly drug abuse. They tend to marry early in arranged marriages, and Irish people have traditionally thought of them as settled people who were thrown out

of their homes and lands a few centuries ago by the English: “If we could only settle them, everything would be alright.” But these people were never settled. Settled people don’t become nomads.

We grew up in a small town where we had good relations with the few Traveller families we had. In an agricultural world, they had a place—they fulfilled an important function as tinsmiths and horse traders—and in that world there was tolerance and a certain respect for them. The age of plastics did away with all of that. Socially they’ve slid downhill, which is very tragic, and as a society we’ve never acknowledged that because we’re still pretend-



*Catholic monks praying at small oratory (robbed of altar). Courtesy Michael Gibbons.*

ing that they were once settled people: “If they’d only stay in the houses we built for them, everything would be fine.” Many settled travelers in the cities have fallen prey to drugs with all of their associated dangers and criminality. About 20% of the traveling community have adapted well and are reasonably prosperous traders.

The real revelation I had that they are not just displaced, but a nomadic people, was one day when I went to look at a holy well site. Of course, it was the local Travellers who knew where the well was, and so I went to see

one of the families. The town council had built them a brand-new house, six months old, and as I walked up to it, I could see that the house was completely trashed, almost in bits. In the back garden was a Traveller tent and a fire; it was pouring down rain. There was an old man there, at least he seemed to be old, but was probably only in his 50's. His wife was cooking, minding the grandchildren, and catching the horses that were wandering in and out of the house. I asked them, "What happened to the house?" "Oh, we couldn't live in it." Once the weather warmed up they'd gotten out of the house. They were claustrophobic, and they simply didn't know how to live in a house. Of



*Pilgrim at the second station. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

course that goes down like a lead balloon with the housing people: "It's a disgrace!" They threw social workers at them to beat the band, but not what they really needed—anthropologists. The insights that anthropology brings to people like this are important, but the Irish don't believe they need to study anything. We're such a self-confident lot.

So, in the mainstream of pilgrims to any pilgrimage is this sub-element of Travellers who don't mix socially. They are an important group, but I couldn't see that on our first pilgrimage, "Christ, look..." They weren't hos-

tile, but you stick to your own, and your own certainly weren't Travellers.

RTE: Can you tell Travellers by their dress?

MICHAEL: Sometimes, and the girls often have big earrings, but you can more often tell by their names and their accents. It's a closed community and they don't marry out, so they have a very particular way of speaking English. Though everyone has their own regional speech, the dialect that many of the Travellers speak is literally medieval English and medieval Irish—it's one of the secret languages of Ireland, if you like. In some areas, notably Tuam and Galway, there are still a lot of Traveller words in colloquial English.

You can also tell Travellers by the nomadic routes that they follow around the country. They travel back and forth to Scotland also, though there have been Scottish laws from the 13th century prohibiting them from disrupting townspeople. When the British came to Ireland, they almost went cracked because, although they were used to the regular Irish, they weren't at all used to these nomads who just didn't pay any heed to central government and had no sense of private property.

Whereas climbing the Reek is a regular thing for most of the settled population, there's this especially strong attachment to it for the Travellers. The last woman killed on Croagh Patrick was a Traveller woman. She vowed to climb it three times, one after another on the same day in the middle of winter because her nephew was sick. On the second climb she slipped and fell about 1500 feet. The pilgrimage tradition has this older edge to it as well.

What you may be looking at with these people is a survival of early historic metalsmiths, who may have created some of the finest works of art in early Christian Ireland. As I said, this was their original function in early Christian society, taking their trades to the various lordships and monasteries. When that medieval culture was broken up, they began their long historic slide into social dislocation. Nevertheless, they are a wonderful part of all pilgrimages, and they have a great devotion to Our Lady, Patrick, Brigid, and a whole host of other saints.

### Night Pilgrimage on the Reek

RTE: Why was Croagh Patrick's night pilgrimage stopped?

MICHAEL: We don't know why precisely. There are many rumors, but the

Marian shrine at Knock may have had something to do with it.<sup>1</sup> Knock was heavily promoted and reliably Catholic, unassociated with the dodgy stories of Patrick fighting the demon Crom Dubh, and all of the pre-Christian possibilities there. Some think that some of the bishops may have wanted to give Catholic Ireland a pure shrine to go on pilgrimage to, and to let these older ones sort of slide off. That first pilgrimage I went on in 1974 was the last night pilgrimage, and it coincided with the revival of Irish music and festivals, including a lot more celebrating. The clergy felt that it was getting too raucous, too out-of-order, and quite a few people would be drunk starting up.

RTE: Was that dangerous?

MICHAEL: Well, you know they say that if you slip drunk you don't get hurt. Those who were stiff and tried to save themselves were more liable to get hurt. When you think of the number of people going up and how steep it is at the end, it's remarkable how few do die. Probably every other year someone dies, but generally from a heart attack rather than actually falling. The reason given for it being stopped was that people were getting hurt, but the truth is, it isn't any safer in the light. Before, when it was dark you wouldn't go outside the boundary of the light, because you knew there was a drop, but in daylight people get off the main path. A man died doing that just two years ago.

Certainly the people of Morrisk, the village at the bottom of the mountain, weren't happy when the night pilgrimage stopped, but hundreds of people, thousands probably, still climb it at night, including the Travellers. No one will stop you, but mass doesn't start now until eight o'clock in the morning.

RTE: Are there other set prayers that people say going up at traditional resting places or wayside shrines?

MICHAEL: Yes, there are a series of stations on the ascent where pilgrims traditionally stop. At each station a series of traditional prayers would be recited—Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and the Creed—often while the pilgrim circled the station on their knees, although this is now dying out.

1 Ed. note. The Marian Shrine at Knock: On August 21, 1879, fifteen people, age five to seventy-five, reported seeing an apparition of the Mother of God, St. Joseph, and St. John the Evangelist in the south gable of the Knock parish church. The apparitions appeared during daylight, as bright, unmoving figures and stayed until well after dusk. Although the praying witnesses were wet from the rain, they reported that the ground under the apparition remained dry. The apparitions were repeated three times in the following spring. Various possible natural theories explaining the apparition were investigated by church authorities, but none were proved. A basilica was built at Knock in the 20th century to memorialize the event, and the Roman Catholic pilgrimage site was given official approval by Pope John Paul II in 1979, on the centenary of the apparition.

## Bronze and Iron Age Croagh Patrick

RTE: Do you have any idea how long pilgrimages to the area have been going on?

MICHAEL: That's a harder question, and a big debate. The mountain is the incredible centerpiece of a whole ritual landscape, so there have been people living on and around Croagh Patrick for about 7,000 years. Because of its shape and size, it could easily have been a prehistoric sacred peak. I used to think that myself until very recently, because there are many Neolithic sites around the mountain.



*St. Patrick's Chair (Boheh Stone), Fr. Frank Fahey on pilgrimage, 1990. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

Another very beautiful early site about four miles from the mountain is called St. Patrick's Chair. It is on the 22-mile route from Ballintubber Abbey (the traditional starting point) and is actually one of the pilgrimage stops. Many of the early Christian stops along the route are reused pre-Christian sites: Lankill cemetery, for example, is an early Christian monastery site with tall Bronze Age standing stones inscribed with beautifully decorated crosses. Further on, are Iron Age sites, also with inscribed crosses, and the Boheh Stone.



The Boheh Stone, or St. Patrick's Chair, is a multi-ledged rock about the size of this room, completely covered in Neolithic rock art except for one small cross carved into the side. Adjacent to it is a children's burial ground hidden on a knoll, obviously an early cemetery because there are a number of decorated crosses there. From St. Patrick's Chair, you have an exquisite view to the west of the beautiful pyramid-shaped Reek.

Gerry Bracken, a friend of mine who died recently, observed that the sun appeared to set on the summit of the mountain when viewed from this beautiful rock. When you are standing on the Boheh Stone, Croagh Patrick is in front of you dominating the horizon: in late afternoon the sun swings around



*Sun rolling down the north slope of the mountain on April 18 and August 24 as seen from the Boheh Stone. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

and sits on top of the mountain, and then appears to glide down the north face. Gerry got an amazing multiple exposure photograph showing the whole sequence. It looks like someone is pulling it down the mountain at a perfect angle. A physicist from the national observatory published an article on the phenomenon, saying that this prehistoric religious phenomenon explains why the rock art was there.

After this article, New Age pilgrimages developed around the site from lots of people who know nothing about Patrick or anything else. It's the harum-scarum end of pilgrimage—people who are looking for something exotic and have found it in this “prehistoric” pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick. I was once asked to speak on this and it didn't go down too well because I said, “Well, alright, perhaps this was the reason why the rock art was carved there, but this phenomenon can also be seen from two miles up the road and two miles down the road, because I checked. If you have a steep-sided peak like this at a particular angle, and the sun sets on a particular day, you do get this phenomenon, but just the fact that we can see it from here, doesn't mean that this was a sacred point and it doesn't necessarily explain the rock art. While it's a possibility, it's not evidence.” That theory has been gathering legs, so I've been busy trying to chop the legs off.

RTE: Michael, you said that you used to think that Croagh Patrick was a sacred peak in prehistory. Do you still believe that?

MICHAEL: We have seventy mountains with Neolithic tombs on top of them, including Tully Mountain to the West, which has a massive Neolithic tomb on top. The early Neolithic farming communities often built their tombs on hilltops, sometimes with very elaborate ritual enclosures, but on Croagh Patrick there simply aren't any. The new argument among supporters of prehistoric pilgrimage is that perhaps it was so sacred that they didn't want to spoil it by defiling it with a tomb, so you can't win with that one. For some people, when there's no evidence, the lack of evidence is evidence; when there is evidence, they use it both ways.

Another argument they use to claim that Croagh Patrick was a ritual monument in the Bronze Age, is that to the north of the mountain is Killadangen (“kill” is a church, and “daingean” is a stronghold), there is a large area adjacent to the mountain with a Bronze Age ritual complex right beside the main road. There you have a series of standing stones aligned on a notch in the mountain, and on the 21st of December, at the beginning of the New Year of the ancient calendar, the sun appears to slide down into that notch and disappear over the horizon. We have about two hundred of these stone alignments all over Ireland, (I recently found another, near here) and we've always wondered what their significance is. They are almost all aligned exactly north-south, or a degree or two off. Some mark passes in the mountains, others seem to mark route ways: all of them are burials. I've excavated one of them.

When people argue that this means that Croagh Patrick was a sacred Bronze Age site, I say, “Well, if you put enough stone rows up in a mountainous area, some of them are going to come up with very interesting alignments, and are we reading into it or not?” Nevertheless, there are legitimate arguments that this was a holy mountain.

When you come forward to the late Iron Age, a very shadowy period coinciding with the Roman occupation of Britain, Ireland goes silent. We have thousands of Bronze Age sites, a huge array of Neolithic sites, but almost no late Iron Age sites.

So if you think of Croagh Patrick and the surrounding area as a pulsing Bronze Age settlement, with people flowing in, filling the landscape, filling the valleys, filling every island, and then the climate deteriorates and they push back onto the better land; the marginal land is abandoned.

We can see a continuous movement to and fro in the archeological record from 8,000 BC, but in the Iron Age we don’t see anything for four centuries, although the gradual appearance of some late Iron Age material on road schemes is changing this picture. This is a critical formative period, immediately pre-Christian and coinciding with the Roman occupation of Britain, so perhaps colonization has brought disease with it and has wiped out the Irish. By the end of the Roman period we know that the Irish are back because the Romans describe their pillaging, raiding, and burning of British cities as part of a larger barbarian conspiracy that took a whole imperial army from Gaul to squash.

So, the Irish appear in the historic records for the first time in a major way in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards, you have Ireland being Christianized, Patrick being the major figure for that. Other Christian missionaries mentioned in the early accounts are Auxilius, Secundius, Iserninus, and Palladius, all pre-Patrician Christian missionaries in the south of Ireland. It’s said that Palladius was sent in 431 to those who were already Christians, probably in County Meath—these Christians may have been Romano-British or Gallic. We also have many Christian Ogham [pronounced Oh-am] inscriptions in Leinster and Munster from the late 4th and 5th centuries.

RTE: What is Ogham?

MICHAEL: It was a cipher, a written form of the Irish language in code, similar to Viking runes. Today, we generally find it on stone or bone, but it was probably also written on wood or manuscripts that haven’t survived. It ap-

appears as a series of lines on an edge, with a stroke after a diagonal line representing either vowels or consonants. The people who wrote it were clearly fluent in Latin as it mimics Latin structure, but they are not copying Latin. In this way, it's a secret code, developed perhaps by merchants or returning soldiers (we know there were Irish in the Roman armies). Most Ogham from the 6th century is found on monastic sites and we know that it was taught in the monastic schools, so you've got Ogham, Irish, and Latin being used as languages. Recent excavations at a wonderful site off of the south-west Scottish coast of Argyle uncovered the scriptorium and the tablets used in teaching Ogham in the school.



1904. Pilgrims surrounding church in the hollow traditionally believed to have been built by St. Patrick. Courtesy Harry Hughes.



*(Ogham translation: The stone of Lugnaedon son of Limenueth)*

RTE: Local tradition says that St. Patrick fasted and prayed for forty days and forty nights on Croagh Patrick. Is there any historical evidence that he came to Croagh Patrick, or lived in this part of Ireland?

MICHAEL: There is no direct evidence and Patrick does not mention it in his own writings, but one of the few place names associated with Patrick is the Wood of Foclut, which we think is in north Mayo near another very famous patrician site, Downpatrick. Also, about 150 feet off the Downpatrick headland is an extraordinary sight—a pillar of rock rising out of the sea. We call such pillars sea stacks, and this one has a church site on top of it. There are a number of sea stack monasteries off the west coasts of Ireland and Scotland, all purely early church sites. Irish monasteries were established in the most remote, obscure corners; neither distance nor height deterred these monks.



*At the foot of Croagh Patrick, early 20th century. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

RTE: Would they have located in these remote places because of raids, as they did in Meteora in Greece?

MICHAEL: We're not sure if that's the case here, they may have just craved solitude, but certainly, raiding was endemic. The Vikings get blamed for all of the raids on Irish monasteries but two-thirds of them were done by the Irish themselves. It was illegal to attack church sites, but it went on as part

of inter-tribal warfare. Ireland was a tribal society divided into a myriad of different kingdoms, and monks within enemy territory were often relatives of enemy tribes. Royal wealth was often stored in monasteries, and the monasteries themselves would also occasionally raid one another.

That Patrick worked in this tribal society, alive with such raids, we know from his *Confession* and his *Letter to Coroticus*. As for written assertions of his presence, we have Tireacháin of Connacht, one of Patrick's biographers writing 150 years after his death. Tireacháin has him associated with sites in Connacht, although other people claim he never got out of Ulster. We also have a later account of him in Munster, but we know now that he never actually got there. The great monastery associated with Patrick in Ulster, Armagh, wanted to establish their authority over all of Ireland, but to do this, they had to link up other areas of Ireland with Patrick and hence with their authority, so they concocted a great saga of Patrick's travels in Munster, laying waste to druids and converting kings. As a result of this push, Patrick later became the national saint, and the Monastery of Armagh became the country's primary ecclesiastical center.

## Mapping Ireland's Past

Although we have no proof that Patrick was on Croagh Patrick, there is archeological evidence for an early Christian presence on the mountain. The present church at the summit was built in 1905, and we know that there was a 19th century church up there before that, with an earlier church underneath.

We'd been studying the mountain for about fifteen years when gold was first found on Croagh Patrick. The old pilgrimage tradition had always said that there was gold on Croagh Patrick, but it was finally found and there was a lot of it. This was just before the boom in Ireland, when we still had 20% unemployment and mass migration. (In this area especially, people were reared for export. I'm from a family of seven, and at one point, six of us were working abroad, including my father. This was quite common.) So, with this rough, hard life, the notion of a lucrative gold mine in Mayo was quite attractive to some of these characters. Fortunately, they were so arrogant that they turned everyone against them. They prospected on the side of the hill, cutting off and polluting a stream. It was minor pollution, but it showed a contempt for local sensitivities and for the mountain, and so a campaign was started to see the charlatans off. At that point a committee was formed to research Croagh Patrick, to look into the background of the pilgrimage, and to see if there was any

archeological evidence of an early Christian presence other than the tradition of Patrick having been up there. This was when I was invited to get involved.

I worked at that time for the national survey program, which was mapping sixteen Irish counties using aerial photography and doing documentary research on everything before 1700. We set up our own aerial photography unit, handpicked our team, and ran the first computerized archeological office. We'd been brought in because the original survey was felt to be in need of some fresh blood and a new focus.

We didn't have the means to survey the whole country with ground teams, so we thought, "We'll look at it from the air." The Royal Commission of Britain are superb archeologists, so I went to Fortress House in London, as well as to Norfolk and Cambridge where they've had a huge archeological flying program going back to the 1930's, with a tradition of oblique aerial photography [low-elevation angled photographs taken in multiple directions] using a hand-held camera. With a few rare exceptions, we didn't have experience of that here, so we said, "This won't do, we'll have to use vertical aerial pictures, where a plane flies in a straight line with a camera attached to the bottom that takes a photograph every five seconds. These are overlapping pairs of photos, so with stereoscopic equipment we can look into every single field in the country. After the flights, we sent field teams out to check the interesting sites, and included the data in our records. It was hugely productive.

Two years later, when I was back lecturing in Cambridge, David Wilson, the head of the Cambridge Aerial Archeological Unit had just published his book on aerial photography in Britain, in which he made a sweeping statement that vertical aerial photography is of very little use for settlement studies, but by the time I finished, he was eating his hat. The Royal Air Force had flown over Britain doing vertical photography dozens of times, which showed up many of the crop mark sites<sup>2</sup> that had long been ploughed out, and I was able to show them: "They're actually there as standing artwork, lads, if you look at your own vertical collections." So what was good for us

2 [Ed. note] Crop mark sites: A means by which sub-surface archaeological and natural features may be visible from the air, and along with soil marks and frost marks, can reveal buried archaeological sites not visible from the ground. Crop marks appear due to different conditions of growth and soil. A buried stone wall, for example, will affect crop growth above it, as its presence channels water away from its area and occupies the space of the more fertile soil. Conversely, a buried ditch, filled with more organic matter than the natural earth will naturally collect water there, nourishing the plants that are growing above. These differences in conditions cause some plants to grow more strongly and therefore taller, and others less strongly and therefore shorter. Some species will also react through differential ripening of their fruits or their overall color, and all of these patterns can be seen most effectively from the air, where small changes can be seen as differences in tone or color. Fields of grain, peas, and potatoes are particularly noticeable, and will naturally follow any features buried below.

was also good for Britain and we got fantastic help from the British archeologists to get started. Whatever computer programs we needed, they were ours. They were just brilliant.

So, between the jigs and the reels, we developed a very effective way of mapping large blocks of land. We mapped about 100,000 Irish sites, and found 10,000 new ones: many were early Christian churches, and some were early Christian monasteries, generally consisting of a little church, a graveyard, an enclosure, road access and a series of earthworks. We were able to pick up a vast array of new sites, but never got to publish them fully because



*Murrisk Abbey, near the base of the pilgrim's path, 1990.*

our job was to document and map them and to put planning constraints around them, feeding into a whole system of governance and protection.

I'd already known there was a lot out there because I'd found over forty megalithic tombs just in this area. When I'd gone to university I was told, "There's nothing of archeological interest in Connemara." This was one of these statements academics love to make when they haven't bothered to do any field work in forty years, but because I grew up here, where there's a lot of Irish spoken and we have many place-names associated with monuments,



as well as a myriad of stories of the *síogí* (Shee-Oh-G-EE) fairies associated with the sites. If you're open to hearing all that, you're bound to find something. I'd been finding sites every day of the week, virtually, so I brought that knowledge to the other parts of Ireland that I worked in.

I also gave lectures wherever I happened to be working. There'd always be a shy character in the back who'd never put up his hand, and I'd wonder, "Why does that guy look so uncomfortable, now? What's he doing at the lecture?" I had a great nose for picking out people who were bursting to tell you something, but didn't have the confidence to stand up. It was great get-



*Confession at the summit, 1951. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

ting these stories. One wonderful man we met, a postman, was a self-taught expert in medieval Latin and could read it fluently. He came to us very timidly, overly-respectful, as if we knew everything. He knew about one hundred times more than us about medieval landscapes and all of these sources. So with all of this we started fitting in with amateur archeologists, historians and place-name specialists.

All of this fed into our work, but Croagh Patrick was particularly exciting because it had never been done before. Jerry Walsh, who also worked for us

said, "I want to set you up as a small private foundation, with minimal funding, minimal interference, and a small team." Since then we've done a number of publications, surveys and excavations trying to enhance the archeological record, at the same time, putting it out to people that this is a hugely important landscape in itself. Harry Hughes, the chairman and originator of our group, has written a wonderful book called *Croagh Patrick, A Place of Pilgrimage, A Place of Beauty*.

RTE: And what have you found there?

MICHAEL: Gerry Bracken, who took the remarkable multiple exposure photos of the sun setting on the mountain, also flew the Reek when it was covered with snow. Snow is very rare here, but when it does happen, you get a fantastic light. Jerry came one day to show me his wonderful photograph of the mountain, with the church in snow and the sea behind. I said, "Jerry, don't mind the church, look what the church is sitting in." Of course, what it was sitting in was, from the air, clearly a monastic enclosure.

I managed to get a set of photographs from 1905, when the present church on the summit was built. There was a huge throng of people that year, because the pilgrimage was being revived as an official Catholic pilgrimage. In those photographs, you could just pick out the early ramparts on either side, which have since been degraded by people taking stones for souvenirs. During the building of the 1905 church, the workers found a burial up there, which was interpreted as the grave of a famous 19th-century guide, Bob o' the Reek, who'd been buried on the summit, but almost certainly this grave wasn't his. It was probably a much earlier cemetery that they'd dug into.

When we started working on the summit, we found a number of structures that we'd spotted from the aerial photography, one of which turned out to be a small oratory, which we excavated. The oratory was set within the wider enclosure, and outside of that, on the scree slope, we found about twenty hut hollows dug into the mountainside.

RTE: These hut hollows were sites of monastic cells?

MICHAEL: We don't know. We excavated them through the scree and we got some artifact images, but the context wasn't clear, so we're still not sure.

RTE: Were you able to date the oratory?

MICHAEL: Yes, we're pretty sure it's from between the fifth to the eighth cen-

tury, but we haven't gotten any closer than that. It was a sunken oratory, sunken into the hill, which makes sense when you're up on this very steep peak. The doorway faced east, and we have a number of early churches like this. If you'd had the more normal western-facing door (with an eastern facing altar) in this building you'd have just blown down the mountain. Teampall Benan, on top of the hill at Cill Éinne on Aran, has a north-south orientation. It was an identical structure to ours in terms of size, shape, and the form of the building, which was a sort of corbelled, up-turned boat-shaped plan. So the oratory was a very important discovery, and we left the rest of it unexcavated. Then we had to seal the whole thing off again because the souvenir hunters and pilgrims got wind of it.

There is evidence of this chapel's existence recorded in 824 when the Archbishop of Armagh had an argument with the Archbishop of Tuam as Armagh was claiming church dues from Teampall Phadraig. This shows that the church on the summit was in use.

RTE: Wouldn't it make sense that the hut hollows in the scree were monastic cells for a community that worshipped in the oratory? The monks surely couldn't have made the climb from the bottom every day.

MICHAEL: I can say that after a couple of weeks of our team working up there, we could climb Croagh Patrick in an hour. You get adapted, and I'm sure the monks did too. It's arduous for us moderns because we aren't used to hard physical work, but that's something rather new. Before he emigrated, my father cycled seventeen miles to work every day and the same back, and that wasn't unusual. I do believe people were living on top of Croagh Patrick, but for how long, we're not sure. Another possibility is that the remote monasteries were seasonal—perhaps they only lived there for part of the year.

One of the other marvelous sites on the mountain we found with the help of a local hill farmer. He couldn't come up because he was too elderly, so we climbed down a thousand feet from the summit with him directing us from the bottom. With his help we found a lovely remote monastic cell recessed into the scree slope, looking out toward the main pilgrimage route. It was an amazing site. This was probably a penitential cell, a private little spot.

So now we have a confirmed major early-church site on top of Croagh Patrick, and we have an historical account of the year 1113, when thirty people were killed in a lightning strike while climbing the Reek on the night pilgrimage. We also have accounts of raids on the Reek.

RTE: So you have the textual evidence and a confirmed site! Climbing Mt. Sinai, you also pass the ruins of a small cell off of the route. In earlier centuries, there was a monk there and pilgrims couldn't climb past that point until they'd confessed. Might this have been similar or was it too far off the path?

MICHAEL: About that, we don't know, but one of the problems today is that many archeologists working on sites have no background to even think about such things. They live in a post-religious world, and to them these are just buildings. So their interpretations are not based on any experience or



*Sticks for the Reek, 1990. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

understanding of the religious setting, and they have no taste for it. This is a massive gap. They treat the church or cell as if it's a Neolithic tomb.

RTE: Could the date of 1113 for the night pilgrimage indicate that the pilgrimage had been going on long before? If the oratory was a 5th—8th century foundation, isn't it likely that Croagh Patrick had attracted pilgrims for centuries?

MICHAEL: We don't know exactly when the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick began. The earliest reference to a pilgrim going to an Irish site is from 606 AD

when a pilgrim died at Clonmacnoise according to the *Annals of the Four Masters*. Many pilgrimage destinations are mentioned in the Annals but often only once or twice and only if some other event happened during the pilgrimage such as the 1113 lightning storm. Unfortunately, we don't have many pilgrimage records. We do have an old inscription on Mt. Brandon referring to a pilgrim, but most of our written accounts of pilgrimage are from Ireland to Rome or Jerusalem. There's one very early account mentioned by Dicuil, an Irish geographer at the Carolingian Court around 767, of an Irishman who had been to Jerusalem and Egypt and described seeing the



*Dan Gwain and children as he sets off for the Reek, 1957. Courtesy Harry Hughes.*

pyramids. *The Annals of Inisfallen* also record the King of the Déisi going to Jerusalem in 1080.

Croagh Patrick is also associated with a series of other 5th-8th century monasteries (and some a little later) on the lower slopes that have been long abandoned, though some are still used as burial grounds. These include a number of significant sites to the east and north faces where you've got a very good sliver of land for growing food. The transect on the front face of Croagh Patrick has a high number of monuments of all periods, and we think

that the lower church sites were probably supporting monasteries for the summit monastery itself.

We reckoned all along that there had to have been something up there, but monasteries were often only mentioned when they were attacked, and in any case the records were destroyed in various troubles. We've been able to confirm what was in the earlier accounts.

RTE: Where are these accounts from?

MICHAEL: *The Annals of the Four Masters*, mostly. These were four 17th-century Irish clerics who, when the whole of Ireland was convulsed by war, furiously gathered manuscripts from monasteries all over the country and compiled these annals. The *Annals* are like a year-by-year diary written from the 6th century onwards, right up until the Middle Ages. Similar individual annals are still kept by monasteries, but many of the originals have been lost. Some, like the *Annals of Armagh*, survive because these monasteries kept their own annals. They were serious scholars who were conscious that Gaelic culture was being destroyed. It was destroyed, and this was a desperate attempt to rescue the culture, or at least its key documents.

RTE: Was this destruction mostly under Cromwell?<sup>3</sup>

MICHAEL: Not only Cromwell. You had nine years of the Elizabethan wars,<sup>4</sup> then you have about thirty years that included the Plantations of Ulster<sup>5</sup> and the invasion of Cromwell, and then the Williamite Wars<sup>6</sup> at the end of the 17th

3 Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658): An English military and political leader who defeated the royalists in the English Civil War. After the execution of Catholic King Charles I in 1649, the Puritan Cromwell dominated the short-lived Commonwealth of England, brutally conquered Ireland and Scotland and ruled as Lord Protector from 1653 until his death. His measures against the Irish Catholic population and culture were genocidal.

4 Elizabethan and Nine Years Wars (1562-1603): The Elizabethan War began around 1562 during the reign of Elizabeth I when the English began forcibly replacing Irish lords with English Protestants. Irish resistance resulted in the defeat of the Desmond clan and the reallocation of their estates to the English. The Nine Years War (1594-1603) was a continuation of the struggle against the growing English Protestant power in Ireland. The Irish were forced to surrender in 1603.

5 Plantations of Ulster: Beginning in 1606, an organized, forced colonization of the Irish province of Ulster (previously the most Gaelic province of Ireland and the most resistant to English invasion) by wealthy English and Scottish Protestant landowners. After 1609, the plantation was officially overseen by King James I of England and VI of Scotland. A half-million acres of land were illegally confiscated, with many native Irish dying of starvation.

6 Williamite War: (Also known as the Jacobite War) was a late 17th-century conflict between Catholic King James II and Protestant William of Orange after the deposition of James II as King of the Three Kingdoms. James was supported by Irish Catholic Jacobites in Ireland, who were defeated in 1691. The war had a lasting effect on Ireland, confirming British and Protestant rule over the country for over a century.

century. Classically, these are English-Irish wars, but there are many layers to this, because there were also Norman Irish here, sometimes called the Old English, who remained Catholic after the Reformation—like my own family who came to Ireland under the Gaelicized Normans. But by the 17th century, your ethnic background was no longer as important as your religion and when Cromwell came, he came to defeat the Catholic Irish, without distinguishing between the Old English and the Gaelic Irish. Key English families who had always been faithful to the crown but had remained Catholic were stripped of their lands just like the Gaelic Irish. But these educated landowners tended to be more politically astute, so often they'd end up with four sons on different sides in every row, so that after treaties were signed they could sometimes receive their lands back. The Gaelicized Normans were more fleet of foot than the Gaelic families, who were by and large exterminated, exiled, and lost virtually everything. That world survived longer, of course, in Scotland. The pro-royalist Jacobites hung on until 1745, the Battle of Culloden.

RTE: I imagine that before Cromwell the Gaelic Irish and the Norman Irish had lived apart?

MICHAEL: For a while they did. The Normans came in the 12th century, and quickly began to establish themselves in towns scattered all over Ireland, and as powerful provincial landowners. Gaelic Ireland remained mostly rural, but during the 14th-century outbreak of the Black Death, most Norman towns failed precisely because the Normans were town dwellers and the Irish weren't. It hit the towns hard.

Galway is a good example of a walled Norman city, but after its devastation by the plague, you find 15th-century statutes brought in to forbid the speaking of Irish and the playing of Irish games. We know from this that the diminished Norman English culture of the city must have already shifted toward the surrounding Gaelic. At that period, although Galway is officially English, culturally it's becoming Irish, and the officials are going cracked. With the Reformation in the 16th century, you have other new settlers coming in: another complex combination with Protestant officials stepping on the toes of Galway's old Norman Catholic magnates, who themselves had been sent there centuries earlier to keep the Irish quiet. Then, with the Reformation and the coming of Cromwell, Norman Catholics now have to throw in their lot with their traditional enemies, the native Irish. Once the Puritan armies arrive they have a common enemy.

A papal legate is sent to Ireland with arms and money to put a bit of Catholic steel to the flagging Irish effort, but the Irish, while Catholic, were quite political as well and weren't necessarily fighting for a Catholic state. They were fighting for their lives and land. They had other alliances too, because you also had English Protestant royalists from England and the continent who were fighting alongside Irish troops for the reinstatement of the monarchy. At the end of the Cromwellian wars, the Irish are destroyed.

Inishbofin, near here, was the last stronghold of the native Irish in the west. The island surrendered on terms, which they were lucky to do. They



*Pilgrims on summit of Croagh Patrick, c. 1904. (Wynne Collection)*

escaped with their lives and sailed to France with about 700 people. In the 17th century, hundreds of thousands of Irish are exiles in France, Spain, the Papal States, Austria-Hungary, Poland, anywhere there is a Catholic country, and Irish armies are being raised from the émigré Irish populations in Louvane, Salamanca, Rome and Vienna.

RTE: I've also read that more than 12,000 Irish were sent by the English conquerors as indentured servants to the Caribbean.



MICHAEL: Yes, both as indentured servants and as slaves. The earliest existing maps we have of Croagh Patrick are from this dark period. From the 16th century, the mountain is marked as a sanctuary. William Petty, a mapmaker for the Cromwellian regime in Ireland, mapped the lands of the “papists” and of disloyal Protestants. These are fantastic maps of every parish, describing who lives there: Irish, papists, rebels, description of land, and afterwards, the confiscated land and who is going to be granted the land. The wars in Ireland were funded by venture capitalists and soldier merchants, all of whom had to be paid. So, you have wholesale confiscations going on



*Pilgrims outside St. Patrick's Oratory, 1905. (Wynne collection)*

to pay soldiers and investors, and masses of people migrating to the continent. Culturally, the population is beheaded. Under the Penal Laws, no Irish Catholic can practice a profession or hold public office. The country's Irish Catholic schools are closed and no Catholic may teach. Irish may not serve in the army, adopt orphans, or at some periods, even live in towns. Pilgrimage is also banned, although not very effectively. There are no longer any priests or bishops, they've all been executed or banished on pain of death. There are a few religious remaining in secret, but the great majority of church sites

that had survived the Middle Ages are abandoned. There is nothing left to the Irish of their traditional religion except going to holy wells and climbing Croagh Patrick. From the 1780s onwards, many of these restrictions were gradually eased and the British Government even funded the new Catholic University in Maynooth. Full Catholic Emancipation came in the 1820's.

RTE: How many of the Catholic clergy survived?

MICHAEL: By the end of the 17th century, huge areas have none at all. In fact, in 19th-century Connemara when Irish-speaking evangelical Protestant missionaries were swarming all over the place, people had been without churches and sacraments for so long that they didn't know the difference. They knew that earlier there'd been Irish-speaking priests, so they were quite happy to go to a Protestant mission to get some food and go to the services until the difference was pointed out to them.

Reverend MacManus, a Protestant minister (and ex-priest, which was quite unusual) described their awakening: "We were making great inroads with the Joyces of the Inagh Valley"... until someone must have poisoned the atmosphere against him, and told the Joyces that he wasn't a Catholic priest at all, but a Protestant minister. They didn't know what a Protestant minister was, but he was obviously something he shouldn't have been. (*laughter*) On Aran, when they were told that he wasn't a real priest, they wouldn't take him off, so he wandered the island for weeks, looking for a way back to the mainland.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, only the pilgrimage sites continued as an outward religious practice; otherwise there's total war. When the Irish broke the "rules" the English would launch cruel punitive raids, and all hell would be unleashed on top of them. Defeated Gaelic chiefs would often sign a deal: no more raiding, no more attacking English crown land or the English allies. But if a Gaelic lord isn't raiding, he's not really a Gaelic lord. After a few years, they'd get bored and break out in rebellion. If the rebellion was strong enough, like that of Grace O'Malley, the Irish pirate queen, they'd be offered another pardon by the English. So there was a succession of surrenders, rebellions and pardons, until finally the English would go in and garrison the place, taking all of the land. Our Irish history is often written from a nationalist point of view that there was a pre-conceived plan by the English to colonize the whole country, but often, the confiscation was by default. These mountain areas of Connemara and parts of Mayo survived the longest. They

were so isolated that even some paganism survived in remote corners; there was a medieval Ireland still clinging on.

## The Irish Language

RTE: Speaking the Irish language was also forbidden under the English, wasn't it? Can you say something about today's Irish/Gaelic speakers?

MICHAEL: Yes, a massive effort was made to anglicize Gaelic society, and a knowledge of English became necessary in order to interact with the state or the legal system. Linguistically, Irish is the same language from Scotland all the way down. It is a British language as well as an Irish language, but a different dialect. Today there are probably no more than 60,000 who speak it naturally every day of the week, and half a million more who can speak it, but don't use it as their primary everyday language. Roughly half of Connemara remains Irish speaking.

I worked in London on building sites when I was 17. This was 1976, and I remember that one of the men on the site was very quiet. Donegal, we used to call him, and Donegal wouldn't say a word to anyone. But one day I heard a man from Spiddal, a village south of here, talking in Irish and I said in Irish, "How are you, where are you from?" When Donegal heard he ran over to me and said, "You're able to speak." He'd lived in London for a few years and had never learned English and didn't want anyone to know because the most embarrassing thing within an immigrant community is not to speak the host language.

There were a lot of Irish people in London from Connemara, Aran, and Donegal that arrived with so little English that they kept themselves within that community. There's a very large Irish-speaking community in London, as there is in New York, Boston, and Chicago, but they tend not to pass it on to the next generation. There was huge antagonism towards Irish language from the 17th century onwards in Ireland. The Irish-speaking Lords were gone, as was the clergy, so it simply went down the social order.

There's a wonderful early 18th-century account of one of the Irish O'Connor chiefs in exile in Austria-Hungary. He is meeting the Archduke in Vienna, and an old Irish émigré chief is also there who greets his two young cousins, who had just come from Roscommon, in Irish. They are embarrassed and say, "We don't speak the old language anymore." The archduke replies, "What sort of culture are you that you don't even speak your own language?"

We have a national Irish radio and television station now, but there is still an on-going decline. Before independence, Irish was often beaten out of you in the schools. My grandfather went to school in the national school system. They had to wear a tally-stick around their neck, and every time they spoke Irish it was notched and they were beaten at the end of the day. So there was tremendous pressure to have English to get on in life. The world of commerce, of respectability, of advancement, was all in English. Then, after



*Roman Catholic mass on summit of Croagh Patrick with Archbishop Neary, 2008.*

Independence, they tried to beat Irish back into you, which left many people with ambiguous feelings toward the language.

This attitude has changed now, but not the deep change we need. We don't have the strength of the language like in Wales or in northern Scotland, where the Presbyterian Church is very conscious of holding onto the language. In Ireland, despite an official position of support, the cultural impact of colonization and anti-Irish prejudice is strong. The people most against the Irish language are the generation who've abandoned it, like my father. His parents and older sister were Irish speakers, but he had no time for it at

all; he wanted to be a modern Irish person. Irish is still in sharp decline, even though it's obligatory in school. You can't matriculate without it, but it's not part of the deep culture.

Now, the areas around here speak it, but my children don't, even though I speak to them in Irish. My sister lives south of us and her children do speak it, because they've been brought up in an Irish-speaking village. Irish is still spoken in parts of Belfast as part of a nationalist identity.



*First Station of the Reek, 1985.*

## The Tragedy of the National Archives; Later Literature

RTE: Are there accounts of people climbing Croagh Patrick during the period of the penal laws?

MICHAEL: We know they did, but there are only spartan accounts. Our big difficulty with historical records is that in 1922 during the Civil War after the British left, the historical records in the Four Courts in Dublin were destroyed. Our whole history went up in smoke. Anti-treaty forces, opposed

to the new government and the terms of the settlement with Britain, seized control of buildings in the centre of Dublin. The forces of the new Irish Government, Michael Collins and his men, shelled the national archives with incendiary shells and 90% of the country's written records were lost. This is one of the great tragedies of Irish history, because these records had survived a thousand years of war. The loss is irreparable.

RTE: How incredibly sad.

MICHAEL: Yes. It probably isn't until the 17th century again, that we have an account of Croagh Patrick being climbed on its traditional day, the last Sunday in July. Until today, there is also another pilgrimage to the top done on the Friday before, by the people who live west of Croagh Patrick. It is called Crom Dubh Friday. Crom Dubh ("black and bent") was the pagan demon associated with St. Patrick on Croagh Patrick. Local history is full of these battles between Patrick and Crom Dubh: Patrick always wins, of course, and the devil is drowned in the lake at the bottom. The mountain is also regularly climbed on St. Patrick's Day, but this is often very wintry weather, and there have been many fatalities just from the cold. But there are always climbers, every day of the year.

For the millennium year in 2000 we wanted to have the night pilgrimage back, which was the original tradition. One wise-cracker said, "The reason it was a night pilgrimage is obvious. If you'd seen the height of it during the day, you'd never go up." (*laughter*)

Although we've lost most of the earlier historical records, one of the best descriptions of climbing Croagh Patrick is by Asenath Nicholson in her 19th-century account, *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger*. She had met impoverished Irish in the hovels of New York. She's a sort of evangelical protestant but not pushy—in fact, she's not a very enthusiastic evangelist. She gives out the odd tract here and there but she's much more interested in these new neighbors that have turned up. They're half-starved, they're very quarrelsome, but they've a great sense of life and fun. This is the Irish. She finally moves to Ireland to see where they've come from, and she walks throughout Ireland right before and during the famine, and gives some harrowing accounts. She writes from Clifden to Letterfrack and calls it the most impoverished place she's seen to date in Ireland. She climbs the Diamond, and then she goes to Croagh Patrick and is negotiating for a girl guide to bring her up the mountain. She was asked for six pennies, but in the end she climbs up on

her own. The guides at the bottom are horrified that she's going up on her own, but she won't pay. She climbs up through the cloud and the mist and describes sliding down the scree. She's a wonderful writer.

Another of the best accounts is by Patrick Kavanagh, one of our most famous 20th-century Irish writers, who wrote in the 50's. (This account is in Harry Hughes' book). Also, T. H. White, who wrote *The Once and Future King*. White was in Ireland during the Second World War as a conscientious objector and wrote a fabulous book called *The Godstone and the Blackymor*. The godstone is a stone the Inishkea Islanders were said to worship as an idol and which they certainly used to perform magic and cast curses, but it was almost certainly a medieval saint statuette. This is a wonderful novel about the whole northwest, and even though he's Protestant, he makes a marvelous account of it. It's often the outside observers who pick up on details that you don't see. Because our own archives were destroyed, these oblique views on the culture and the pilgrimage are hugely important.

RTE: With the records destroyed, there is even less physical evidence from those early centuries, but what can you tell us about the Black Bell of St. Patrick, which I understand is associated with the Reek?

MICHAEL: The bell was traditionally brought on the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage every year by the Geraghty family; pilgrims could kiss it for a penny. It is now in the National Museum in Dublin and is an early Christian hand-bell called the 'Clog Dubh Phádraig' (the Black Bell of St Patrick). It is also known as 'Bearnán Bhrighde' (the gapped bell of Brigid) and the 'Clog Geal' (the bright bell). All of the early accounts mention it. It was used to swear on in legal matters (it was believed that the devil would carry off the swearer if he told an untruth). In 1838 it was owned by Hugh Geraghty who told the antiquarian John O'Donovan that the bell was originally white but turned black as a result of the constant pelting at demons by the saint.

RTE: True enough in spirit, anyway. Now, to end, pilgrims obviously climb Croagh Patrick out of love for God and the saint, but for what other reasons do people climb? You've already mentioned fulfilling vows, such as the Traveller woman who tried to climb it three successive times for her nephew's health.

MICHAEL: People climb it for all sorts of reasons. My brother climbed it because he's a bomb disposal officer in the Irish army and he was going on a

dangerous mission to Kosovo to clear mines just after the war. At the moment he's in Chad, clearing mines from around the refugee camps on the Darfur border. That climb was for a very particular reason, that St. Patrick keep an eye on him.

A lot of the Travellers climb because they have a personal attachment to Patrick, who'll intervene on their behalf. Other people climb because they are about to do something important in their lives: getting married, taking exams (such as your leaving-certificate for school—the hardest exam you'll ever do, with eight comprehensive subjects. That exam decides the rest of your life.) Sometimes, a whole class will do it at the end of their test. When they have their results, they'll all go together. Sometimes also, people climb for other people. For example, you might climb for a sick member of your family, a strong tradition in the 19th century. I remember while climbing in the Himalayas, one of our guides told me, "I don't know why I'm a Buddhist. We're all Buddhists." For some Irish this is the same; it's part of our tradition.

I was there two years ago when the Catholic cardinal from Northern Ireland climbed. He was a fit man, and I think he may have been up before, but this was his first time climbing the Reek as a cardinal. It was wonderful because it was a really foggy day and the summit was thronged because everyone wanted to be at his mass. As he was saying mass, the sun broke through the clouds and suddenly Clew Bay was sparkling in the distance with another mountain behind also lit up. It stopped him in his tracks in the middle of mass—everyone saw it. The whole majesty of the place is overwhelming and it was fabulous that he was aware of that.

The great thing is to see that even with all of the changes going on in Ireland, the pilgrimage sites are holding their own. ✦

Michael Gibbons is a member of the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland. He has twenty-five years of experience as an archaeologist and recently completed a five-year term as a member of the Archaeology Committee of the Heritage Council. He has worked with the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem and for the Museum of London City Excavation Programme. In Ireland, Michael worked on the Donegal Archaeological Survey and Galway Archaeological Survey and is a former co-director of the National Sites and Monuments Record Office of Public Works. He has directed surveys and excavations on Croagh Patrick and has mapped the uplands and islands of the Connacht Coast.



His recent publications include a book, *Connemara: Visions of Iar Chonnacht*, Cottage Publications (2004) as well as dozens of articles for academic and scientific journals, and has recently spoken widely at conferences about the Skellig Islands in Cork, at Harvard and at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C.

Currently Michael works as an independent archaeologist, and is looking at upland settlement in the Reeks for a forthcoming publication by Con Moriarty. His research interests include the archaeology of the intertidal zone and the pilgrimage tradition in Ireland with a particular focus on holy mountains and islands.

Michael provides a guide service for walking groups interested in archaeological field trips in Connemara. He can be contacted at [walkwest@eircom.net](mailto:walkwest@eircom.net).

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