

## Forest Perspectives

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### Saint Patrick's Forest

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#### Abstract

A review of surviving records and of modern commentaries indicates that Saint Patrick's Irish captivity was spent at or near a forest in Co Mayo, and not on Slemish in Co Antrim.

**Keywords:** Saint Patrick, captivity, Wood of Foclut, Ireland.

#### The basis

Experts agree that only two of the writings popularly ascribed to Patrick are authentic. Those are the *Confession*, which we deal with here, and the *Letter to Coroticus*, which does not concern us in this context (Hanson 1983).

#### The question

In the *Confession* Patrick refers to a 'Wood of Foclut' (*Silva Vochuti* alternatively *silua Uochuti*<sup>1</sup>, and other versions, all dealt with extensively by Bieler (1943)). That wood was apparently located in the west of Ireland. Since the word 'wood' carries an implication of man-made woodland, and since the Latin word *silva* is a fairly broad term and since there were no plantations in Ireland at the time in question, we may more reasonably refer to it as a 'forest'.

In his paper, *The Problem of Silua Focluti*, Ludwig Bieler (1943) lists 21 authors who have speculated on the location of the Wood of Foclut since 1905, (including, in 1937, Henry Morris, father of a former Chief Inspector of the Forest Service). He adds, by way of comment: *Passing over so much learned literature, the student cannot help feeling that most of the authors mentioned have been happier in their criticisms of their predecessors than in their original contributions.*

A modern tourism booklet confidently asserts, although without offering supporting evidence, that: *This area, Focluth, which today is now known as Foghill, lies approx. eight kilometres north of Killala and the wood, 'Silva Focluti' extended from there to Crosspatrick cemetery on the Ballina road: and beyond!* (author's exclamation mark), (Dunford 2004).

#### The life

Reading some of the more scholarly writings about Patrick one becomes aware that much less is known for certain about him than many of us may have been given to

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<sup>1</sup> In Latin writing u and v tended to be used interchangeably.

understand in earlier years. It appears that most of the Patrician stories and traditions collected by for example Joyce (1913) are fictitious or apocryphal. A high proportion of them are derived from the so-called *Tri-Partite Life*, (the *Vita Tripartita*) composed between 859 and 901 and described by Hanson (1983) as a compilation ... *in which folklore and pious imagination have run riot; among other embellishments of the earlier story, this brings Patrick to visit Rome in the time of Pope Celestine, study there under Germanus, to spend a further period under Germanus at Auxerre, and, to finish things off properly, to live for a period as a monk at Tours under Martin (ob 397)! ... He rejects all that. (It is of course acknowledged that the ancillary details as recorded by Joyce are valid as an indication of social conditions in ancient Ireland.)*

The outline of Patrick's career, not seriously disputed among modern scholars, is summarised by Hanson (1983) as follows: *He was born in Britain of British [not English as the Angles had not yet arrived] upper-class or aristocratic parents. When he was nearly sixteen he was captured by Irish pirates<sup>2</sup> who carried him off to Ireland where he spent six years as a slave tending sheep. He then escaped from Ireland. Later he returned to Ireland as a bishop and spent the rest of his life evangelising there, and he died in Ireland.*

### Documentary sources

As mentioned above, the *Confession* is one of only two of Patrick's writings which are regarded by authorities as authentic. The relevant passage in the *Confession*, in Hanson's translation is

'And next a few years later I was in Britain among my parents who [had] received me for their son and earnestly requested me that I should now after all the troubles which I had experienced never leave them, and it was there that *I saw a vision of the night* a man coming apparently from Ireland whose name was Victoricus, with an unaccountable number of letters, and he gave me one of them and I read the heading of the letter which ran, "The Cry of the Irish," and while I was reading aloud the heading of the letter I was imagining that at that very moment I heard the voice of those who were by the Wood of Voclut which is near the western sea, and this is what they cried, *as with one voice*, "Holy boy, we are asking you to come and walk among us again," and *I was struck deeply to the heart* and I was not able to read any further and at that I woke up. God be thanked that after several years the Lord granted to them according to their cry.' (Translator's italics indicate biblical quotations.)

In his comment on the foregoing passage Hanson writes *It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the 'wood of Voclut which is by the western sea' was situated by the Atlantic on the west coast of Ireland. Patrick was in Ireland when he wrote these words; the only sea to the west of him was the Atlantic. To imagine that he could mean the Irish Sea between Britain and Ireland is absurd. It is equally far-fetched to*

<sup>2</sup> Joyce (1920) believes that this raid was 'probably' led by Niall of the Nine Hostages, although O'Rahilly (1942) suggests the involvement of Nath Í, king of Connaught, leading further credibility to the Mayo location of Patrick's captivity.

think that 'the children of the Wood of Voclut' were not the people among whom Patrick had spent the years of captivity, especially as in the dream they call him to come and live among them 'again'. This means that the place where he was kept a slave for six years was on the west coast of Ireland, and the necessity which faced him when he escaped of travelling two hundred miles<sup>3</sup> fits in well with this. When therefore Tirechán tells us that the Wood of Voclut was in the district of Tirawley (near the small town of Killala on the sea-coast of Mayo not far from the border between Mayo and Sligo), we can well believe him. Tirechán himself came from that area, and place names survive unchanged much longer than any other form of tradition. These conclusions are, of course, fatal to the later story that Patrick spent his captivity on Mount Slemish in Co. Antrim.

This was also the conclusion of Bieler (1949) who regarded any attempt to locate the Wood of Foclut in the north-east as ... *blocked – for good, as it seems to me – by O'Rahilly.*

In that later and more general treatment<sup>4</sup> which, he implies, is less opinionated, Bieler (1949) suggests that the Wood of Foclut of Patrick's dream may be no more than a place he had heard about during his captivity. To the present writer this is considerably less convincing than to conclude that the location of his dream was a place where Patrick had lived as a youth.

It is remarkable that, as pointed out by O'Rahilly in his 1942 publication, the Wood of Voclut is one of only two place names mentioned by Patrick in his *Confession*; the other, his home village in Britain, has never been identified.

### Localities

John O'Donovan of the Ordnance Survey, writing to his headquarters from Ballina on 12 May 1838 asks to be sent ... *the references in Tirechan [to] the Tripartite [Life] and Usher<sup>5</sup>, to the Wood of Fochlut (Caill Fochlut) where St. Patrick in a vision saw the Irish with outstretched hands, beseeching him to come to their assistance. Usher states that it was in the Barony of Tirawley in the Co. of Mayo, and it is added in other authorities that Patrick afterwards built a church there...* On 24 May he writes that *This Barony of Tirawley, seems to be as large as the Co of Louth. It will take more time to traverse than I had anticipated* (O'Donovan 1838). (As well as Killala, Tirawley includes the towns of Ballina and Crossmolina.) On 30 May T. O'Connor, a colleague, writes from Killala *Coille Fochladh is a district of which I have not yet ascertained the extent.* It appears that no trace of St. Patrick's presence was found at that time. That is not surprising in view of Hanson's comments on the veracity of the legends.

<sup>3</sup> ducenta milia passus; literally 200 x 1000 Roman paces = 184 statute miles or 296 km.

<sup>4</sup> It may be of interest that this book carries a NIHIL OBSTAT from the diocesan censor and an IMPRIMATUR signed by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid.

<sup>5</sup> James Us[s]her (1581-1656) Archbishop of Armagh 1594. Condemned the use of Irish in the Church of Ireland. He concluded that the world had been created in 4004 BC.

Bieler (1943) repeats Tirechán's identification of ...*the wood of Fochloth (Fochlad)*... in Connacht, a place-name commonly believed to survive in modern Foghill (Fochoill) near Killala, Tirawley, Co Mayo. Joyce (1869-1913) derives Foghill, in Mayo, from the Irish *Fo-choill*, underwood, suggesting a woodland connection. According to modern Ordnance Survey maps Foghill is located about 6 km (4 miles) north-north-west of Killala. However, O'Rahilly (1942) dismisses this identification as having ... *no basis; the resemblance between the names is deceptive* ... On etymological and linguistic evidence he concludes that the name of the wood would be better rendered as ...*the Sheltering Wood*... He suggests that the Wood of Fochlut lay to the west of the present Crosspatrick, which is two kilometres ( $\frac{1}{4}$  mile) south-west of Killala, and mentions the townlands of Tawnaghmore (Lower and Upper) and the adjoining Farragh.

Patrick's account has the Latin clause: *ut etiam in siluis et in monte manebam*, which Hanson translates as 'even when I was staying out in the woods or on the mountain', and regards this as uninformative as to location since ... *almost any part of the coast of Ireland exhibits those features, or did in Patrick's day* ... If we advert specifically to the word 'mountain' then the high point closest to the group of townlands mentioned is 77 m (253 feet) south of Tawnaghmore. Next there is a peak of 237 m (777 feet) about 10 km (6 miles) north-west of Killala. The summit of Nephin mountain at 808 m (2646 feet) is about 24 km (15 miles) south-west of Killala.

According to Joyce (1869-1913) Tawnaghmore means 'great field'. He explains 'Tamhnach' as signifying ... *a green field which produces fresh sweet grass* ... Ó Dónaill (1977) defines it as ... *grassy upland; arable place in mountain* ... These definitions suggest a non-forest terrain, possibly sheep pasture. Joyce explains 'Farragh' as from the Irish 'Farrach' or 'Forrach': a meeting-place. Ó Dónaill has only 'forrach', with, among several meanings 'area, tract, of land; (meeting-) place.' Joyce identifies 'Tir-Amhalgaidh i.e. Awley's district, now the barony of Tirawley', and quotes the Tripartite Life as claiming that Patrick once preached there at *Forragh-mac-nAmhalgaidh* (Forragh-mac-nawley) i.e. the assembly place of Amhalgaidh's clan, baptized the seven sons of Amhalgaidh, and twelve thousand others. In this connection we may bear in mind Hanson's comments, above, on the Tripartite Life. Joyce tells us that Tirechán latinises *Forrach* as *forrgea*. Joyce further quotes O'Donovan to the effect that the name survives as the townland name of Farragh, 'about a mile and a half south-west from Killala'. In fact, O'Donovan appears to go no further than to identify the territory *Caille anciently Caille Fochlut* as one of the seven territories of 'Tir-Awley'. Knox (1908) presents a map of *Connaught West of the Shannon in the 5th Century* showing 'CAIL FOCLADH' bounded approximately by the Cloonaghmore and Ballingen rivers and the sea.

No large-scale soil maps of this region have been published. The General Soil Map of Ireland (Gardiner and Radford 1980) characterizes the local soil association as 'rather complex', consisting of 50 percent Degraded Grey Brown Podzolic associated with 15 per cent Brown earths, 15 per cent Peats, 10 per cent Gleys, and 10 per cent Podzols. Its use range is described as 'mainly grassland'.

A soil in its location is not a static system. It has evolved, over centuries and millennia, under the influences of leaching and cluviation, altering its chemical and physical characteristics, usually for the worse. The soils in this general area, derived from calcareous materials, would have been considered moderately desirable for agriculture, and would therefore have become deforested in early historical time. It is known that farming was practised some thousands of years BC at the so-called *Céide Fields* about 18 km (11 miles) north-west of Killala, on the mineral soils beneath the present blanket bog.

There can be no doubt that in the fifth century considerable areas of forest existed here but it could be delusive to speculate on their species composition: Mitchell (1986) states that *Scots pine ... probably died out in Ireland in the early centuries of the Christian era*, which seems to admit the possibility that it may have been present here, while oak and ash remained widespread.

No sizeable areas of woodland were recorded in the first mapping of this part of Co Mayo carried out in the 1830s by the Ordnance Survey and published at the scale of 1:10560 (6 inches to one mile).

These areas now present a bleak, generally treeless and rather exposed landscape of permanent grassland. Rushes (*Juncus* spp) are more prominent around Farragh, as might be expected from the presence of gleys within the association. According to Ordnance Survey maps ancient monuments: ringforts, standing stones, megalithic tombs, ancient cooking places (*fulachtaí fia*) etc., are scattered about the area indicating many centuries of human presence.

Ó Muraíle (1982) is cautious. He writes that Tirechán, a Mayo bishop, writing about 670, ... *was one of the two main progenitors of what was to become 'the Saint Patrick legend'*. His account ... *is essentially propaganda on behalf of the church of Armagh, [but] may be of little value in relation to the life and works of the historical Patrick*.

Simms (1991), in a small book which is apparently aimed primarily at a youthful readership, emphasizes that ... *the Woods of Focluth by the western sea* is the only place in Ireland mentioned by Patrick, and he accepts its location in Mayo. But he repeats and apparently accepts the later legends associating Patrick with the north-east, in particular Antrim and Armagh. George Otto Simms was Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland (Church of Ireland) 1969-1980.

## **Outcome**

An ineluctable conclusion is that Patrick's period of captivity was in or near a forest in north Co Mayo, and not in Co Antrim. In this connection Hanson anticipates Ó Muraíle in implying that the development of the Armagh legend in the seventh century was to provide propaganda in support of Armagh's claim to have jurisdiction over the whole Irish church.

## **Saint Patrick's oak**

Incidental to all of this it may be interesting to note that an oak tree was ceremonially planted by the President of the Society of Irish Foresters, O.V. Mooney in the course

of a Society Study Tour in the Black Forest. A photograph of that tree, taken in 1957, with a plaque which reads, in translation, *St Patrick's oak planted on 1st June, 1956, by members of the Society of Irish Foresters on the occasion of their visit to Zwingenberg*, appeared in *Irish Forestry*, Vol. 14 (2), Winter 1957, page 76. It is understood that a recent effort to locate that tree proved fruitless.

### Acknowledgements

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Since the present writer is neither a historian nor a classical scholar, having but small Latin and no Greek, it has been necessary to rely almost exclusively on secondary sources. The following are the principal publications used.

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### Notes on sources

*Ludwig Bieler* (1906-1981) was born in Vienna. After a varied career he occupied a specially established Chair in Palaeography and Late Latin in University College, Dublin, 1960-1976. He was regarded as one of the most internationally distinguished scholars to have been on the staff of the University. (Information by courtesy of Kate Manning Archivist, UCD.)

*RPC Hanson* (1916-1988) of English birth, was educated in Trinity College, Dublin, qualifying with 1st Honours in Classics and in Ancient History in 1938. He served as curate in some Irish parishes, including Banbridge, Co Down, before moving to academic posts in England. He was Professor of Historical and Contemporary

Theology in the University of Manchester, 1973-82. Author of many books on religious and ecclesiastical matters.

*Patrick Weston Joyce* (1827-1914), historian and music collector, author of many scholarly volumes on history, place names and music.

*G.F. (Frank) Mitchell* (1912-1997). Graduated from Trinity College, Dublin and joined in the pioneering studies of Irish bogs by means of pollen analysis. Lectured in Irish archaeology, and, in 1965, appointed to a specially created Chair of Quaternary Studies.

*John O'Donovan* (1809-1881). Edited and translated in seven volumes the Annals of the Four Masters. Employed by the Ordnance Survey, his letters from all parts of the country were issued in fifty volumes in 1927.

*T.F. O'Rahilly* (1883-1953), was a leading authority on Irish dialects and on medieval and modern Irish. Director, School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies.

*G.O. Simms* (1910-1991), Awarded Ph.D. for work on the Book of Kells. Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland (Church of Ireland), 1969-1980. Noted for his ecumenical work.