

Philip Freeman,
St. Patrick of Ireland: A Biography
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), xx+216 pages.

History has been enormously generous to Patrick. Of the hundred or more saints whose memory was celebrated on a specific day by the mediaeval Roman Catholic Church, St. Patrick's day is one of the very few to survive in the modern calendar. The green of Ireland is remembered every year around the world on March 17 and Patrick is everywhere the symbol of Irishness. But, as others have noted, in so elevating Patrick to icon status, the true measure of the man has been obscured. In recent years there have been a number of excellent studies that have sought to illuminate the real Patrick and his world, such works as R.P.C. Hanson's *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick* (1983) and Máire B. de Paor's *Patrick: The Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland* (1998).

This new study of Patrick's life by Philip Freeman, professor of Classics at Washington University, St. Louis, joins them as an extremely well told account of an important Romano-British missionary. Freeman rightly assumes that the whole of what we can know about the historical Patrick must begin with his two undoubted writings: *The Confession* and his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. Freeman includes translations of these two works in an epilogue (p.169-193). To someone used to a standard translation of these two works, like that of Ludwig Bieler, Freeman's translation might seem somewhat loose and too colloquial. On the other hand, his translation does have the advantage of making Patrick and his world come alive.

Freeman knows that fourth- and fifth-century world well enough that he is able to effortlessly place Patrick's thought and achievement in context. Rarely, in this reviewer's opinion, does his sketch of Patrick's historical context need serious qualification. One such place, though, is his affirmation that Patrick was "likely baptized as an infant, a standard practice since the mid-third century" (p.13). H. F. Stander and J.P. Louw, also classicists, have convincingly shown that infant baptism was not at all common in the Ancient Church until the fifth century.¹

Another statement that needs some qualification is the assertion that besides Patrick's two authentic works "there are simply no other documents from ancient times that give us such a clear and heartfelt view of a person's thoughts and feelings" (p.xviii). Freeman reiterates this view later on in the book: "in Patrick's *Confession*, unlike in any other contemporary letter, we have a window into the soul of a person" (p.143). In the context of this last remark, Freeman does mention Augustine's *Confession*. But Freeman believes Augustine's work to be "a carefully constructed spiritual biography that still leaves a reader wondering just what kind of man the author was beneath the ornate and exquisitely

¹ *Baptism in the Early Church* (Rev. ed.; Garsfontein, South Africa; Didaskalia Publishers, 1994).

organized prose” (p.143). Of Augustine’s exquisite Latin there is no doubt, but if any ancient document is revelatory of the author, surely it is this work!

Nor is Augustine’s *Confession* in a class by itself. Yet another ancient Christian work that open up a window into the affections and thoughts of an author is Gregory of Nazianzus’ *On his life (De vita sua)*. Though highly elaborate in its Greek poetic construction, this is a work that gives the reader rich insights into Gregory’s unforgettable character, with all of its foibles and flaws.

These are quibbles, though, in a well-executed work that will hopefully expose a new generation of readers to the joy of getting to know one of the most extraordinary mission-minded Christians of the Ancient Church, Patrick. Not without reason did William Carey, the so-called “father of the modern missionary movement,” see in Patrick an exemplar.

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