

Through Belloc's Eyes:

Saint Patrick's Person and Presence

(This article by **Professor Robert Hickson**, written on the feast of the Annunciation, 2014, has been posted on the *Apropos* website, www.apropos.org.uk Subheadings inserted by Editor, *Apropos*.)

Belloc's Essay on St Patrick

Slightly more than a century ago, four years before World War I began, and six years before the Easter Rising in Dublin, Hilaire Belloc published an essay on Saint Patrick of Ireland in one of his collections of varied essays, entitled *First and Last* (1910).¹ This compact six-page essay—containing important concepts and vivid personal experiences—was published five years after J.B. Bury, the Protestant Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, had published his own learned 400-page book on Saint Patrick (d.461), which was entitled *The Life of St. Patrick and His Place in History* (1905).²

An abiding presence

What Belloc will draw us to consider about the abiding Presence of a Person—in this case a Saint of Robustness and Heroic Vitality—may mean even more to us when we recall Boethius' classic four-word definition of Person (“*Persona*”): “the individual substance of rational nature” (“*naturae rationabilis individua substantia*”).³ The fuller passage, wherein Boethius introduces this important definition, which was later adopted and transmitted by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (I-II q. 29 a.1), goes as follows:

*Wherefore if person belongs to substances alone, and these rational, and if every substance is a nature, and exists not in universals but in individuals, we have found the definition of person: “The individual substance of a rational nature.” Now by this definition we Latins have described what the Greeks call HYPOSTASIS [as in Our Lord's “HYPOSTATIC UNION” in the Incarnation].*⁴

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- 1 Hilaire Belloc, *First and Last* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD., 1910), pp. 91-96. All quotations from H. Belloc's own essay on St. Patrick will be from this 1910 edition, and placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay.
 - 2 J.B. Bury, *The Life of St. Patrick and His Place in History* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited), 400 pages. In his 6-page Preface (pp. v-x), where he speaks of why and how he came to write the book, he says: “*For one whose interest in the subject is purely intellectual, it was [to me] a matter of unmixed indifference what answer may be found to any one of the vexed questions. I will not anticipate my conclusions here, but I may say that they tend to show that the Roman Catholic conception of St. Patrick's work is, generally, nearer to historical fact than the views of some anti-Papal divines.*” (pp. vii-viii—my emphasis added) Moreover, earlier on his p. vii, he had also unqualifiedly asserted: “*The business of a historian is to ascertain facts.*” (p. vii—my emphasis added)
 - 3 Boethius: *The Theological Tractates; and The Consolation of Philosophy*—Loeb Classical Library no. 74 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 84-85.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

Recalling Christ as a Divine Person

Given the prevalence today of the Neo-Modernists' "relational" and "evolutionary" theories and their accompanying "process philosophies" and "process theologies"—where purportedly (and blasphemously) even "God **needs** us to complete Himself!" and all perceived things are somehow "becoming" and "emerging" and "converging"—it is especially important to remember and affirm **the Concept and Reality of Substance and the Concept and Reality of Person**—also in the Blessed Trinity and in the Incarnation of Christ as a Divine Person (**not** as a Nestorian "**Human Person**"!).

The targeting of Catholic Ireland

We may reliably expect that, at forty years of age, Hilaire Belloc himself—who was also later to be more fully formed by the Thomist, Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.—already knew his Saint Thomas as well as his Boethius. But, let us now consider our Belloc's view of Saint Patrick and Ireland in 1910, and elegiacally contrast it with what we are coming to see in Ireland today, in 2014. For, it poignantly reminds me of what Hamish Fraser once farsightedly said in person, and in his writing, that the Irish have heroically endured the cruelty and protracted Perils of Adversity, but that they would be even more grievously tempted and tried by the more spiritual Perils of Prosperity (*i.e.*, the lure of apparent prosperity, and the seduction of actual ease and sloth-inducing comforts⁵)—and that was, indeed, as it seemed, the new Strategic Plan of the British (and others) in the late twentieth century in their Targeting of Catholic Ireland.

Muddled thinking

To return to Belloc's brief 1910 essay, "St. Patrick," and to his own unexpected and somewhat abstract, introductory words, we refreshingly discover him to say:

*If there is one thing that people who are not Catholic have gone wrong upon more than another in **the intellectual things of life**, it is in **the conception of a Personality** [*i.e.*, an influential Person, a markedly unique Personhood]. They are muddled about it where their own little selves are concerned, they misappreciate it when they deal with the problems of society, and they have a very weak hold on it when they consider (if they do consider) the nature of Almighty God [thus, by implication, the Nature of the Triune God]. (91—my emphasis added)*

How, we may wonder, does all of this pertain to the character and life of Saint Patrick?

A Personal Will made all things

With his characteristic aplomb and enhanced accent, and in light of his own recurrent fears about personal immortality, Belloc goes on to say:

*Now, personality is everything. It was **a Personal Will** that made all things, visible and invisible. **Our hope of immortality** resides in this, that we are persons, and half our frailties proceed from a [our!]*

⁵ Cf. this quotation by Hamish Fraser from *A Nation Betrayed*: "It is indeed a moot point whether salvation is imperilled more by a violently anti-Christian regime that quite openly persecutes the faithful than by a Western permissivist society which in the name of freedom conspires to enslave men to sin by offering every conceivable means of gratifying cupidity and concupiscence with apparent impunity. For whereas men resent enslavement imposed by others, the prospect of becoming enslaved to self invariably appears to be irresistibly seductive."

misapprehension of **the awful responsibilities** which personality [personhood] involves or **a cowardly ignorance** of its powers of self-government. (91—my emphasis added)

G.K. Chesterton, some twenty years later, gave in somewhat different words a comparable expression to his dear friend Belloc's own earlier insight about the "terrible dowry of human freedom" (Josef Pieper) and our final personal responsibility for how we use that faculty. But Chesterton's words are, perhaps, even more profound. For, he wrote the following lucid and incisive words in his mature Catholic essay entitled "The Outline of Liberty":

*Will made the world; Will wounded the world; the same Divine Will gave to the world for the second time its chance; the same human Will can for the last time make its choice.*⁶

After this trenchant insight worthy of our further reflection, Chesterton immediately adds another touch, and with his ironic charm (having already himself so modestly and gratefully become a Roman Catholic, back in 1922):

*That [above-articulated doctrine] is the real **outstanding** peculiarity, or eccentricity, of **the peculiar sect called Roman Catholics**. And if anyone objects to my limiting **so large a conception** to Roman Catholics, I **willingly** agree that there are many who value it **so much** that they obviously **ought** to be Roman Catholics. But if anyone says that it is not **in fact and history** bound up with the Faith of Roman Catholicism, **it is enough to refer him to the history and the facts.***⁷

The function of legend

Belloc, moreover, though with some rhetorical hyperbole, will now also consider the matter of history itself, and in light of the "main error" he has already discussed, namely about the concept and reality of "Person" and "Personality":

*The hundred and one errors which this main error **leads to** include **a bad error on the nature of history**. Your modern non-Catholic or anti-Catholic historian is always misunderstanding, underestimating, or muddling the rôle played in the affairs of men by great and individual Personalities. That is why he is so lamentably weak on the functions of legend; that is why he makes a fetish of documentary evidence **and has no grip on the value of tradition**. For traditions spring from some personality invariably, and **the function of legend**, whether it be a rigidly true legend or one tinged with make-believe, **is to interpret Personality**. Legends [as of Saint Patrick] have vitality and continue, **because** in their **origin** they so exactly serve **to explain or illustrate** some personal character [i.e., permanent stamp, or mark of distinction] in a man **which no cold statement could give**. (91-92—my emphasis added)*

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 236. His specific essay on "The Outline of Liberty" is to be found in its entirety on pages 233-237.

⁷ *Ibid.*—my emphasis added.

A school of dunderheads

At last, we shall come to see more specifically through Belloc's eyes how some nineteenth-century scholars prior to J.B. Bury have presented and effectively depreciated (or at least diminished) the mission and character of Saint Patrick and even doubted his very historicity:

*Now St. Patrick, the whole story and effect of him, is a matter of Personality. There was once—twenty or thirty years ago [1880-1890]—a whole school of dunderheads who wondered whether St. Patrick ever existed, because the mass of legends surrounding his name troubled them. How on earth (one wonders) do such scholars consider their fellow-beings! **Have they ever** seen a crowd cheering a popular hero, or **noticed the expression upon men's faces when they spoke of some friend of striking power recently dead?** A great growth of legends around a man is **the very best proof** you could have not only of his existence but of **the fact that he was an origin and a beginning, and that things sprang from his will or his vision.** (92—my emphasis added)*

A step back to common-sense

Alluding to the recent scholarship of Professor J.B. Bury, Belloc praises his confirmation of things long believed by the traditions of Irish Catholicism, and he sees Bury's work as a good example for other Protestant enquiries into European history, perhaps even so as to help the yet stiffer Germans:

*There were some who seemed to think it a kind of favour done to **the indestructible body of Irish Catholicism** when Mr. Bury wrote his learned Protestant book [unnamed by Belloc, regrettably] upon St. Patrick. It was a critical ["Quellenkritik"—J.B. Bury's own word] and a very careful bit of work [of only 440 pages!], and was deservedly praised; but the favour done us [Catholics] I could not see! It is all to the advantage of non-Catholic history that it should be sane, and **that a great Protestant historian should make true history out of a great historical figure** was a very good sign. It was a long step back to common sense compared with the German absurdities which had left the victims [methodically] doubting almost all the solid foundations of the European story; but as for us Catholics, we had no need [sic] to be told it. (92-93—my emphasis added)*

Imbibing the presence of St Patrick

Although I find Belloc a little too condescending here, and ungratefully dismissive in those last unqualified words of his about "us Catholics," I am soon mollified when I immediately then read how he now himself imbibes "the presence" of St. Patrick, which is still to be found in Ireland [in 1910], especially to a vivid-souled Catholic sailor man running along the Irish coast in a fair wind:

*Not only was there a St. Patrick in history, but **there is a St. Patrick on the shores of his eastern sea** and throughout all Ireland **to-day**. It is **a presence that** stares you in the face, and **physically almost haunts you**. Let a man sail along the Leinster coast [heading north-northeast] on such a day as renders the Wicklow Mountains **clear up-weather behind him**, and the Mourne Mountains [to the north-northwest] **perhaps in storm, lifted clearly above the sea down the wind**. He is taking some such course as that on which St. Patrick sailed, and **if** he will land from time to time [while still running with the wind] from his little boat **at the end of each day's sailing, and hear Mass in the morning before he sails further northward**, he will **know** in what way St. Patrick **inhabits the soil which he rendered sacred**. (93—my emphasis added)*

Would that this little passage on sailing (and the culture of the Faith) would be more widely known and savored, for, once again, it shows so much of our Belloc's heart—and his soul of childhood.

Unintended consequences

Now he will give us his reflections on holiness and the evidence, indeed witness, of miracles that are one fruit of holiness; but Belloc's narrative will also then take us further into the tragic history of Ireland, to include the acute sorrows that also provoked emigrations from Ireland, which likewise had some good “unintended consequences”—at least ones not intended by the flagitious British:

*We know that **among the marks of holiness** is the working of miracles. Ireland is the greatest miracle any saint ever worked. It is a miracle and **a nexus of miracles. Among other miracles it is a nation raised from the dead.** The preservation of the Faith by the Irish [as of 1910] is an historical miracle comparable to nothing else in Europe. There never was, and please God never can be, so prolonged and insanely violent a persecution of men by their fellow-men as was undertaken **for centuries** against the Faith in Ireland: and it has completely failed. I know of no example in history of **failure following upon such effort.** It had behind it in combination **terror and greed.** And so amazing is it that they [especially the British] did not attain their end, that perpetually as one reads one finds the authors of the dreadful business [of religious persecution] now at one period, now at another, assuming with certitude that their success is achieved. Then, **after centuries,** it is almost suddenly perceived—and in our own time—that it has not been achieved and never will be. (93-94—my emphasis added)*

However, if our Belloc were alive today, he might be shaken by what he would now see in Ireland; but he would also then search to find and articulate the deeper causes for the seeming, if not unmistakable, “Decomposition of Catholicism” (Louis Bouyer) in Ireland these days, as well as in the wider Modernist-Occupied Church.

The complexity of strange coincidences

Who would have imagined what Belloc calls the “complexity of strange coincidences combined” (94) that enabled such a resistance and survival, even so as to effect a rescuing migration of the Irish to America, for example:

*Think of the American Colonies; with one little exception [Maryland] they were perhaps the most completely non-Catholic society of their time. Their successful rebellion against the mother country meant many things, and led to many prophecies. Who could have guessed that one of its chief results would be **the furnishing of a free refuge for the Irish?***

The famine** [the Great Potato Famine from 1845-1848 or 1852], all human opinion imagined, and all human judgment was bound to conclude, was a mortal wound [to Ireland], coming in as **the ally of the vile persecution** [by the British] I have named. It has turned out the very contrary. From it there springs indirectly **the dispersion,** and the power which comes from unity in dispersion, **of Irish Catholicism.

*Who, looking at **the huge financial power that dominated Europe,** and [dominated] England in particular, **during the youth of our own generation** [1870-1900], could have dreamt that in any corner of Europe, least of all **in the poorest and most ruined corner of Christendom, an***

effective resistance could be raised?

Behind the enemies of Ireland, furnishing them with all their modern strength, was that base and secret master of modern things, the usurer. He it was far more than the [British and Anglo-Irish] gentry of the island who demanded toll, and, through the mortgages on Irish estates, **had determined to drain Ireland as he has drained and rendered desert so much else.** Is it not a miracle that he [i.e., the Usurer] has failed [as of 1910]? (94-95—my emphasis added)

A nation risen from the dead

As he approaches his conclusion, Belloc first returns to the theme of the multiple historical resurrections of Ireland, especially after enduring so much unjust cruelty and protracted religious persecution; and then he will end with another personal and evocative vignette:

Ireland is a nation risen from the dead; and to raise one man from the dead is surely miraculous enough to convince one of the power of a great spirit [person and presence]. This miracle [of a whole nation risen from the dead], as I am prepared to believe, is the last and greatest of St. Patrick's [miracles].

*When I was last in Ireland, I bought in the town of Wexford a coloured picture of St. Patrick which greatly pleased me. Most of it was green in colour, and St. Patrick [then a Bishop, consecrated in 432 A.D.] wore a mitre and had a crozier in his hand. He was turning into the sea a number of nasty reptiles: snakes and toads and the rest [hence, also the reptilian usurers?]. I bought this picture **because it seemed to me as modern a piece of symbolism as ever I had seen:** and that is why I bought it **for my children and for my home.***

*There was a few pence change, but I did not want it. The person who sold me the picture said they would spend the change **in candles for St. Patrick's altar.** So St. Patrick is still alive. (95-96—my emphasis added)*

In such a way does Hilaire Belloc deftly convey the Person and abiding Presence of Saint Patrick, and his fertilizing Holiness, with its manifold, often unexpected, effects in History. For, under Grace, the Missioner to Ireland still “inhabits the soil which he rendered sacred.” (93) And, also *sub Gratia Divina*, as Christ's own Parable of the Sower teaches us, the Cultivation of the **Soil** and the Cultivation of the **Soul** are intimately interrelated. And it is so still yet today, though less visibly and more modestly, in Saint Patrick's beset and enduring Ireland.⁸

8 With deep gratitude, I want now to acknowledge that this short essay (with its counterpointing running commentary) was inspired by an unlooked-for combination of things: (1) some words about snakes (including those with legs) by Anthony S. Fraser; (2) the recollection of some of Hamish Fraser's (Tony's father's) earlier words about Ireland and the new British Strategy to gain submission and greater dominance over Ireland by way of “prosperity”; (3) C.J. (“Joe”) Doyle's recent, eloquent and whole-hearted writings in his Catholic Defense of Saint Patrick and of the Catholic Traditions of Boston's longstanding Saint Patrick's Day Parade, which was this year under attack by certain sordid groups and “flatulent political thimbliggers” (Albert Jay Nock); and, finally, (4) a note which Gerard Hanratty placed on the Hilaire Belloc Blog which reminded me of Hilaire Belloc's original essay on “St. Patrick” that I had not read for some years. (My wife, Maike, then, as always, encouraged me to follow up on that inspiration and to try to bring forth some good fruit out of all of this. Love does such things—especially her “lele luve.”)