

## COMMENT

## ST PATRICK'S PURGATORY

IT might have been called 'Hy Brazil the Isle of the Blessed', for a blessed isle it unquestionably is. There is a reverence in the air here that is almost palpable. It has been generated by the prayers and sufferings of the pilgrims that have trod its rocky surface for fifteen hundred years. But the resemblance to Hy Brazil must end there. Hy Brazil was a mythical place, Lough Derg is a reality. It is one of the oldest places of pilgrimage in Christendom, and secure in that knowledge it reposes quietly and unobtrusively in the brown lake amongst the little bare hills. It has no need to advertise itself, for it is famous throughout the Christian world. To this hallowed spot year after year and century after century the faithful have flocked barefooted and penitent to lift up their hearts in prayer to God.

## HARDEST CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE

Situated in south-east Donegal, Lough Derg, or the Red Lake, is not a pretentious place. The lake itself is about six miles long by four miles wide and is studded with scattered islands. Surrounded by low barren hills, it is effectively cut off from the outside world. Station Island, or the Island of St Patrick's purgatory, is the penitential island. It is a tradition that the patron saint himself originated the penance here which still remains the hardest Christian pilgrimage in the world. Here he is supposed to have fasted in a cave for forty days and got a glimpse of the sufferings of Purgatory. Tradition has it also that it is from here that St Patrick banished the snakes and reptiles from Ireland for ever.

It is certain, however, that St Patrick personally evangelized this part of County Donegal. Dabheoc, a contemporary and disciple of St Patrick, became the first Abbot of nearby Saint's Island, and it is known that some of his monks lived on Station Island and took over the care of the penitential cave. From the death of the first Abbot in 516 until the monastery on Saint's

Island was plundered by the Danes in 836 we have little knowledge of Lough Derg. All records were destroyed with the monastery.

#### MYSTERIES AND FANTASIES

Three hundred years after the sack by the Danes the monastic settlement on Saint's Island again arose. The Augustinians arrived between 1130 and 1134 and took charge of the pilgrimage on Station Island. It had in the interval gone on without interruption. From this time onwards we have a great deal of information about the pilgrimage. It became famous throughout Europe in the twelfth century and the writings of Henry of Saltry extended its fame even further. Some of his manuscripts dealing with the story of Lough Derg still survive. St Patrick's Purgatory had become identified with many mysteries and fantasies which bear no relationship to reality. The Saltry story was reproduced by Roger Wendover in his *Flores Historiarum* and from this in turn it was taken by Matthew Paris and included in his *Chronica Majora*. Several versions of the story were written in Old French and Old English.

In 1275 the Italian Jacobus de Voragine included the story of Lough Derg in his *Golden Legend*. It has been claimed that the great Dante used Saltry's account of Lough Derg when writing his immortal work, *The Divine Comedy*. Certainly some of the phrases of both works are very similar.

Pedro Calderon, the Spanish poet-priest and famous dramatist of the seventeenth century, wrote a drama, *St Patrick's Purgatory*, which was performed in the Royal Theatre, Madrid.

#### LEVELLED TO THE GROUND

Whilst the fame of Lough Derg as a place of alleged supernatural manifestations spread throughout the Continent and brought many travellers to the lonely Donegal lake, the Irish at home looked upon the place in a very different light. To them it was a place of spiritual healing to which they flocked in their thousands to do the fifteen-day fast and religious exercises. In 1503 a Papal Bull granted indulgences to the pilgrims.

The Franciscans took over charge of the pilgrimage from the Augustinians in 1631. Next year the island sanctuary was seized by the English Protestant forces and all buildings were levelled to the ground. During the reign of Queen Anne the pilgrimages

to the island were proclaimed by law as 'riotous and unlawful assemblies'. But despite this and the imposition of fines the pilgrimages continued with little interruption.

#### BOATING ACCIDENT

The year 1795 is one of note in the island's history. On July 12 of this year a particularly bad boating accident occurred. At this time the ferry was not under the control of the clergy and it is said that large quantities of 'poteen' from a local shebeen had been consumed by the Protestant boatmen to celebrate the Orange 'Twelfth'. Being a Sunday, a large number of local residents came to be ferried across to Mass with the pilgrims. Ninety-three people in all were packed into an old and leaking row-boat. Within a few yards of their destination the water-logged boat overturned and its occupants were thrown into about eight feet of water. There were only three survivors. Ninety were drowned within sight of the pilgrims standing on the island wharf a few yards away.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there was an easing off of the persecution and obstruction and the pilgrimage became better organized. This period also marks a lessening of the severity of the pilgrimage. What originally was a fast of fifteen days had been reduced to six days. In 1825 this was further reduced to three days, but the pilgrim still had the option of doing a six- or nine-day fast. A chapel was built in 1763 and a church in 1789. Both of these were later pulled down and new churches erected in their places. Accommodation for pilgrims and priests was also erected.

The pilgrimage continued to flourish. New hostels had to be erected to accommodate the pilgrims. The minute little island is now completely covered with buildings many of which are built on piles over the water. In 1926 work was commenced on the present basilica which rests on one hundred and twenty-three pillars of re-inforced concrete. It has seating accommodation for nineteen hundred pilgrims and is a unique example of the Hiberno-Romanesque style.

#### PENITENTIAL BEDS

The island is open to pilgrims for ten weeks each year and in that period an average of thirty thousand people do the three-day

pilgrimage. The pilgrim must arrive, fasting, before three o'clock on the first day. Indeed, many people from surrounding districts walk barefooted over long distances as their fathers and their fathers' fathers did before them. On reaching the island the pilgrim is shown to a modern dormitory, where he removes his shoes and socks. He does not use these again until he is leaving the island on the third day.

He has three stations to perform on the first day. The requisite number of rosaries are said walking on bare feet mainly around six penitential beds of sharp uneven stones. These beds, as they are called, are really the remains of the foundations of beehive oratories. In the centre of each ring of stones is a cross. The roughness of these beds has to be experienced to be believed. The beds are on a slope and the stones are so crazily set that it would be a feat of balance to walk over them even on shod feet. The jagged rocks eat into the bare feet of the pilgrim as he strives to preserve his balance. The beds are so close together that when a large number are doing stations at the same time, as they usually are, the cramped space makes all movement difficult. When the pilgrim selects what he thinks is a not-too-sharp stone on which to step, a brush against another pilgrim can have painful results. Or maybe, when he is kneeling lightly on a particularly sharp stone and striving to keep his weight off it, an old person leans heavily on his shoulders. When it is raining, as it usually is, the pilgrim's misery is complete.

#### THE VIGIL

When he has completed his first station the pilgrim may have his first meal since midnight the night before and his only meal for that day. The meal consists of black tea and dry bread. He may take as much as he likes of this at one sitting. Poor though the meal is, the hot tea revives him and he then completes two further stations.

There is no sleep for the pilgrim on his first night on the island. This is 'Vigil' night. He spends it mostly in the basilica in organized prayer and religious exercises. When not in the basilica he must remain out of doors. The long night wears on slowly. His eyelids are weighted as he intones the repetitive prayers. He cannot remain long in any one posture. He must not sleep on any account and he must awaken any other person who might be

momentarily overcome. Hour follows weary hour, but when morning comes there is no rest for him.

#### HUNGER AND SLEEPINESS

The second day is really the worst of all. There are no religious duties or stations after he has had Mass and Communion in the morning. His penance on this day is to keep awake. Until 9.30 p.m. he must manage to keep his eyes open when every instinct commands him to lie down and surrender. Groups of pilgrims sit or walk together. They laugh and yarn. It is fatal to remain alone. The meal of black tea and bread is looked forward to, but is far from satisfying. The hunger and the sleepiness combined makes him extraordinarily miserable. After the Stations of the Cross at nine o'clock he is given access to the dormitory. He washes his feet and the hard bed seems like down to his tortured body. He is asleep in a second and he has the soundest night's sleep in his life.

Next morning he must do two further stations. Although the night's sleep has done him good, his feet are now particularly tender and these stations are usually the worst. When he has completed them he may put on his shoes. The boat leaves at 11.30. Even though he has left the island, he must not eat until midnight of the third night. He may, if he wishes, partake of lemonade and water-biscuits. At midnight his pilgrimage is completed and he may—and usually does—gorge himself to his heart's content.

A pilgrimage to Lough Derg is an extraordinarily satisfying experience, both spiritually and physically. The pilgrim has had three days' peace and quiet in which to think things over undisturbed by the distractions of his everyday life. He has mortified the flesh and conquered its cravings. He experiences a peculiar elation. This is nothing new. It has been experienced by the pilgrims to this island for the past fifteen hundred years.

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