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St PATRICK'S WELL

Rachel Moss

*Full fifty times Pat drank at the shrine
Of his titular saint – his skin full of wine;
Which made the saint debtor – so to bring accounts even,
On the 17th of March he snatch'd him to Heav'n.¹*

Just off the tree-lined pathway to the Provost's House Stables is a narrow vault that extends under Nassau Street, close to its junction with Dawson Street. Housed within this vault is a well, reputed to be St Patrick's Well, a once famous ancient focal point for St Patrick's Day revelry in the capital city.

Of the roughly one hundred holy wells recorded in Dublin, six are dedicated to St Patrick.² Foundation myths are recorded for several of these and one, probably created in the twelfth century, is thought to relate to the Nassau Street well. The account is found in chapter LXX of Jocelin of Furness' *Life of St Patrick*, which dates to c.1185/6:

And Saint Patrick, while abiding in this village [Dublin], was entertained at the house of a woman who often in his presence complained of the want of fresh water. For the river that ran near it was, by the flowing in of the tide of the sea, made wholly salt of taste; nor before the return thereof could any fresh water be obtained, unless drawn at a great distance. But the saint, who continually thirsted after God, the living fountain, compassionated the grievance of his hostess and of the multitude then newly born unto Christ, and, the rather that they might the more ardently pant toward the fountain of life, thought he fit to show its virtue. Therefore on the morrow he went unto a certain place, and in the presence of many standing around he prayed, and touched the earth with the Staff of Jesus, and in the name of the Lord produced from it a clear fountain. Thus with the staff in the hand of his preacher Saint Patrick did the Lord renew the miracle which of old time he had deigned to work by the rod in the hand of Moses striking the rock; there the rock twice struck flowed forth abundant waters; here the earth once pierced poured forth a pure fountain. And this is the fountain of Dublinia, wide in its stream, plenteous in its [p. 74] course, sweet to the taste, which, as is said, healeth many infirmities, and even to this day is rightly called the fountain of Saint Patrick.³

Jocelin's *Life* is the first to mention any association between the saint and Dublin, and his assertion, in another section of the *Life*, that Patrick came to the place when it was already inhabited by Vikings should be sufficient basis to doubt the veracity of his account.⁴ The description of the well, however, would seem to confirm that by the twelfth century it was

already a place of veneration, and one that was noted for the quality and abundance of its water.

During the Middle Ages the well would have been located a little outside the city walls close to All Hallows, a priory of Augustinian canons. The Augustinians were an order not averse to the promotion of pilgrimage: priories were often located at sites with important pilgrimage associations, such as St Patrick's Purgatory (Donegal), Mona Incha (Tipperary) and Ballinskelligs (Kerry), while a number of Augustinian houses, such as Trim (Meath), enjoyed revenue brought in through the veneration of 'miraculous' statues. It is possible, then, that the canons may have been involved in the perpetuation of the sacred associations of the well at All Hallows, although there is no direct evidence to support this.

Following the Dissolution, the lands that had formerly belonged to the priory were, in 1592, given by Queen Elizabeth I to the newly-founded College of the Holy Trinity. In a description of the property granted to the College at this time, the southern boundary is described as 'the lane that leads to St Patrick's well to the south of the monastery of the Blessed Virgin' (*vanella qui ducit ad fontem Saint Patricci ex parte australi usque ad terram predictam nuper monasterii beate Marie Virginus*).⁵

Despite its proximity to a College with such a strong Anglican ethos, the well appears to have reached the apogee of its popularity in the early seventeenth century, a period during which devotions at holy wells across the country enjoyed something of a renaissance, with well houses erected over existing wells, and some 'new' wells established for the first time.⁶ Our earliest and most comprehensive accounts of the pattern there both come from Barnabe Rich, an English writer and soldier who spent the latter part of his life in Dublin. It should be noted that Rich was not an altogether objective observer, believing, as he did, that all of Ireland's [p. 75] difficulties were due to the religion of the people and to the lack of firmness on the part of the English government!

In his *A New Description of Ireland*, published c.1610, Rich described the pattern day thus:

On the East part [of Dublin] they haue Sai. Patrick's well, the water whereof, although it be generally reputed to bee very hot, yet the very prime of the perfection, is upon 17. of March, which is Sai. Patrick's day, and vpon this day, the water is more holy than it is all the yeare after, or else the inhabitants of Dublin are more foolish vpon this day, than they be al the yeare after. For vpon that day thither they wil run by heapes, men, women and children, and there, first performing certain superstitious ceremonies, they drinke of the water; and when they are returned to their owne homes, for nine days after, they will sit and tell, what wonderfull things haue bin wrought by the operation of the water of Sa. Patrick's Well.⁷

Two years later in his *A Catholycke conference between Syr Thady Mac Mareall, a popish priest of Waterford and Patrick Playne, a young student of Trinity Colledge by Dublyne in Ireland*, Rich's character Sir Thady compares the pilgrimage to the well to similar devotional

exercises taking place at St Patrick's Purgatory (Donegal), Holy Cross (Tipperary) and St Sunday's Well (Cork):

But let me draw somewhat near to your college it self: are you not eye witness how every 17th March what flocking there is of men, women and children to that same holy sanctified pool, Saint Patrick's well. I hope you do not think the whole multitude that do so yearly frequent the place to be stark mad, to come running hither so thick, if they did not find some sanctity in the water? I warrant you they are not so arrant fools, as a number of those that do use to take tobacco, that will still be stuffing themselves with smoke, but upon vain conceit.⁸

Given the 'heaps' of 'stark mad' Catholics 'running thick' so close to the College, it is interesting how silent the early College records are on the well and the activities around it. A memorandum entered into the College Register in 1665 notes that the 'way' leading to the well had been improved at the expense of the City, and then states that this is only being recorded because the College had formerly taken [p. 76] responsibility for it.⁹ The sense that one gets of the College distancing itself from the well is further strengthened five years later when, 'in consideration of the want of water in the college', a well, pump and cistern were installed.¹⁰

In his description of the pattern, Rich mentions the 'wonderful things wrought by the operation of the water'. Scientific tests of the water quality of Dublin springs by Dr Rutty during the middle of the eighteenth century noted that one of the 'wonderful' things wrought by the St Patrick's Well water was its laxative qualities. According to the doctor the water yielded:

from one hundred and ten, to two hundred grains of sediment from each gallon, which was chiefly marine salt and Nitre, as I have elsewhere shewn: and hence their laxative quality is to be derived.¹¹

Such a high level of salt must have made the water quite unpalatable, leading one writer to suggest that the well may have instigated the tradition of Irishmen 'drowning their shamrocks' on St Patrick's Day, requiring something [whiskey], to mask the 'cold and purgative' quality of the water.¹² An association between drunkenness and the activities around wells dedicated to St Patrick certainly appears to have been well-established from the seventeenth century, the phrase 'to have drunk at St Patrick's well' being a contemporary euphemism for drunkenness.¹³

Several rhymes and poems of the time also imply that not all activity around the well was of a strictly devotional nature. One, entitled *A Poem upon St Patrick's Well in 1716*, includes the lines:

These lines were found near Patrick's Well:
When, or by whom, there's none can tell:
But some pretend to say or think,
'Twas by a Scholar, when in Drink;
Not with that Water, to be sure,
But that, he took, 'tis thought for Cure;

And, when that he was sober grown,
He writ the following of his own.¹⁴

The well is also reputed to have been put to another slightly unorthodox use at the end of the seventeenth century when a doctor, variously identified as Sir Hans [p. 77] Sloane¹⁵ or Dr Gwither,¹⁶ went to Liverpool, where he filled several barrels with the 'choicest spawn of frogs', a species which were at that time, reputedly not known in Ireland:

The doctor was a very ingenious physician, and a very good protestant: for which reason, to shew his zeal against popery, he placed some of the most promising spawn in the very fountain that is dedicated to the saint and known by the name of St Patrick's Well, where these animals had the impudence to make their first appearance. They have since this time very much increased and multiplied in the neighbourhood of that city. We have some curious enquirers into natural history, who observe their motions with a design to compute in how many years they will be able to hop from Dublin to Wexford: though as I am informed, not one of them has yet passed the mountains of Wicklow.¹⁷

The well continued to play a significant role in the lives of Dubliners through to the early part of the eighteenth century, until 1729, when calamity struck and the spring ran dry. The cause is unclear, but this did not hamper speculation. The *Dublin Gazette* in late March of that year reported that it was either due to digging for stone too close to the well or to the ill use that has been made of St Patrick's Day for some years past – but be that as it will, it could be wished everybody would take care to behave for the future as to prevent worse evil happening unto them.¹⁸

Other commentators saw the hand of Saint Patrick himself at play, and in his satirical poem *On the sudden drying of St Patrick's Well, near Trinity College Dublin* Jonathan Swift suggested that the well had run dry as a demonstration of the Saint's displeasure with English governance:

Where is the holy well that bore my name?
Fled to the fountain back, from whence it came!
Fair freedom's emblem once, which smoothly
And blessings equally on all bestows.
Here from the neighbouring nursery of the arts,
The students, drinking, raised their wit and parts;
Here, for an age or more, improv'd their vein,
[p. 78] Their Phoebus I, my spring their Hippocrene.
Discouraged youths! Now all their hopes must fall,
Condemn'd to country cottages and ale;
To foreign prelates make a slavish court
And by their sweat procure mean support.¹⁹

Such was the popularity of the well still at this time that an appeal was made to the City Corporation to try to restore the flow of water. Two years later the *Dublin Weekly Journal* reported that

The water has again been restored to St Patrick's Well, to the very great satisfaction of the Inhabitants of this city, it has been dry for many months and is now again cleared up and repaired at the city charge, great complaints having been made about its loss.²⁰

Reference to the 'digging of stone' close to the well probably refers to use of the lands around the well at that time for development. Records of leases in the College registers confirm that the College owned the land, a portion of which was leased to a John White in the early eighteenth century.²¹ However, the Molesworths, the family responsible for laying out the area roughly bounded by Dawson Street, Nassau Street, Merrion Square and St Stephen's Green, showed a keen interest in the development of the 'St Patrick's Well Lands' from early in the century. In 1709 William Molesworth agreed with John White, who was presumably acting as his agent, to allow tenants in the cabins on St Patrick's Well Lands to extend their leases for another year, in the hope that adjacent developments by Joshua Dawson (who gave his name to Dawson Street), might improve the value of the land.²² By 1724, Molesworth was still contemplating the 'setting out' of the Well Lands,²³ but correspondence with his brother, Viscount Robert, suggests that this was proving problematic due to the nature of his lease. In a letter of April 1728, Robert informed his brother that a strong argument had been made to have the new Parliament House located on the Well Lands. Due to the nature of his tenure, however, and the fact that two thousand pounds' worth of materials were already on the old site, this was unlikely to happen; but once a perpetual lease was secured, 'I am sure so fine a situate of ground will soon be laid out into a handsome building'.²⁴

[p. 79] While a 'handsome building' does not seem to have materialised, the well itself does appear to have sunk into obscurity around this time. Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century maps of the city, such as that by Bernard de Gomme (1673) (fig. 2) and a derivative map by Henry Pratt (1708) (fig. 3) show it prominently located and marked by a tower-like structure. In the more detailed survey by John Rocque of 1756, however, there is no sign of the well.

An important aspect of the well's representation in early maps is its location. Both de Gomme and Pratt show it located relatively far down St Patrick's Well Lane (now Nassau Street/ Leinster Street) on the College side. Two maps drawn up by the City Surveyor, John Green, in the 1680s of the area that now corresponds to the top of Grafton Street and Nassau Street described the latter as respectively 'High way from St Patrick's Well' and 'Way to St Patrick's Well', implying that the well lay at the end of the thoroughfare rather than near the top of it.²⁵ Indeed, the most likely location of the well, based on the collective evidence of pre-1730 maps, [p. 80] is at the modern junction between Leinster Street and Lincoln Place. This is further reinforced by the unusual curve shown on the street at that point in Brooking's map of 1728 (fig. 4), which may have come about as a result of the presence of the well there.

There is no evidence in early maps of a well at the junction of Dawson and Nassau Streets, although by the nineteenth century this is one of the springs that had become known as St

Patrick's Well. It was singled out as the original medieval spring by the noted Dublin historian J.T. Gilbert,²⁶ and also formed part of the setting for the novella *Ierne: A Romance of St Patrick's Well, Trinity College*, published in 1895.²⁷

In recent decades scholars have claimed that there were two, three and even four Saint Patricks, while some have claimed that he never existed at all.²⁸ A similar state of affairs existed for the well dedicated to the saint somewhere around Nassau Street in the nineteenth century, with three contenders for the dedication. A spring behind No. 9 Nassau Street, 'concealed in an ancient vault', was suggested by Edward Clibborn as the most likely candidate to be St Patrick's Well. The premises was occupied, from 1780, by Thompson's Steam Cutlery Works, who in an 1892 advertisement claimed that their business was located 'on the exact site of St Patrick's Well'.²⁹ Clibborn highlighted that the well behind No.15 Nassau Street had also historically been called St Patrick's Well in leases given by Simpson's Hospital, which gave rights to a number of houses in the locality to draw water from it.³⁰

This is probably the same well that came to be utilised by the Cantrell and Cochrane plant established in Nassau Place in 1869 (fig. 5). Like their neighbours, Thompson's Steam Cutlery Works, they were keen to claim ownership of the well. As their business was the distribution and sale of mineral water, this was a key marketing asset, and was emphasised in their advertising. An extract from an 1892 Commercial Directory relates the following:

The water necessary for the purposes of manufacture is obtained from a well on the premises long known as St Patrick's Well. This splendid natural fount was for many years covered in, and it was only through Sir Henry Cochrane's indefatigable research into antiquarian and other sources that the well was [p. 81] discovered. This is situated immediately in the centre of the factory, the depth of the boring reaching a distance of 95 feet – 70 feet from the surface to the rock and 25 feet below the granite. The well is lined with cylinders from top to bottom, the water being elevated by two powerful steam pumps capable of lifting 2,000 gallons of water per hour and providing the most inexhaustible supply of the purest spring water for the purposes of the trade.³¹

When compared in the 1930s by an impartial disciple of St Patrick, the Cantrell and Cochrane water source was described as 'deep and gushing', of at least 96 feet in depth and 'springing as fresh as ever', while the Trinity well had 'no visible flow'.³²

The presence of at least three wells along Nassau Street may be a symptom of the boom in Dublin development that coincided with a doubling of the capital's population between 1682 and 1722. Up to 1721 the city's water supply had been provided by the thirteenth-century reservoir fed by water from the river Poddle. By the early eighteenth century this was unable to meet the demands of the growing city, and work on establishing new waterworks was commenced, with householders paying corporation water rent collectors for the privilege of having a domestic water supply.³³ Costs were high, however, leading many householders to sink their own wells; indeed, it may well have been the sinking of new wells to serve recently erected houses along St Patrick's Well Lane that caused the holy well to dry up in 1729.

Prior to the construction of the current Provost's House Stables, the site was occupied by a range of Georgian houses and some outbuildings. On John Rocque's map of 1756, the location of the Trinity well is not marked, but coincides roughly with the boundary between a yard and a wooded area. At present, the most likely explanation for its origins would seem to be as a source of water for the houses which once occupied the stables site – a suggestion supported by the use of eighteenth-century brick in the construction of the well chamber. While most such domestic wells have long since been filled in, the preservation of this one may be attributable to its proximity to the Provost's stables, providing a free source of drinking water to those less concerned with issues of purity and taste.

While the current 'St Patrick's Well' is unlikely to be the original site of feast day revelries, it nevertheless preserves the memory of one of the most important focal [p. 82] points of Dublin life from the twelfth to the early eighteenth century. Its water supply may ultimately come from the same source as that of St Patrick's Well, but it now requires a good deal more than whiskey to make it potable.

¹ 'Extempore on the sudden death of an Irishman on St Patrick's day', *The Western county magazine*, 3 (1789–92), p 120.

² Finglas, Boherboy, Jamestown, St Patrick's Close, Nassau Street and (doubtful) Skerries. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'The holy wells of county Dublin', *Reportorium Novum*, 2 (1958), pp 68–87.

³ Edmund L. Swift, *The life and acts of Saint Patrick* (Dublin 1809), pp 95–6.

⁴ For the background to Jocelin's *Life* see Joseph Szövérfy, 'The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland and St Patrick', *Reportorium Novum*, 2 (1958), pp 6–16.

⁵ Richard Butler (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Omnium Sanctorum Juxta Dublin* (Dublin, 1845), p 94.

⁶ P.J. Corish, *The Catholic community in the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin, 1981), pp 50–1.

⁷ Barnabe Rich, *A new description of Ireland* (London, 1610), p 52.

⁸ Barnabe Rich, *A Catholycke conference between Syr Thady Mac Mareall, a popish priest of Waterford and Patrick Playne, a young student of Trinity Colledge by Dublyne in Ireland* (London 1612), p 18.

⁹ TCD MS MUN/V/5/2, p 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 101.

¹¹ John Rutt, *An essay towards a natural, experimental and medicinal history of the mineral waters of Ireland* (Dublin, 1757), pp 18–19.

¹² Edward Clibborn, *The Dublin water question: The springs of Dublin and fountains of Ath-Cliath and Dublinia attributed to St Patrick: Proposed as an auxiliary to the present and any future supply of water to the city, with remarks, historical, statistical and economical, in relation to the further utilization of the Liffey Water* (Dublin, 1860), p 26.

¹³ John Farmer and William Henley, *Slang and its analogues past and present. A dictionary, historical and comparative of the heterodox speech of all classes of society for more than three hundred years. With synonyms in English, French, German, Italian, etc.*, 7 vols. (1890-1904), 6, pp 93–4.

¹⁴ John Winstanley, *Poems written occasionally by John Winstanley, ... Interspers'd with many others, by several ingenious hands* (Dublin, 1742), pp 159–62.

¹⁵ *The Lubrications of Isaac Bickerstaff, esq.* 6 vols. (London, 1786), 6, pp 176–7.

¹⁶ T.P.C. Kirkpatrick, *History of the Medical School in Trinity College Dublin* (Dublin, 1912), pp 87–8.

¹⁷ *Bickerstaff*, 6, pp 176–7.

¹⁸ *The Dublin gazette* (25–9 March, 1729), p 185.

¹⁹ John Hawkesworth (ed.), *The works of Jonathan Swift, D.D. Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin, accurately revised in six volumes, adorned with copper-plates* (London, 1775).

²⁰ *Dublin weekly journal* (1731), 4: 22, p 92.

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- ²¹ TCD MSS MUN/V/5/2, p 503; TCD MSS MUN/V/5/3, pp 19, 81, 129.
- ²² Historic Manuscripts Commission, *Reports on manuscripts in various collections*, 7 (London, 1913), Clements MSS, p 243.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p 369.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 399.
- ²⁵ Dublin City Archive, City Surveyors Maps C1/S1/1; Dublin City Archives, Wide Streets Commissioners' Maps WSC/maps/565/1.
- ²⁶ J.T. Gilbert, *History of the City of Dublin*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1854), 3, p 244.
- ²⁷ Mrs Thomas Alexander, *Ierne: A romance of St Patrick's Well, Trinity College* (Dublin, 1895).
- ²⁸ A. Hopkin, *The living legend of Saint Patrick* (London, 1989), p 151.
- ²⁹ *Dublin, Cork and South of Ireland: a literary, commercial and social review of past and present* (London, 1892), p 60.
- ³⁰ Clibborn, *The Dublin water question*, p 26.
- ³¹ *Dublin, Cork and South of Ireland*, p 69.
- ³² Oliver St John Gogarty, *I follow St Patrick* (New York, 1938), pp 107–09.
- ³³ Michael Corcoran, *Our good health: A history of Dublin's water and drainage* (Dublin, 2005), pp 11–14.