

## IT'S A FACT

By Mark Kearney and Randy Ray

**Q.** What are the origins of St. Patrick's Day and who was St. Patrick?

**A.** St. Patrick's Day is celebrated on March 17, his religious feast day and the anniversary of his death in the fifth century. The Irish have observed this day as a religious holiday for more than a thousand years.

On St. Patrick's Day, which falls during the Christian season of Lent, Irish families would traditionally attend church in the morning and celebrate in the afternoon. Lenten prohibitions against the consumption of meat were waived and people would dance, drink and feast on the traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage.

St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. Various sources, including the Web site [www.holydays.tripod.com](http://www.holydays.tripod.com), say his real name was Maewyn Succat. He took the name of Patrick, or Patricius, meaning "well-born" in Latin, after he became a priest. He is believed to have died around 460 A.D.

Although his father was a Christian deacon, it has been suggested that he probably took on the role because of tax incentives and there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family.

At the age of 16, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who attacked his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity. During this time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people.

Lonely and afraid, he turned to his religion for solace, becoming a devout Christian. It is also believed that during his captivity Patrick first began to dream of converting the Irish people to Christianity.

After escaping to Britain, Patrick reported that he experienced a second revelation – an angel in a dream told him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after, he began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than 15 years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission – to minister to Christians already living in Ireland and to begin to convert the Irish. This mission contradicts the widely held notion that Patrick introduced Christianity to Ireland.

Familiar with the Irish language and culture, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs. The Irish culture centered on a rich tradition of oral legend and myth. When this is considered, it is no surprise that the story of Patrick's life became exaggerated over the centuries – spinning exciting tales to remember history has always been a part of the Irish way of life.

*Randy Ray of Ottawa and Mark Kearney of London, Ont. are the authors of nine books about Canada.*

*This article originally appeared in the March 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper*