

# St. Patrick and the Snakes

By Frederick Boyce

## What really happened . . . or didn't happen

Having had many close friends from Ireland, I can attest that the Irish generally do not have much affection for snakes. Irish folk are said to be able to immobilize vipers by drawing a circle around them, and the milk of Irish cows, as well as certain blue stones found on Irish beaches, are said to be cures for snakebite. Irish air is said to be so pure that no snake can stand to breathe it, and whatever else is said, the fact remains that, aside from any imported indoor pets, there are no snakes in Ireland. As everyone knows, St. Patrick drove them all into the sea in the late 4th century. Or did he? A lot of things that "everyone knows" are not literally true.

In recent times, St. Patrick's Day, the traditional observance of that fabled event, has become a rather silly celebration of things of which most people who live in Ireland do not partake—or much care for—including green beer, corned beef and cabbage, leprechauns and phrases like "top o' the morning." It is widely believed these days that St. Patrick's dispute with the snakes was allegorical in nature, with the snakes being a metaphor for ancient pagan sects—Druids—that stood in the way of the early missionary and his desire to bring Christianity to that wild and untamed island.

According to *Book of Days* by Richard Chambers, Patrick "met formidable opposition from the Druid priests. So obstinate and antagonistic were they that, despite his kindly disposition, he cursed the land, turning it into dreary bogs, cursed the rivers so that the fish died, and cursed the women's cooking pots so that their water never boiled. He aimed an especially virulent curse at the Druids themselves so that the earth promptly opened up and swallowed them. Finishing off in good style, he drove out the snakes by beating on a drum. At one crucial point, he knocked a hole in the drum-head, but an angel immediately appeared and mended it."

While there is evidence that Druids did use snakes in their rites as far back as the first century B.C., there is no evidence that real snakes were ever kept by the Druids in Ireland. The fact is that there have never been any native snakes in Ireland at all. Other places on earth from which snakes are notably absent include Iceland, Greenland, Newfoundland, Hawaii, New Zealand and Antarctica. All of them, like Ireland, are islands, and most of them, also like Ireland, have climates that are clearly inhospitable to ectothermic or "cold-blooded" reptiles. (None of them, as far as we know, were ever visited by St. Patrick.)

Ireland has but one native reptile, the unassuming European "common lizard" or *viviparous* lizard, which is vaguely similar in size and appearance to the fence lizards or "swifts" that we have over here. One big difference is that, whereas all of our native lizards lay eggs, the viviparous lizard, as its name literally means, gives birth to live young, a definite advantage for a reptile living in such a cold climate. Some might point out, and rightfully so, that England, next to Ireland, is also an island and yet has snakes, but it has only three native species—the European adder, the little grass snake and the smooth snake, all three of which, like the common lizard, are live-bearers. Of the three, only the adder is venomous, but it is far from dreadful, with fatalities being practically unknown, much the same as with our copperheads. Shakespeare wrote of the venerable adder, and until recently a colony of them still lived within the city of London.

So how did those three European snakes get themselves across the channel to England, and why didn't they continue on to Ireland? Ten thousand years ago, Europe lay buried beneath the gigantic glaciers of the ice age. Ireland and England were not islands at the time, but were still connected to Europe by land bridges. As the climate slowly warmed and the ice melted, the land bridges were inundated and disappeared under water. The land between Ireland and England was the first to go, some two thousand years before England separated from the European continent. As the climate was still very cold at that time, snakes never had a chance to reach

Ireland before the 50-mile-wide Irish sea was created, but the temperatures warmed up enough over the next two millennia for those three hardy species of snake to reach England before its land bridge to mainland Europe disappeared beneath what is now the English Channel.

There is, however, at least one well-documented case of actual snakes on the original Emerald Isle (not to be confused with our own Emerald Isle, NC, historically home to lots of snakes). In 1831 an Irish gentleman and something of a citizen-scientist by the name of James Cleland purchased six harmless snakes (most likely grass snakes, *Natrix natrix*) at the Covent Garden Market in London and released them on his estate at Rath-gael in County Down. He was apparently conducting an experiment to see whether or not St. Patrick had indeed rendered Ireland uninhabitable to serpents. One of the snakes was found and killed a week later by a man who at first thought it to be some kind of eel, but it was correctly identified by the eminent Irish naturalist J.L. Drummond. The news that a snake had been found very near the burial place of St. Patrick created a national uproar. One prominent clergyman preached that the end of the world was near, and rewards were offered for any other snakes. Three others were eventually found and killed. The other two were never found, but according to the *Belfast News Letter* of December 9, 1831, Mr. Cleland quietly donated two preserved snake specimens to the Belfast Natural History Society.

Sources for this article: *Venomous Reptiles* by Sherman and Madge Minton; *Book of Days* by Richard Chambers (published 1864); James Owen, *National Geographic News*; Nigel Monaghan, National Museum of Ireland; Mark Thompson, clydesburn.blogspot.com

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A nonvenomous European grass snake, one of the approximately 2,700 snake species not found in Ireland, but very likely the kind of snake that was released there in 1831 by James Cleland. It is, however, one of the three species native to the UK.—Photo by Al Hyde

DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME

**REMINDER**

**Daylight Saving Time begins at  
2 a.m. on March 11, 2018.  
Set your clock ahead one hour  
before you go to bed on March 10.**