

The Latin of Saint Patrick

FOUR LECTURES

BY

CHRISTINE MOHRMANN

Professor in the Universities of Nijmegen and Amsterdam

DUBLIN

DUBLIN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

64-65 MERRION SQUARE

1961

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These lectures were delivered at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in February and March 1961 by invitation of the Board of the School of Celtic Studies. Our thanks are due to Professor Mohrmann for allowing us to publish them at the Institute.

MYLES DILLON,
Director,
School of Celtic Studies.

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I. THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE LANGUAGE OF SAINT PATRICK

I have read in O'Rahilly's *Early Irish History and Mythology*,¹ an Irish saying to the effect that one generally makes a fool of oneself when one intrudes into a subject which is not one's own. This, I think, is perfectly true, and therefore I hesitated quite a long time before accepting the flattering invitation to give a series of lectures on the Latin of Saint Patrick in this Institute, famous centre of Patrician studies.

I am quite aware of the fact that I am speaking here to scholars who know much more about the problems regarding Saint Patrick than I do or ever shall do. I am of course not a Patriciologist: my special subject of study is neither of a historical nor of a hagiographical character, nor do I know any Celtic language. My special field is early Christian, late and medieval Latin. And therefore I have tried to study the Latin of Saint Patrick in the framework of our knowledge of early Christian, vulgar and medieval Latin, trying to locate his language by comparing it with that of more or less contemporaneous authors. I know that in this field important work has already been done, particularly by Montgomery Hitchcock and by Dr. Bieler.² When, nevertheless, I consented to submit to your judgement the results of my studies of Saint Patrick's language and style, I thought that, looking on the language of Patrick from a point of view different from that of the Patriciologists by profession, I could, perhaps, present some ideas and considerations which could be a small contribution to the solution of one of the most fascinating problems of the history of early Western civilization, and

¹ Thomas F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin, 1946, p. vi.

² F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock, *Hermathena*, 47 (1932), p. 202-233; 51 (1938), p. 65-76; 54 (1939), p. 93-109. L. Bieler, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 6 (1952), p. 65-98; *id.*, *Libri epistolarum sancti Patricii episcopi*, Introduction, Text and Commentary, *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 11 (1950), p. 1-150; 12 (1951), p. 82-214 (re-printed by the Irish Manuscripts Commission, I. Dublin, 1952).