EDITORIAL, 1993–1994

This volume of the Journal is different in several ways from preceding numbers, firstly in that it is a double-number — we have only had two so far. 1962–63 and for 1973–74. Such double-numbers are not generally liked as some members seem to think that they are not getting value for their annual subscriptions, but such a belief is not justified: double-numbers are always considerably larger, containing more articles than normally, and are also somewhat less costly than two single numbers, thus easing the Society's financial worries and helping to put off the inevitable day when annual subscriptions will have to be raised. Double-numbers also help the Hon. Editor try to catch up on the regrettable backlog in the Journal's annual production — obviously not successful in this case as this particular issue gave more trouble than most and is even later in appearing than usual (mo náirt is mo thruta).

While all of the articles in this issue of the Journal are of interest, some are also of major importance. Members will have their own preferences, but your Hon. Editor believes that the article on St. Patrick (pp. 29–44) is particularly so. This article was specifically commissioned to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of St. Patrick's death — yes, although Ireland commemorated that event in 1961, with major public and diplomatic ceremonies, including a huge open-air Mass in Croke Park at which St. Patrick's Bell was rung at the consecration by our late member Dr. A.T. Lucas, and by a special issue of commemorative postage stamps, and by over a hundred relevant publications, the general opinion among most Patrician scholars and historians nowadays is that the traditional dates associated with the national saint are unreliable. It is now more generally accepted that he was born during the second decade of the fifth century, that he began his missionary activities here after the middle of that century, and that he died in 493 rather than in 461. 1993 passed without many taking much note of the matter, though the Ulster Museum mounted a major exhibition on the archaeology of the saint, our member Liam de Paor published an important re-assessment of his life, work and context, and a few other relevant publications also appeared — as noted and reviewed by John Bradley in his article, an article which puts our Society in the forefront of those commemorating the National Apostle.

To better commemorate this notable event, we publish also six representations of St. Patrick, three with the above-mentioned article, two with this Editorial, and the frontispiece. The earliest is that of the saint, interestingly with the ubiquitous snake, carved on a 15th/16th century slab from Faughart, Co. Louth (Illus. 1), while one of the more interesting and least known (Frontispiece) was painted

Illus. 1 Carving of 15th/16th century date on a stone slab from Faughart, Co. Louth. (Photo: National Museum of Ireland)
Illus. 2 Cement bust of St. Patrick at Furnace, near Whitegate, Co. Clare. (Photo: E. Rynne)
in 1932 by Margaret Clark, R.H.A., wife of Harry Clarke, the famous stained glass artist. In it St. Parick is shown on Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo with the bell which, according to tradition, was a present from an angel and was originally of pure silver but turned black and corroded “by its contact with the demons on Croagh Patrick, when the Apostle of Ireland was expelling them thence” (Wilde, Lough Corrib, 1867, p. 197). Others say that it was given to the saint by St. Brigid and that he rang it a few times at the devil’s mother and a host of demons who attacked him on Croagh Patrick, but that he failed to repulse them until he threw the bell at them, knocking a piece out of the bell on the impact. The bell was acquired for the Royal Irish Academy by Sir William Wilde from the Gerarty family, from near Ballinrobe, who used to bring it to the pattern on the top of the Reek on the last Sunday of July of every year, “where, in the little oratory there, the pious pilgrim was allowed to kiss it for a penny; and, if he had been affected by ‘rheumatic pains’, he might put it three times round his body for two pence. But times got bad, the pattern thinned, and the Maor or keeper of the Clagdubh sold it, to help pay his passage to America” (Wilde, loc. cit.). The Black Bell of St. Patrick is now preserved in the National Museum, and is of Bourke’s Class 1, datable to c.805–1000 A.D. [J. Roy. Soc. Antigu. Ireland 110 (1980), 52–66]. Illustration 2, of a cement bost, is of more local interest. It was made by a member of the Hayes family, at Furnace, near Whitegate, Co. Clare, and was photographed in a rockery outside their farmhouse some years ago. (For an interesting series of representations of St. Patrick through the ages the reader is referred to Seanchas ArdMacha, 1961–62, cover and 15 plates between pages 48–49.)

Hagiography, insofar as St. Patrick is concerned, takes a bit of a knock in John Bradley’s article, but is still fully present in the following article, an early 17th-century Life of St. Senan. As someone who chose Senan as his Confirmation name, may I be forgiven for saying “Hands off!” to any revisionist who wishes to disillusion me about our North Munster saint?

This Journal is also different in that we publish a photograph of the Society’s Committee for 1992 page viii — the first pictorial record of such to be published by us, one which will help not only our present members but also posterity to add faces to the Lists of Officers we publish every year — maybe it is something we should consider including every so often?

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The Society gratefully acknowledges generous grants-in-aid from the National Museum of Ireland towards publication of the article by Mary Cahill; from University College, Dublin, towards publication of that by John Bradley; from University College, Galway, towards publication of that by Etienne Rynne; and from the ‘Discovery Programme’ towards publication of those by Aidan O’Sullivan.

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Your Hon. Editor came across the following on page 10 of the Galway Medical Journal, no. 1 (1970):

“The Editor reserves the right to refuse articles, if considered unsuitable, and to make literary corrections”.

— a nice thought! Please take note!