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## **Wearing the Green and Drowning the Shamrock**

by Eamonn Doherty



St. Patrick's Day was once a much more traditional religious festival which commemorated a Welshman who converted Ireland to Christianity and became its patron saint.

My memories of St. Patrick's Day is a Sunday routine; going to mass, having lunch and watching the telly because the weather permitted little else.

The festival also has the distinction of falling during Lent. This is the forty day period when the children usually gave up eating sweets. The money saved during this suffering was put into a cardboard money-box in aid of the "poor, starving, black children in Africa." However, St. Patrick's day was considered an exception and so while Jesus was fasting in the desert, we were stuffing our faces on curly whurlies, crunchies and Kit Kats.

But in recent years it has become a five-day entertainment extravaganza which is worth around €40 million to the economy and an excuse for excursions abroad by the politicians. Tomorrow as usual, officials in Dublin will be bracing themselves for about 700,000 people to throng the city for the annual parade.

Parades are held in many other cities around the world, including New York, Chicago (where they have dyed the river green every year since the 1960s), Sydney and Singapore. There was a 4,000-strong parade in London last year.

Many people love St. Patrick's Day, be they plastic Paddies or the real thing. Celebrators enjoy supping a few pints of the black stuff, and some will no doubt be reaching for various hangover cures "the day after the night before."

But questions are being asked in Dublin about the health of the celebration.

There are indications that peace and tranquillity may not be reigning in the glorious, green fields of Mother Éire. One newspaper has gone so far as to say that the day was now "the most depressing and dangerous" one of the year in Ireland.

Last year more than 700 people were arrested across Ireland for public order offences on St. Patrick's Day, more than double the arrests on the previous year. The level of drunken behaviour and public order problems on St. Patrick's in recent years has prompted supermarkets and off-licences to delay the start of their alcohol sales on the day.

Irish politicians get into the festivities early because the Irish parliament has gone into recess for almost a week due to the absence of so many of its members.

Most of the government ministers find themselves in the role of assistant ambassador. Last year they managed to be in 22 different countries! New York and Cheltenham (horse racing festival) are probably the most popular destinations for the great and good of the country.

The Taoiseach (Prime Minister) is usually in Washington with a U.S. president (it doesn't really matter which one) to present the bowl of shamrock at the White House. His officials stress, though, that it is not just vacation time; he will also be lobbying to legalise the estimated 50,000 undocumented Irish in the U.S.

And I will be celebrating in that old traditional Celtic Tiger way—getting together with some friends for an Indian meal and a few *cañas* of porter.