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Saint Patrick's Day

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March 17th, Next Monday, is Saint Patrick's Day. Colloquially known as Paddy's Day, it celebrates the patron Saint of Ireland, who converted us all to Christianity.

My earliest memories of Saint Patrick's Day growing up in Ireland are of it being like a Sunday. In staunchly catholic Ireland, we considered Sunday to be the most important day of the week. We went to mass on Sundays, we wore clean (or cleaner) clothes on Sundays. Put on your Sunday best !! My dad would get up early on Sunday mornings to make sure our shoes were polished for the day. My mother would be - as with any other day of the week - in the kitchen, preparing the day's meal. Sunday dinner was always a roast and on special days, like Saint Patrick's Day, it was roast lamb.

After breakfast on Paddy's Day we went out to the back garden in search of shamrock. In Ireland it was traditional (and still is) to wear a bunch of freshly-pulled shamrock pinned to our jumpers, or in my Dad's case, to the lapel of his jacket. Known as "the wearing of the green", this practice stems from a tale of how Saint Patrick used the three-leafed shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity and the existence of three separate persons in one being. He's also said to have banished all snakes from Ireland. Though, snakes were never really native to Ireland, and many believe this to be merely a metaphor for the conversion of the pagans to Christianity.

Our back garden was overgrown with weeds and wild flowers, briars and thorny, unkempt rosebushes and all sorts of toads and frogs and insects. No snakes, though! "Don't get your clothes dirty!" my mother would shout, as we ran out to the garden. Invariably, one of us would arrive back in the kitchen, proudly displaying the bunch of shamrock we'd found, only for Dad to examine it and

say, "That's not shamrock. That's clover!" and off we'd go again, looking for the right stuff. I could never get it right. Clover looked quite like shamrock, except that its leaves were bigger, but then smaller-leaved clover could always fool us. Just as well Dad was a bit of an expert in the area.

Once my mother had washed the clay off the roots of the shamrock and divided it up between all of us, Dad would pile us all into his light-blue Austin 40 and off we went to mass with our bright green leaves sprouting proudly from our chests. God, it was great to be Irish on Paddy's Day.

Saint Patrick's Day mass was a boring affair for us kids. We just wanted it to be over so that we could get into town to watch the main event of the day: the Saint Patrick's Day Parade ! These days, the Parade is a mega-event in most cities. Back then, though a pretty paltry display looking back, the parade in Sligo Town was a major thing for us kids.

It involved a series of 'floats', provided by local small businesses, parading slowly through town as we lined either side of the street applauding each one as it passed. 'Floats' could be anything from a marching pipe band to a couple of local musicians playing on a small trailer being pulled by a car or a tractor. Transport firms would polish up their lorries and vans and decorate them for the day. Floats could also include small theatre groups, dancers, clowns or even a local football team kitted out and kicking a ball around. Once the parade had finished, it was back into the car and home for dinner. Remember ? The roast lamb ?

The rest of the day was generally played out in pubs. Musicians would meet up and ferocious sessions of music ensued. Irish traditional music was not a consumer-friendly entertainment option to be chosen from a 'what's on' guide. No, played informally in pubs, houses, on the street, it was a form of expression. Lively, joyful dance music followed by melancholy slow airs. Happy songs of drinking and courting sat side-by-side with painful songs of emigration, starvation and suffering. Of course, this outpouring of emotion was not only on March 17th, but it became more acute on this day, aided, no doubt, by the patriotic feelings the day aroused and the copious amounts of Guinness and Irish Whiskey consumed.

These days, Saint Patrick's Day has transformed itself, in much the same way as Ireland has, and is now an opportunity to promote Ireland abroad as a tourist destination. Nearly a million people take part in the 'St. Patrick's Festival' in Dublin, a five-day celebration with concerts, parades, outdoor theatre and fireworks displays. St. Patrick's Day is also celebrated worldwide by people of all backgrounds, the so-called 'Plastic Paddies' who decide to be 'Irish For A Day'.