

5-19-2020

**Roy Flechner, *Saint Patrick Retold: The Legend and History of Ireland's Patron Saint*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 320. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-691-18464- 7) \$27.95.**

John Higgins  
jhiggins@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Higgins, John (2020) "Roy Flechner, *Saint Patrick Retold: The Legend and History of Ireland's Patron Saint*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 320. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-691-18464- 7) \$27.95.," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 1 , 28-30.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol47/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New England Classical Journal* by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Roy Flechner, *Saint Patrick Retold: The Legend and History of Ireland's Patron Saint*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 320. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-691-18464-7) \$27.95.

St. Patrick, author of two works in Latin, the *Confessio* and the *Epistula ad Milites Crotici*, is one of the few Latin writers from Late Roman Britain and the only one that gives us any sense at all of living in that time and place. Ancient historians have tended to leave Patrician scholarship to medievalists and Celticists. Roy Flechner's new book places Patrick firmly in Late Antiquity, in the cultural milieu of Late Roman Britain. Reading Patrick's writings with an eye to modern literary scholarly techniques and the social history of the fourth and fifth centuries, Flechner develops a novel interpretation of Patrick's life in Britain and Ireland during his youth and of his later mission to Ireland. Flechner's interpretation shows Patrick in a new light and expands our view of Ireland's relationship to the later Roman Empire and our view of Hiberno-Roman relations. In his approach to the material, Flechner is solidly in the latest school of interpretation of early Irish history which integrates the story of Ireland into the story of Late Antiquity. *Saint Patrick Retold* is another attempt to bring these stories together. It is explicitly "not strictly academic and... written with a wider popular appeal in mind..." but is also directed to "a more specialist readership" (xvi-xvii). It shows: the book is far more readable and enjoyable than most academic histories.

The book includes chapters dealing with the historical Patrick and his context, and with the development of the Patrick legend in the Middle Ages and later. Flechner treats the social and historical context of Late Roman Britain, Late Iron Age Ireland, and slavery, both Patrick's and others'. He then deals with religion, pre-Christian as well as Christian, and Patrick's life as a missionary. The book concludes with two chapters on the development of the Patrick legend in the Middle Ages. This review concentrates on the material dealing with Patrick himself in the Late Roman context. The major new insights appear in the chapter on "Captivity" (94-118). Flechner makes some startling suggestions.

All work on Patrick must start with his two works, the *Confessio* and the *Epistula*. Recent work has established that they are sophisticated literary works and not the naïve and primitive writings that earlier scholars thought them. Flechner reads these works with the tools of literary scholarship, and concludes that it was never Patrick's intent to give a straightforward and factual account of the events of his life. In particular, Flechner distinguishes between *argumentum* and *fabula* in rhetoric, the one meant to be fact and the other a form of argument. Both of Patrick's works are rhetorical and polemical, and therefore do not require strict adherence to historical fact. This approach to the texts gives Flechner the freedom to go beyond what the words literally convey and to dig deeper into the implications of Patrick's polemical purposes.

In the *Confessio*, Patrick gives an account of his early life. He was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest, and was of the propertied, decurion class in Roman Britain. He describes his capture by Irish raiders when he was 16, his years in Ireland as a slave, and his escape back to Britain. The context of this account in the history of Late Roman Britain clarifies what happened. Patrick's social class included many slave owners, Patrick's family among them (and we should remember that slave-owning was perfectly respectable for Christian and non-Christians alike in the Late Empire). This class was burdened with high taxes; it would make sense for the young Patrick, as heir to a wealthy man, to take his fortune out of the empire, away from the tax-gatherers. The easiest way to transfer wealth across the Irish Sea and imperial border would have been in moveable goods. In a pre-monetary economy like that of Ireland, that meant slaves. If Patrick had wiggled out of his obligation to pay taxes as a decurion, that would have given rise to questions about Patrick's character. Later in his career he wrote the *Confessio* in response to some undefined and obscure criticism of his mission. His insistence that he was in fact a captive in Ireland and that he left Britain unwillingly might be meant to obscure the true situation. Flechner ties into this alternative narrative some details of Patrick's mission: he was able to operate in the Irish social and legal context only if he possessed independent wealth, since Ireland was very much a gift-economy at the time: he had to exchange gifts with rulers. Patrick's wealth could not have been in land: in Ireland, land was a communal possession and could not be alienated away from the kingdom; Patrick, a foreigner, was not a part of Irish tribal society. Here, too, the evidence suggests that he traded in slaves while a missionary. This suggestion acquires some force when we take it in connection with Ó Corráin's suggestion (*Peritia* 28, 2017) that the writer Orosius, another non-Irish Roman, was himself a slave and slave trader in southern Ireland at the same period.

This new narrative is intriguing. It gives a context to several puzzling parts of Patrick's writings: his rocky relationship with the British church leaders, his apparently easy escape from bondage in his youth, and his ability to operate in Ireland as a missionary. It also fits Patrick neatly into the world of Late Antique British society and gives us a considerably more detailed picture of how trade worked between the empire and the lands beyond the borders. We have always known that there was trade; now we can perhaps see it happening. The book taken as a whole, though, seems shaky. The evidence for Patrick's life rests on only two relatively short texts, neither of which is meant to give a coherent picture of his life; therefore, all of our knowledge has to be provisional and inferential at best. The historical context that Flechner gives is very good as background; as far as telling us anything substantial about Patrick, though, it is mostly the basis for showing the sort of thing that Patrick probably experienced and provides no evidence to support Flechner's conclusions. When details become important, Flechner has no choice but to write the life of Patrick as other scholars have done—virtually, if not grammatically, in the subjunctive.

Flechner is well aware of the limitations his work entails: he says that his “alternative narrative cannot, admittedly, be corroborated, and it is clear that there is more to the story than we have been able to recover” (58).

The few misprints cause little difficulty for the reader. To avoid confusion, note that Ammianus wrote in the fourth, not fifth century (79); read “Britain” for “Ireland” (107). The bibliographical section is well put together and comprehensive and will be very helpful to readers, especially those unfamiliar with Late Roman Britain, early Ireland, and Insular Latin literature.

I do not wish to end on a negative note. This is a novel and exciting new perspective on Patrick’s career. Flechner’s argument, which he does not over-sell, is not only intriguing but more compelling the more I think about it. If we regard this work as the spur to future research it is enormously valuable.

John Higgins

Amherst College and Smith College

Marcelo Epstein and Ruth Spivak, eds., *The Latin of Science*. Mundelein, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2019. Pp. xxxii + 395. Paper (ISBN 978-0-86516-860-2) \$29.00.

With *The Latin of Science*, Marcelo Epstein and Ruth Spivak have attempted to fill a surprising “anthological vacuum” (xii): they have produced a student-friendly reader of scientific Latin. The twenty-two readings represent twenty authors, from Vitruvius and Pliny to Isaac Newton and Luigi Galvani. Almost every text is presented in two ways: facsimiles of early printed editions are followed by “a modern transliteration” (xiii) of the precise passages to be read. A brief introduction precedes each selection, and explanatory notes follow; the notes strike a balance between grammatical, historical, and scientific issues. Other significant features include a historical survey of Latin scientific writing (10 pages); appendices on Latin pronunciation, Latin grammar (77 pages), and the “quirks” (327) of early printed books; and a comprehensive glossary. By simply suggesting that scientific texts belong in the undergraduate Latin classroom, and by demonstrating how teachers might incorporate such texts into their curricula, Epstein and Spivak have performed a valuable service, and I have no doubt that students will enjoy and be energized by the readings. At the same time, certain features of *The Latin of Science* may make Latin teachers reluctant to include it on their syllabi.

The book, organized by discipline, is at its best in the Astronomy and Rational Mechanics chapter. Anyone interested in the history of science will be thrilled to read the original words of Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton. The editors’ introductory essays connect the passages, and the texts themselves display a range of registers and