

MUST-READ OF THE WEEK: THE MISSIONARY

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The Missionary by Rowena Kinread is a vivid and authentic work of historical fiction that retells the life of Ireland’s patron saint, Saint Patrick, in dramatic fashion.

By Gwyneth Rees

Set in the fifth century A.D., *The Missionary* is an ambitious and impressive debut novel recounting the life of Ireland’s patron saint, Saint Patrick—or ‘Patricius’ as he was then known.

Right from the beginning, the pages of this historical novel are brimming with life, drama, and plot twists.

We enter the journey with Patricius, aged 16, living in the British-Roman village of Bannavem Taburniae, where he spends time studying, working the land and lusting after a young woman, Flavia.

His life is soon upended when Gaelic pirates come, burning his village and taking villagers—himself included—captive.

From there, he is taken by boat and sold as a slave to the cruel underking of the pagan tribe Dalriada in the far north of Ireland.

Here, the book goes into brilliant descriptions of the fresh horrors that the teenage Patricius faces as he is incorporated into this brutal land.

A particularly evocative scene is when the captives all land on shore, sharing news with each other of whom they had seen butchered.

Patricius' friend Pliny, along with many of the women, is raped. Patricius is forced to march for days through forests.

He witnesses his captors performing primitive acts to appease the many gods they believe in, such as throwing silver in rivers to ward off storms and afford them safe passage, and realises that they are pagan.

Once the slaves arrive at their destination, a ring fort settlement in what is now modern-day Antrim, Patricius is forced to tend livestock while being subjected to constant degradations and savage beatings by his masters.

After six years of hard labour, living in appalling squalor, he finally finds a chance to escape by boat, venturing to the west coast of France.

From there, he travels to Italy and then to the Island of Lerinus before, with a growing sense of spiritual need, he returns first home and then back to France to study theology and become a priest.

Now deeply wedded to the Christian faith, and haunted by visions of Irish people begging him to spread the word of Christianity, baptise them, and redeem them from eternal damnation, he recommends himself to the pope to fulfil this mission.

The pope gives his assent but the fulfilment of this sacred duty—which constitutes the second half of the book—does not come without significant obstacles.

Not least of these is the hostility shown towards him by the resident priestly class, the druids, and high king Laeghaire.



Rowena Kinread makes an impressive literary debut with historical fiction novel *The Missionary*.

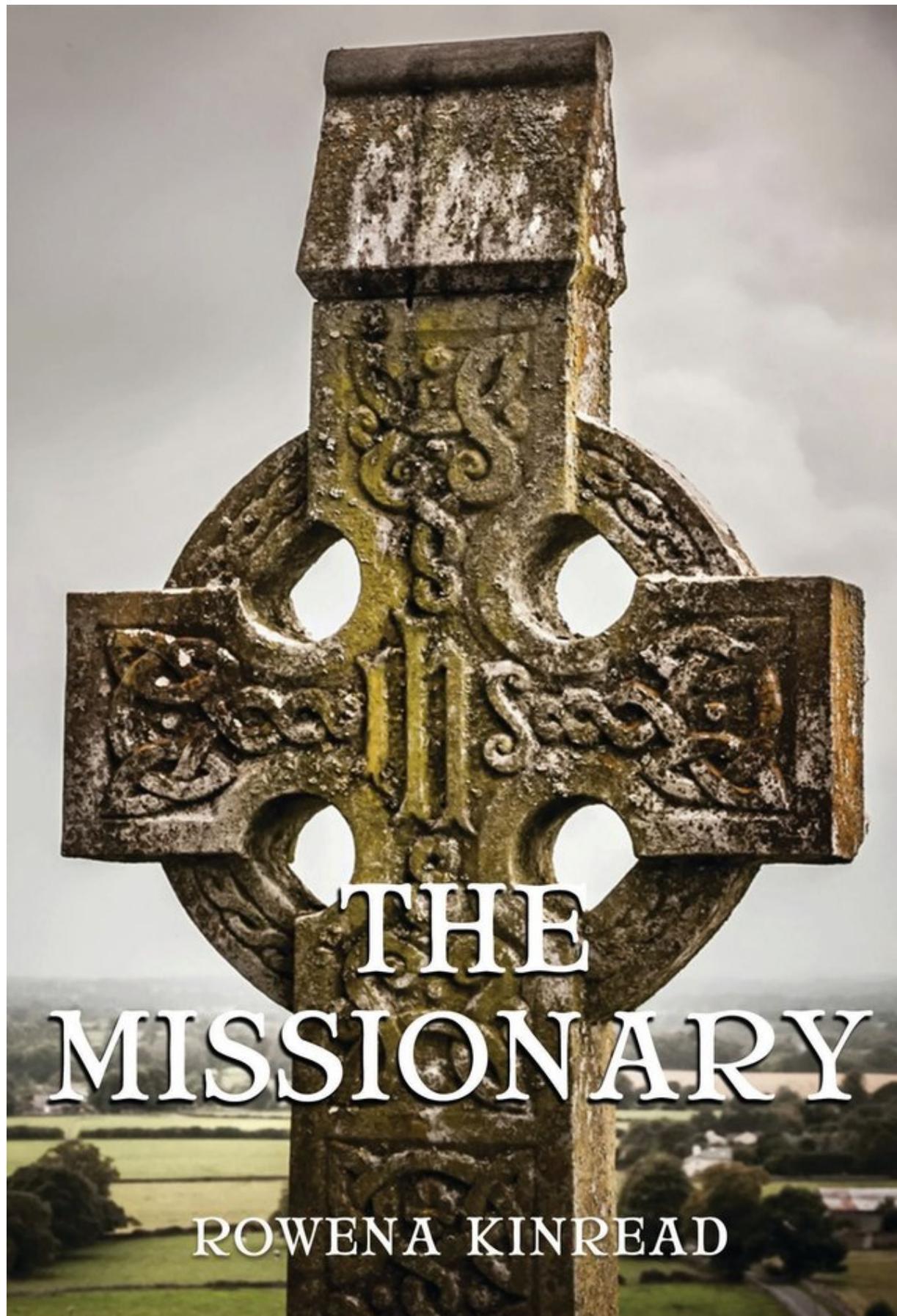
Although a work of fiction, *The Missionary* provides an astonishingly accurate account of this period.

Author Rowena Kinread spent three years researching the novel, including surveying the few surviving primary sources that recount the life of Saint Patrick, including his own autobiography, *Confession of a sinner*.

As such, not only does the novel document how he was able to bring Christianity and a flourishing culture to Ireland—at a time when other European civilisations were crumbling—but it also manages to weave in other historical figures of the day and their customs.

In this way, and with a dedication to historical accuracy that can only be admired—especially for a debut novel—the story provides readers with a clear picture of the Dark Ages, an era which is poorly, and criminally, underserved in contemporary historical fiction.

Woven in, too, is a wealth of Irish folklore, mythology, and legends surrounding the life of Saint Patrick.



THE MISSIONARY

ROWENA KINREAD

Given the paucity of historical records, Kinread has drawn upon creative licence where necessary to patch together the known incidents of the saint's life into a cohesive, and satisfying, narrative.

We see, then, memorable scenes such as the saint's famed explanation of the Holy Trinity by means of a shamrock, the national flower of Ireland, and how he used his cloak to cross the river Liger in France, impressing his companions whom he then teaches how to pray.

It should be noted, however, that perhaps the most famous miracle of Saint Patrick—expelling snakes from Ireland—is not presented by the author.

While you may initially wonder why, Kinread's reasoning is sound. As she explains at the end of the book, scientists have concluded that there were never any snakes in Ireland, so it would be historically unfaithful to suggest there were. She concludes that the snakes were possibly a metaphor for the druids.

Now, that's what I call dedication to the genre.

As a reader who, like many, was previously uninformed about the Dark Ages or the life of Saint Patrick, I found *The Missionary* to be both fascinating and educational.

That's not to say, however, that it reads like a textbook. Far from it—this is a fast-paced and utterly compelling story that spoils readers with its vivid prose and literary acumen.

Beyond anything, it is a classic adventure, with similar elements to the works of authors such as Wilbur Smith or Noah Gordon, whose writing is concerned with presenting new eras and cultures to readers in relatable and engrossing fashion.

Although written in the past tense, we are transported right into the moment as we follow Patricius on his journey, feeling the cold wind on his face and the rain lashing on his skin.

In particular, I enjoyed his internal dialogue as he meets with each new adversity, such as his hopes to be treated as well by his masters as his own father treated their servants, and his feelings of shame later in life with regard his early trysts with Flavia.

I was also impressed by the evolution of the character as he progresses through life. The awkward, somewhat spoilt Patricius grows into the wise, caring saint we all recognise today, and we can sense that change, and how it comes about.

Even the minor characters, such as sagacious Sextus and the easy-going companion, Pliny, come alive on the pages, further drawing us in while adding additional depth.

Perhaps, though, the star of the piece, aside from the protagonist, is the setting itself, which is painted so well in words. From the screech of a grey heron to the relentless itch caused by biting mosquitoes, this alien world is both terrifying and mesmerising to behold.

The novel includes, as an appendix, a short glossary of terms, and a list of historical figures featured in the story, to add further to our enjoyment.

Kinread has certainly left no stone unturned in her quest to deliver all one could ask for in an historical novel, and such attentiveness can only come down to her devotion both to her craft and subject.

It transpires that she first set upon her quest after research into her family name revealed that it is derived from the ancient Gaelic name ‘dal riada’, which translates as “the kin at the end of the road”. This then led to the connection with Patricius, and the rest, as they say, is history.

She is now hard at work on her next novel, also set in fifth-century Ireland and focused on Fergus Mór, a later underking of the Dalriada who, according to legend, was the founding father of Scotland.

If it is half as good as this book, then it will still be an enthralling and satisfying read.

It’s because I have been so expertly immersed in the life of Saint Patrick that I feel duty-bound to spread the word: *The Missionary* is a dazzling work of historical fiction not to miss.

***The Missionary* by Rowena Kinread (Pegasus Publishers) is out now on Amazon, priced £10.99 in paperback and £2.87 in eBook.**

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ROWENA KINREAD

We speak with British historical fiction author Rowena Kinread, who is based in Germany, about her debut novel, *The Missionary*, and her future writing plans.



Q. As an author of realistic historical fiction, how did you handle the significant gaps in the historical record about the life of Saint Patrick and the era in which he lived?

A. I constructed a timeline with all the known dates of Saint Patrick’s life, and then added historical dates of the Roman Empire, the popes in Rome, Palladius—the first bishop of Ireland, who was sent there before Patrick—and other historical details. I noted where Patrick was, and when. It is sometimes uncertain which legends took place in which year, so I used a little artistic freedom. For example, let us take the legend of the hawthorn bushes that to this day still flower white in November only in the Loire Valley, France, and nowhere else. I attributed this legend associated with Patrick to when he first walked through the Loire valley. It could have happened at a later date but, for the story, it doesn’t really matter when it exactly took place.

Q. You spent three years researching fifth-century Ireland before writing your novel. What was the most fascinating fact or insight you learned?

A. That history repeats itself and that human beings act in a similar fashion whether in the present day or nearly two thousand years ago.

Q. We have all heard of Saint Patrick, but beyond associating him with the banishment of snakes, most of us know little about the real man. How would you sum him up, and why do you think he makes a compelling subject for a novel?

A. Saint Patrick is interesting because he is so human. He wasn't born a saint; to the contrary, according to his own autobiography, he was a sinner. Neither was he perfect; he had trouble controlling his temper. That lets me, and hopefully the reader, empathise with him. He gave up the comfortable life he could have had to help those people less fortunate than himself. He believed in doing what his conscience told him was right, and he was consequent in pursuing this goal. That makes him admirable in my eyes and worthy of his title, 'Patron Saint of Ireland'.

Q. You are currently writing a second novel set in early Celtic Ireland. Why is this period so attractive to you?

A. It is interesting to write about a period in history that few authors have previously ventured into. I feel that, for example, the Tudor period or the Vikings have been chewed over enough and the time is ripe to delve into the mythology and legends of the Dark Ages.

Q. The Missionary is your debut novel. What was the biggest challenge you faced in writing it, and how did you overcome this?

A. Once I had constructed my framework, I had great fun letting my imagination run and developing the characters. The biggest challenge was to find a publisher. An unknown first-time author, without a famous name and without connections, has not only to write well but also have luck to catch the attention of a literary agent or publisher. I received several "no thank-yous" before Pegasus offered me a contract.

Q. Since a young age you have lived with muscular dystrophy. Can you tell us more about your condition, and how fiction writing has helped provide a form of catharsis?

A. I have a rare genetic disorder that is progressive and, up to date, non-curable. I can imagine that many authors, with or without a disability, use writing as a form of escapism or therapy.

However, those authors who have led an eventful life, in whatever way, good or bad or both, have a lifetime's experience to draw upon. I admit that I like to take secret revenge upon people who have acted adversely in my life by using their characters in my books. I doubt that the people concerned would realise this!



Rowena Kinread spent three years researching *The Missionary*, and has been dedicated to making the novel as historically accurate as possible.

Q. You are an avid reader. What, for you, are the key ingredients of a great historical novel?

A. I like a book to add the flavour and taste of the time and place in which it takes place. If the reader feels immersed in a different era then the book is usually good. The characters should be realistic and believable. Personally, I enjoy a book that reads easily and is exciting but at the same time teaches me something new.

Q. On a similar vein, what are the writing tropes that you absolutely hate?

A. Massive historical mistakes. Characters that are thoroughly evil and then suddenly become good. Too much lecturing!

Q. If your novel were made into a movie who would you like to see in the leading role, and why?

A. Jamie Bell. He is a very authentic actor and with his youthful appearance could probably pass for the young Patrick in addition to, with the right make-up, for the older Patrick. Tom Hiddleston would be a close second choice.

Q. What can you tell us about the next two historical novels you are currently working on?

A. Without revealing too much, my second novel is about Fergus Mór, a prince of Dalriada who ventured forth from Ireland and took control of Western Scotland. He is regarded as the founder father of Scotland, giving it its name and language. He brought the Stone of Destiny, which many historians regard as the Stone of Scone, from Ireland to Scotland. This is the stone upon which the kings and queens of England and Scotland have been crowned upon ever since, up to and including HRH Elisabeth II. Should my two novels of this era prove popular, then my fingers are itching to type a third book about Gabran the Traitor and St. Columba. In the meantime, I am working on a 19th century social drama that takes place in Switzerland.