

ABOUT ST. PATRICK AND THE SNAKES

By ROBERT F. INGER
CURATOR OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

THERE ARE TWO recurring questions about Ireland and snakes. (1) Is it true that there are no snakes in Ireland? (2) Did St. Patrick really drive them out?

My qualifications for answering these questions are two: I am Curator of Reptiles, and my mother was born on St. Patrick's Day.

This story, like most good ones, goes back a long time—in fact, about 60,000 years, to the period immediately before the last Ice Age. At that time snakes probably lived in



Cartoon by E. John Pfiffner

Ireland as they almost certainly did in England. But as the glaciers began to advance and cover Ireland (and England), the snakes and other warmth-loving animals were pushed farther and farther south. Finally the ice covered all of Ireland, exterminating the entire fauna, including the snakes. Actually, the reptiles must have died out before all of the land was under ice because the climate was undoubtedly too cold.

By the time the glaciers began to melt and retreat, so much water was bound up in the ice that sea level was lowered, forming a land connection between the British Isles and the continent of Europe. As the ice sheet continued to melt, animals of many kinds began to reinvade Great Britain from the continent. The climate was still very harsh and the hardest animals returned first. Reptiles, being very sensitive to cold, probably were not among the first invaders. But eventually they, too, crossed the land between modern Europe and England. Just about the time snakes began to reach Great Britain but before they could reach Ireland, it was cut off from England and Scotland by an arm of the sea, for as the ice sheet melted the level of the oceans rose.

This geographic separation of Ireland took place some time before 5000 B.C. Since St. Patrick did not reach Ireland until about

ANIMAL LIFE HAD ITS ORIGINS IN THE OCEANS

By AUSTIN L. RAND
CHIEF CURATOR OF ZOOLOGY

THE PREPONDERANCE of seascape paintings in our new exhibit, "The Animal Kingdom," came as a surprise to me when I stood back and looked at the plans. But the importance of the sea and its inhabitants in any survey of animal life is great. Inclusion of many seascapes was necessary.

In area the seas are much more extensive than the land, covering about two-thirds of

While in the vast expanses of the sea less than one-quarter of the million or so existing species of animals live, they include more basic types than do the other three-quarters of the animal species, which live on the land.

CRADLE OF ANIMAL LIFE

The sea was the cradle of animal life. Already in that far-distant geological period, the Cambrian, or shortly afterward, there lived in the sea representatives of all the major types of animals that we know today.



ECHINODERM PANEL IN 'ANIMAL KINGDOM' EXHIBIT

The animals shown form the only group that developed in the sea and still all live there, none having colonized on land or in fresh water.

the surface of the globe. The oceans have their depths too—the Mindanao Deep off the Philippines descends to 32,000 feet, exceeding by more than a half-mile the height of Mount Everest. But it is the shallow water and the surface layers of the open oceans that contain most of the living things.

A.D. 400, the sequence of events eliminates him from the zoological problem.

Therefore the answers to our two questions are: yes and no. Yes, Ireland has no snakes. No, St. Patrick did not drive them out.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect in a review of the animal kingdom, living and extinct, is that only these few basic types have flourished. Many smaller groups have disappeared, of course. Dinosaurs became extinct but other reptiles have survived. Trilobites disappeared more than 200 million years ago but other arthropods survive in abundance. A few obscure groups, such as graptolites (of which no one but specialists have ever heard and even they find the fossils difficult to interpret), did become extinct, and probably some soft-bodied groups disappeared without leaving an un-

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