



0. A PLACE CALLED PURGATORY - Story Preface

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St. Patrick, Ireland's Patron Saint, had a vision about purgatory. He believed that it was a physical place of penitence which was once revealed to him. The physical place was a cave, on Saint's Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal. The place became known as "St. Patrick's Purgatory." Things have changed on the island, since the time of St. Patrick, but in this photo—by Egardiner0—we see a bell tower standing on a mound which was the site of the cave. Image online via Wikimedia Commons; license [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Purgatory, as an actual place where souls are purified after death, is often associated with [St. Bernard](#), the Abbot of [Clairvaux](#). In his seminal work, *The Birth of Purgatory*, Jacques Le Goff suggests that five years before his own death, [St. Bernard](#) may have given Purgatory its first geographical meaning when he [preached a sermon](#) at the funeral of Humbert, a Clairvaux monk:

Know that, after this life, whatever debts have not been paid here below must be repaid a hundredfold, 'to the uttermost farthing' in the places of purgation ["in purgabilibus locis"]. (*The Birth of Purgatory*, page 145.)

Whether the quoted sermon was given by St. Bernard—or by a counterfeiter who used concepts discussed by Bernard—will never be known. It is clear, however, that by the end of the 12th century, and the beginning of the 13th, the word "Purgatory" was used to describe an actual, physical place. Peter the Chanter, master of the school of Notre Dame in Paris who died in 1197, wrote:

The good either go at once to Paradise if they have nothing with them to burn, or they go first to Purgatory and then to Paradise, as in the case of those who bring venial sins along with them. No special receptacle is set aside for the wicked, who, it is said, go immediately to Hell.

As Le Goff notes:

The word and the idea [of Purgatory] had clearly become commonplace, in Paris at any rate, by the end of the 12th century, and it would seem that the tripartite system of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise had been perfected. (*The Birth of Purgatory*, page 165.)

With the birth of Purgatory, there was "forged a different kind of link between the living and the dead," Stephen Greenblatt writes (at page 17 in *Hamlet in Purgatory*), "or rather, it enabled the dead to be not completely dead—not as utterly gone, finished, complete as those whose souls resided forever in Hell or Heaven."

It is said that [St. Patrick](#), the [patron saint of Ireland](#) who proselytized the Irish people in the 5th century, believed that an entrance to a physical place of penitence was once revealed to him. It was a cave, on [Saint's Island](#) in [Lough Derg](#), County Donegal, where it is believed he had a vision of the afterlife.

Throughout the Middle Ages, after Purgatory was popularized, people visited the cave which has since been closed. To this day, individuals make [pilgrimages to the area](#), albeit to a different Lough Derg island ([Station Island](#)) and to a "Prison Chapel" (instead of to a cave).

It is believed that the story of St. Patrick's Purgatory influenced Dante Alighieri whose *Divine Comedy* remains the most famous tale of Purgatory ever yet told.

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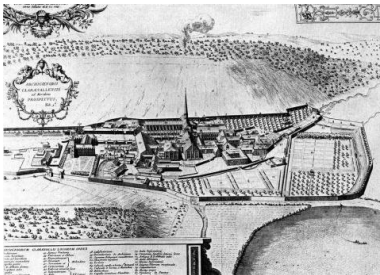


Saint Bernard

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Clairvaux

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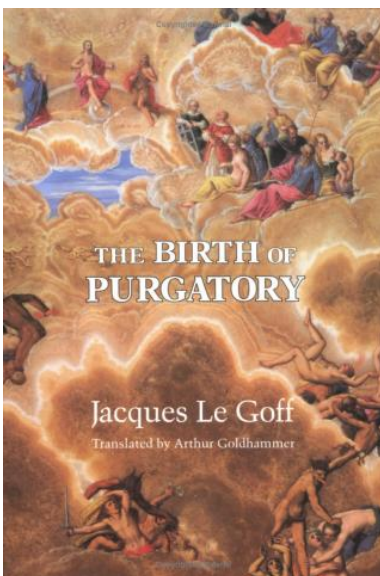


St. Bernard

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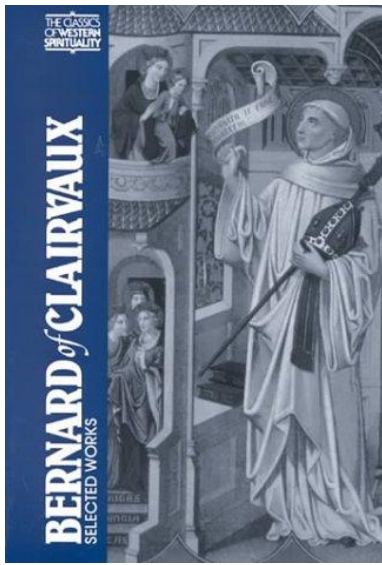
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The Birth of Purgatory

Image online, courtesy the amazon.com website.

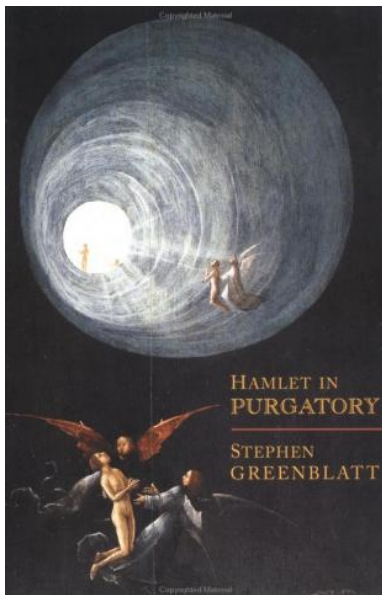
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Bernard of Clairvaux

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Hamlet in Purgatory - by Stephen Greenblatt

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St. Patrick

Image online, courtesy the Rosenberg Library Museum [website](http://www.rosenberglibrarymuseum.org).

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Saint's Island

Illustration by Thomas Carve, included (among other places) in *Anacephalaeosis Hibernica* 1666 (where it is shown as *Insulae Purgatory*). Online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Lough Derg

Image online, courtesy the Lough Derg website.

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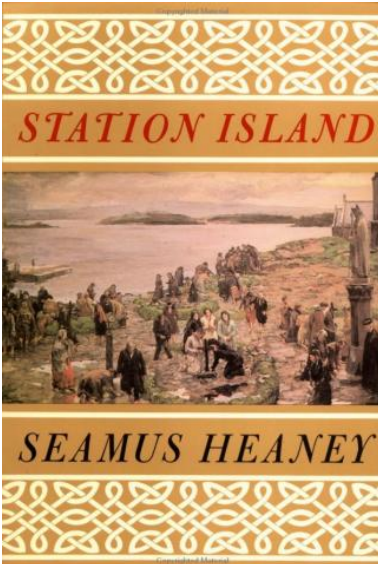


Panorama of Station Island

Image online, courtesy the oracle Ireland [website](#).

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Station Island

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