In circa A.D. 403, sea-faring raiders captured a 16-year-old Roman-British youth and forced him into slavery in Ireland. Six years later, he escaped captivity and returned to Britain. After entering the Church, this bold young man returned to the island on which he had once been enslaved, to convert its inhabitants to Christianity. Before long, Patrick was hailed as Ireland’s patron saint. The date of his death, March 17th, became his feast day, and today St. Patrick’s Day is celebrated around the world. Despite its religious roots, St. Patty’s Day is anything but a solemn religious holiday for many modern celebrants. The various faces of St. Patrick’s Day—from the austere and hagiographic to the wanton and decadent—reflect popular beliefs about Irish culture. Launch your St. Patty’s Day celebrations by exploring Minnesota Reflections.

Since St. Patrick’s time, the Irish history has been tied to the history of the Catholic Church. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (St. Paul) recruited young women from Ireland to join their religious order and move to Minnesota’s burgeoning capitol city: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?ssc,62

Not that holiness pervaded all aspects of the Irish peoples’ reputation. For years, those of Irish heritage have struggled against stereotypes associated with Irish consumption habits. You may remember this controversial quote uttered by Governor Jesse Ventura: “Whoever designed the streets (in St. Paul) must have been drunk. I think it was those Irish guys, you know what they like to do.” Ventura was not the only historically noteworthy resident of the capitol city to communicate impressions of the Irish in high-profile ways. In 1899, St. Paul’s own Archbishop John Ireland delivered an address to the Irish people about the evils of drink: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?iml,2849

Temperance was an area of particular interest to the Catholic Church: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?iml,2874

The Irish also suffered from a reputation for rowdiness. Of all places, the issue reared its head at the Minnesota State Constitutional Convention! http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?sll,2263

But if politicians have mocked the Irish, and religious clerics have castigated them,
then the rest of us are left to enjoy the lofty achievements of Irish art and culture. Irish music has made an international impression:
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?mpls,2197

The harp is an Irish national symbol that embodies the ethereal beauty of the Emerald Isle. While the traditional “Irish harp” is a lap-sized folk instrument, even Classical artists (who tend toward grand concert harps) often enjoy serene Irish melodies: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?p15160coll8,61

Though the 17th falls on a Thursday this year, I hope that you can take some time to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. Drink a cup of invigorating Irish breakfast tea in the morning. Listen to Irish folk music at work. Enjoy corned beef and cabbage for supper. Read some Yeats before bed. Or, if your community hosts a parade, why not celebrate with others: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?scott,260

Whatever your St. Patty’s Day plans, keep in mind the important social and cultural contributions the Irish have made to the world.

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