

## Best-selling Author and Historian "Raises the Dead" in AU Lecture

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Alfred, NY -- Anyone who thinks history is a list of dates, kings, battles, and governments, with an occasional Industrial Revolution or trans-oceanic migration thrown in for human interest, hasn't met Thomas Cahill or read his books. "The historian's task is to raise the dead to life so that the people of the past may live once more -- not as oddities or antiquities but as people like ourselves," Cahill told about 250 people Tuesday (Feb. 2) at Alfred University. In the 40 minutes it took him to deliver AU's annual Russell Lecture, Cahill did just that. In his talk, the best-selling author resurrected three long-dead men with the magic of his storyteller's art: St. Patrick, who plays a role in *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995); King David, who appears in *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (1998); and Alexander the Great, whose story makes part of the book Cahill is writing now. "I almost despaired when I came to St. Patrick," Cahill said. Patrick lived in the fifth century, but his first biography was written 200 years later, and its purpose was not to bring him to life but to make him seem a greater saint than any other. According to legend, he frightened all the snakes out of Ireland and somehow zapped his enemies so that he had only to look at them and they keeled over. In later biographies, too, Patrick the man didn't come through clearly, Cahill said. "So I decided to remove the Saint," Cahill said. "Saint was not his first name. His mother called him Patricius; he was a Roman citizen. Calling him Patricius seemed to give him a new identity. Then I came to his own autobiography." This document is only a few pages in bad Latin, for when he wrote it, Patrick had been speaking Irish for 30 years. "He would get an F for organization," Cahill said. "There are no connections and few transitions ... But gradually, from those few ancient pages, a real human being began to emerge. He was no wonder-worker. The first part shows us the easy life of a boy growing up in Roman Britain as a member of the local gentry. "Patrick himself was a bit of a brat, a brash teen-ager who felt fenced in by his parents' life (and) was only amused by their Christian religion. But then one day he was kidnaped by Irish pirates. They brought him to Ireland in chains and auctioned him off to a warrior king." For six years, from age 16 to 22, Patrick was a slave, owned by a cruel master. "He tells us that he worked outdoors as a shepherd; he was often hungry and sometimes naked. He was completely alone and couldn't even understand the Irish language. In these woeful circumstances, the inner Patrick began to change. Cut off from everything familiar, he began to pray to the god of his parents -- that god he had made fun of." Finally he escaped, Cahill said, "but he never could settle down to a pleasant life in the quiet British countryside. In midlife he returned to Ireland as a bishop, bringing the Christian religion of his parents to Ireland." He was the first person to condemn slavery as immoral -- the real wonder he worked -- and if you know his life experiences, you understand where that act came from. "Patrick's experiences made him a different man from the man he would otherwise have become," Cahill said. "Patrick led a strange life, but all lives are strange. No life is remotely like anyone else's. The historian must find the meaning that's hidden in a life," he said. The Russell Lecture is delivered every year in memory of Willis Russell, who taught history at Alfred University from 1924 to 1965 and for many years was the University's entire history department.