

**“We’ve always known who we are”:  
Irish Folklore and the Brigidine Tradition**

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A tiny bell rang as Rebecca entered the shop. She stood staring at the woman behind the counter.

“Everything all right there?”

“Yeah, yeah. Uh – two pear and Stiltons on pitas, please?”

“That’s a good choice.”

Rebecca turned around, gazing at all the Irish keepsakes displayed on the shelves next to the door. There were sweatshirts and four-leaf-clover key fobs. Claddagh picture frames with the Irish Blessing sat beside small statues of Saint Patrick. Next to a pair of praying hands, she found several crosses woven of grass, each six inches in diameter. She touched one to see if it was plastic. It wasn’t.

“Saint Bridget’s cross,” the woman behind the counter said.

“Saint Bridget?” Rebecca inquired.

“Aye. Also known as Brigid’s cross.”

“Breed’s cross.”

“That’s how you say her name in Irish – *breed*.”

“Brigid. She’s not a saint, then?”

“She’s the mother of us all. Well, was before Saint Patrick.” The woman glanced down as she sliced a pear.

“Before Catholicism,” Rebecca said.

“Aye. He was the first to try and make us something we’re not. He tried to give us just ‘the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’ But we knew we had a Mother. Can’t take the Mother away. So, we just made her something else so we could keep her and keep him off our backs about it. Did the same with the English. Pretended to be something we’re not to get them off our backs till we could figure out how to get them out.” She laughed. “**We’ve always known who we are**, though.”

Rebecca nodded ... glancing up, she found a Saint Bridget’s cross over the shop’s door. “Crossroads are never comfortable,” the woman said. “Crossroads. Being in the center of things – exposed from all sides until you decide what road to take. Very uncomfortable. Good to have one of those with you for protection. Brigid crosses are the crossroads. We put them at our doors and nail them to the roof beams for protection. Need somethin’ up there when there’s sparks comin’ out your chimney and roof’s nothin’ but thatch.” She smiled and slid the sandwiches onto the counter. “I put some blackberry tarts in there, too. It’s not February 1, Brigid’s Day, but since we were talking about her I thought I’d give you some of her tarts.”

“Blackberry tarts are for Brigid’s Day?”

“Blackberry anything is for Brigid. Oh, Saint Bridget. Since we were talkin’ about her, good to celebrate her.”

(from *Casting Off*, by Nicole R. Dickson)

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## INTRODUCTION

I am ending my Master's work by spending a bit of quality time with Irish mythology, literature, and legend. Specifically, I focused on the syncretized narrative of the Goddess/Saint *Brigid*<sup>1</sup> appearing in medieval lore and examined the debate surrounding the nature of that syncretism. In this paper, I shall extend my study away from texts and into the realm of folklore and ritual practice.

The study of the syncretism of *Brigid* is a multidisciplinary endeavor unlike any other I have encountered. It spans literary, folkloric, religious, historical, anthropological, ethnographic, archaeological, and cultural studies. Regardless—and without question—the concept and “being” of *Brigid* represents the eternal, sacred feminine in Celtic folk tradition. Whether she is in the form of the mighty triadic Goddess(es) of the Tuatha Dé Danann, or clothed in the humble garb and mystical mantle of the Sainly abbess of Kildare, *Brigid* is an essential figure in Celtic and Irish culture. No one disagrees on that point.

However, debate abounds regarding the extent to which the legend of the Goddess fed the legend of the Saint. It cannot be denied that the legends are, in fact, inextricably linked: it is not possible to understand the story of the Saint without first knowing her roots in pre-Christian mythology; nor, in turn, is it fully possible to know how the story of the Saint may have helped retell the story of the Goddess. It is in this murky reflexive space where speculation and division takes place: to what extent were pagan traditions extended into early Christian thought? Ciaran Carson, in the introduction to his translation of the epic story of the Ulster cycle, *The Táin*, writes: “Some

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this paper will use the Modern Irish spelling “*Brigid*” in italics to reflect the depiction of both the Goddess and the Saint in a single conceptual being.

scholars have suggested that early Irish prose might have been modelled on the narrative procedures of the Lives of the Saints ... but it is at least as valid to argue that early hagiographies were modelled on folk tales, or that they are a type of folklore” (Carson, 2008, p. xix).

Two dichotomous schools of thought do battle on the topic; their evidence is based primarily on early monastic texts. One espouses a nativist perspective that the Christian Saint Brigit is the direct and deliberate personification of the pre-Christian Goddess Brigid. The most radical stance argues that the Saint, as an actual historical figure (as was Patrick), most likely didn't exist; rather, she was the euhemerized Goddess, pushed and pulled, reshaped and reformed, rationalized and syncretized, to ensure that her powerful story conformed to new religious and political agendas. The anti-nativist perspective argues the opposite point of view, based primarily on the notion that very little can be known of the ancient Irish oral tradition, since all we have are texts written by Christian clergy – who hardly would have been sympathetic toward paganism. Somewhere in the middle between these extremes is the argument that early medieval writers somehow managed to effectively blend the pre-Christian and Christian traditions, both of which were vital in Irish culture. More importantly, this approach takes the debate out of the realm of dead texts and into that of living cultural practice, that which has endured into contemporary times.

While this paper shall review some of the textual evidence on *Brigid* as both Goddess and Saint, it will focus primarily on some of the oral folklore and ritual practices surrounding devotion to her. It will rely on a variety of sources in this space, including help provided by Séan Ó Súilleabháin and Lady Augusta Gregory. While I draw from primarily scholarly sources, I have also examined popular contemporary sources such as the Catholic order of nuns, the Brigidine Sisters, as well as several “neo-pagan” writings. These sources provide a critical perspective when considering

contemporary, popular folk practice and imagery and how the pagan and Christian traditions might be blended.

Ultimately, no matter where her story began or how it evolved, *Brigid* is, unequivocally, an Irish hero: “the most powerful female religious figure in all of Irish history ... a Triple Goddess, a Virgin Mother, a Lawmaker, a Virgin Saint, and a folk image whose shadows still move over Ireland” (Condren, 1989, p. 55). She lives on, not only because of the written word, but because of oral tradition and folk practices that have been passed down for centuries – and some which are being created and recreated in contemporary times.

To begin, I will offer a summary of the debate surrounding syncretism as a foundation for the discussion to follow.

### **SYNCRETISM DEBATE: AN OVERVIEW**

Nativists argue that, as Ireland moved from an oral to a written culture, early Christian texts deliberately borrowed from, preserved, and adapted ancient pre-Christian influences. Nativists’ primary hypothesis is that Irish clergy were demonstrating an attitude of acceptance toward the pre-Christian myth of the Goddess in order to justify the power and authority of the Saint. Due to a lack of physical evidence proving the Saint’s existence and her power, establishing her place of authority in the Church became much more difficult. In her piece, “Body of a saint, story of a goddess: origins of the Brigidine tradition,” Lisa Bitel argues that because the Church lacked her physical remains or any of her writings, as they had with Patrick, there would be no Saint, “unless that Saint happened to be a numinous figure recaptured from the heroic, pre-Patrician, Irish past” (Bitel, 2002, p. 210).

Cogitosus, Saint Brigit's first hagiographer writing around 650 AD, held steadfastly true to Christian teachings in his litany of the Saint's supposed miracles; he never alluded to her possible pagan origins. However, the anonymous authors of the other two primary vitae, *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*, did. "These two post-Cogitosan hagiographers, writing explicitly didactic tales in order to teach Christians how to be more Christian, reached back into the ancient history of pagan Ireland to prove the sanctity of Brigit" (Bitel, p. 225). Evidence of this lies in the motifs of her ties to druidism and a host of other mythological references (Ó hÓgáin, 2006, p. 55). It's interesting that while normally Saints' vitae were written in Latin for the purposes of reading during churches on their feast days, *Bethu Brigitte* was written partially in Irish--suggesting that it might have been read to a secular audience fully acquainted with the mythology of the Goddess (Bitel, note 15, p. 226).

Donál Ó Cathasaigh takes a more pointed position on the side of nativism. He argues: "When the seventh century lives of [Saint] Brigid were written, the cult of a Celtic Brigid had not yet run its course. Attributes of the tutelary Goddess of Leinster were therefore appropriated by the earliest biographers and grafted onto Leinster's Saint. The Goddess of poetry, healing, and the metal arts became the Christian patroness of learning, healing, and domestic arts. Because the celibate monks could not transfer the strong sexual/maternal qualities of the Celtic Brigid to her Christian counterpart, they virginized her, identified her with the mother of Christ, and hailed her as 'Protectress of Ireland'" (Ó Cathasaigh, 1982, p. 91-92).

Conversely, the anti-nativist perspective, which James Carney posited in 1955 in *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (as cited in Cusack, 2008, p. 77) and taken up by scholars ever since, argues something much different. This position claims that there was no transference of pagan themes into the stories of the Saint. Anti-nativists argue that "very little can be known of the earlier oral tradition

of the Irish, since all that remains are Christian texts written by Christian clergy; that these clergy were not sympathetic to, but critical of, paganism; that the most appropriate models for these literary texts are found in the Bible and other Christian writings; that there is no hard and fast distinction between secular and ecclesiastical literary genres; and that the texts provide scholars with material about ecclesiastical matters of importance at the time of their production, first and foremost” (Cusack, 2008, p. 78).

However, somewhere in between these two extremes, are ideas such as those articulated by John Carey in “Native Elements in Irish Pseudohistory” (1995). There, Carey uses the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (“The Book of the Taking of Ireland,” c1050) as evidence that the intellectual culture of early medieval Ireland achieved an extraordinary balance that reflected a respect for indigenous traditions as well as an acceptance of evolving ideas, beliefs, and literature. They were determined to find a place for native traditions side by side with the tenets of the new religion (Carey, p. 47). In so doing, Carey claims, the medieval writers also took advantage of the full range of classical learning available to them create a niche and a significance for Ireland in the wider world (Carey, p. 48). Carey argues that the blending of pagan and Christian lore demonstrates a commitment to both traditions: “it is because they were convinced that both were true, and both important, that the Irish sought so persistently to reconcile them with one another” (Carey, p. 48).

One of the more compelling ideas to consider in this space is that, as Carole Cusack argues in “Brigit: Goddess, Saint, ‘Holy Woman’, and Bone of Contention” (2008), attention to texts alone is not enough to make a case. She argues that while it is undeniable that early medieval texts were monastic products, it is too easy to explain away or suppress elements of the texts that fail to fit the anti-nativist paradigm (Cusack, p. 91). She goes on to state: “...once evidence from folklore and

anthropology is admitted to build up the picture of the Goddess Brigit and the survival of devotions to her in the modern era, it becomes nearly impossible to deny the identity of the Christian Saint and the Celtic Goddess, along with the pre-Christian origins of many of the devotional practices associated with them” (Cusack, p. 91) – for example, festivals, feast-days, holy wells, folk art, sacred flames, prayers, neo-paganism, and other ritual and devotional practices. Cusack argues that focusing only on texts to find Christianity, and/or to question or deny the existence of the practice of paganism, ultimately underscores the intent of colonialism – to obliterate indigenous culture and assimilate the microcosm into the macrocosm. She argues, as do many others, that *Brighid* occupies a critical space in Irish culture between myth and history, pagan and Christian, oral and written, vernacular and Latin, folkloric and ecclesiastical (Cusack, p. 97). While *Brighid* may be depicted as a Goddess or a Saint, an either/or version of her is incomplete, an oversimplification of her complex and multifaceted reality (Cusack, p. 97). In other words, *Brighid* is both.

Keeping this in mind, I will now look at the mythology of Goddess and see how she appears in ancient and contemporary variations, and then consider the legends of the Saint and how she might have been blended with the Goddess.

## **BRIGID<sup>2</sup> AS GODDESS**

What we know of the Goddess and her variant forms comes from scanty textual references, but mostly from oral tradition and folklore. She is interwoven with the very landscape and culture of

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this paper will use the spelling “Brigid” refer to the Goddess and as a means to distinguish her from the Saint.



Ireland and throughout the Celtic world, almost as much as Danu, the Mother-Goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

From a linguistic perspective, her name has become almost interchangeable with the title, meaning “exalted one”. The Old Irish *Brigit* or *Bríg* was spelled *Bríghid* by the modern Irish period and now frequently appears as *Bríd*; it was Anglicized as *Bridget* or *Brigid*. In Scottish Gaelic, she appears as *Brìghde* or *Bride*. Her powerful presence extended across the Celtic world. In *The Lore of Ireland*, Ó hÓgáin wrote that her name is cognate with that of the Brigantes, a far-ranging tribe of Britain and the Continent: “The tribe had the eponymous Briganti as their principal Goddess, and offshoots of them settled in south-eastern Ireland in or about the first century. It was probably through such settlements that the cult of this Goddess came to Ireland, Brigit being the Irish adaptation of the name .... Briginti may indeed have been the Gaulish and British Goddess whom Caesar equated with the Roman patroness of arts and crafts, Minerva” (Ó hÓgáin, p. 50). The rivers Brent (in England), Braint (in Wales), and Brigid (in Ireland) testify to the prestige of the Goddess throughout the Celtic world (Ó Cathasaigh, p. 78). The Goddess Brigit shares similarities with Goddesses in other cultures, such as the Sanskrit Brhaspati and the Norse Bragi (Editor’s note in the *Sanas Chormaic*, p. 23).

Brigit was known primarily as a triple Goddess, three sisters who were most often depicted as daughters of the great god “The Dagda” of the Túatha Dé Danann, thereby making her a granddaughter of Danu. In the ninth century, Cormac mac Cuilennáin, a scholar, bishop and king of Munster, documented her in his Glossary as follows: “Brigit i.e. a poetess, daughter of the Dagda. This is Brigit the female sage, or woman of wisdom, i.e. Brigit the Goddess whom poets adored, because very great and very famous was her protecting care. It is therefore they call her Goddess of

poets by this name. Whose sisters were Brigit the female physician [woman of leechcraft,] Brigit the female smith [woman of smithwork]; from whose names with all Irishmen a Goddess was called *Brigit*. *Brigit*, then *breo-aigit*, *breo-shaigit* ‘a fiery arrow.’” (*Sanas Chormaic*, O’Donovan translation, 1868, p. 23). Kim McCone comments in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (1990), “The names Bríg and Brigit were prone to interchangeability in early Irish sources. Thus the inventory of identically named female Saints, *Comanmann Náeb-úag nÉrenn*, lists ten different Brigit, twelve Brígs and three Brigit depending on the manuscript” (McCone, p. 162).

She appears as Bríg, the wife of the Fomorian Bres, in the ninth-century saga *Cath Maige Tuired*. Mentions of her are fleeting, but consistent. In her retelling of the story in *Gods and Fighting Men*, Lady Augusta Gregory writes: “And all this went against the Fomor, and they sent one of their young men to spy about the camp and to see could he find out how these things were done. It was Ruadan, son of Bres and of Brigit daughter of the Dagda they sent, for he was a son and grandson of the Tuatha de Danaan” (Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men*, 1904, p. 56). Lady Gregory also writes of the Goddess at more length in “The Fight with the Firbolgs”:

It was in a mist the Tuatha de Danaan, the people of the gods of Dana, or as some called them, the Men of Dea, came through the air and the high air to Ireland... the greatest among their women were Badb, a battle Goddess; and Macha, whose mast-feeding was the heads of men killed in battle; and the Morrighu, the Crow of Battle; and Eire and Fodla and Banba, daughters of the Dagda, that all three gave their names to Ireland afterwards; and Eadon, the nurse of poets; and Brigit, that was a woman of poetry, and poets worshipped her, for her sway was very great and very noble. And she was a woman of healing along with that, and a woman of smith's work, and it was she first made the whistle for calling one to another through the night. And the one side of her face was ugly, but the other side was very comely. And the meaning of her name was Breo-saighit, a fiery arrow. (Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men*, pp. 1-2)

Clearly the appearance of Brigid as a triadic Goddess symbolizes the complexity of the sacred feminine. Sherry Rowley, author of “The One Who Is Many, The Many Who Are One: Power and Potentiality in the Sacred Females of Pre-Christian Ireland”, writes: “Sacred groups of three appear frequently in the pre-Christian and early Christian Irish materials, and the extensive appearance of triple forms ... further reflects and reinforces the importance of these triads to the culture. An individual Goddess of pre-Christian Irish religion possesses multiple, sometimes contrasting attributes, revealing her to be too complex to be narrowly defined by a single role.... The triple Goddess of pre-Christian Ireland comprises three separate sacred females, each with her own multiplicity of attributes” (Rowley, 1997, p. 10). The extension of the sacred Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) into Christianity is hardly coincidental, albeit masculinized, as the image of the Goddess is conveniently relegated to a submissive “virginized” Mother.

The Goddess Brigid was accompanied by supernatural animals; in her case, Otherworld cattle – certainly not an uncommon motif in Irish mythology or Goddess mythology of any culture (Davidson, 1996, pp. 91-92). The association with cattle carried over to the person of the Saint. Brigid the Goddess owned two oxen “after which two plains in Cardow and Tipperary were named, and these could give her warning of any rapine committed in Ireland” (Davidson, p. 99). Specifically, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* tells us “Brigid the poetess, daughter of the Dagda, she it is who had Fea and Femen, the two oxen of Dil, from whom are named Mag Fea and Mag Femen. With them was Triath, king of the swine, from whom is Tretherne and Cirb, king of wethers, from whom Mag Cirb is named. Among them were heard three demon voices in Ireland after plunder, to wit, whistling and outcry and groaning” (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, MacAlister translation, p. 133). The Goddess is also credited in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* with inventing a whistle used for night travel. We see the

reference in a multitude of sources, including The Second Battle of Mag Tured: “Now it was that Brig who invented a whistle for signaling at night” (Cross, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 43) and in Lady Gregory’s The Fight with the Firbolgs: “And was she who first made the whistle for calling one to another through the night” (Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men*, p. 2).

One of the more interesting gifts of the Goddess and its infusion into cultural folk practice, enduring for hundreds of years, was her introduction into Ireland of the practice of keening (*mná caointe*), the characteristic shrieking and weeping over the dead. This particular practice was never syncretized into the Saint, as were so many other aspects of the Goddess; in fact, the Church ultimately expunged it from the culture. It is easy to see why. In her dissertation on the subject, Christina Brophy noted that “keening and *mná caointe* were central to both positive and pejorative definitions of Irish identity. In medieval mythology, keening was one of the ways otherworldly women demonstrated the intimate connection between the land and those who resided upon it” (Brophy, 2010, p. 1).

The Goddess’ introduction of keening into pre-Christian Ireland appears in *The Rennes Dindsenchas*, where Brigid is first seen wailing and keening for the dead after the battle of Tara: “Tis then that Brigit the poetess and druidess, Eochaid Ollathar’s [the Dagda’s] daughter, ordained wailing and keening for the dead and screaming at need...” (Stokes, as quoted in Brophy, pp. 276-77). It appears in a number of variations of the story of the Battle of Mag Tured: in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, when the Goddess grieved for her son Ruadán who had been killed in battle: “Bríg came and keened for her son. At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and lamentation [shrieking] were heard in Ireland” (McCoy, 2009, p. 213). Lady Gregory, too, retells the story: “And after the spear being given to Ruadan, he turned and threw it at Goibniu, that it

wounded him. But Goibniu pulled it out and made a cast of it at Ruadan, that it went through him and he died ; and Bres, his father, and the army of the Fomor, saw him die. And then Brigit came and keened over her son with shrieking and with crying” (Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men*, p. 57). It is interesting to note a veiled reference to keening (more specifically, keening as a hired practice) in Carson’s translation of *The Táin*, when Ulster’s rival warrior-queen Medb of Connacht sends two of her bondwomen to keen over the half-god Cú Chulainn, with dire consequences: “He knocked together the heads of the two women who had been watching over him so that each was spattered with grey from the other’s brains. These were two handmaidens sent by Medb to make a show of sorrow over him, so that his wounds would open fresh ...” (Carson, pp. 204-205).

Because keening went far beyond the performative expression of grief, it came to be a bit of a threat to the Church, due to its primitive, feminine-centered spirituality. In “Madwoman, Banshee, Shaman: Gender, Changing Performance Contexts and the Irish Wake Ritual” (2009), Narelle McCoy writes: “The *bean chaointe* (keening woman) inhabited a liminal state between the living and the world of the dead for the duration of the mourning period, entering a kind of ‘divine madness’ which allowed the keener to express the collective outpouring of grief through her voice and body, leading the community in a public expression of sorrow and lament. Because the keener could traverse the parallel worlds and use the power of the voice to guide the soul, the Roman Catholic Church decided to abolish wakes with their attendant laments thereby relegating the community to the position of silent watchers” (McCoy, p.1) and threatening excommunication for violators. Popular Goddess folklore has continued this perception: “*Fear bruine, bean chaointe na garbhmbuilleoir, ni bhf aighidh sna flaithis aon leaba go deo.* [Three persons who will get no bed in heaven, a quarrelsome man, a keening woman and a crude miller]” (Website: Brigid, Goddess and Saint).

Additionally, the Church objected because keening was performed at Irish wakes by paid women mourners, thereby undermining the authority of the local priests. According to Lawrence Taylor in “Bás InEirinn: Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland” (1989), professional keeners were frequently reported at Irish wakes through the nineteenth century, where they were perceived by the Church as a form of “wake abuse.” He writes of an encounter documented by Séan O’Súilleabháin in “Irish Wake Amusements” (1967):

My father told me that he attended a funeral in Tuosist, in South Kerry, at the turn of the century. As the coffin was being taken in a cart to the local graveyard at Kilmac-killogue, three women keeners sat on top of it, howling and wailing at intervals. The parish priest, on horseback, met the funeral near Derreen, a few miles from the graveyard, and rode at its head along the road. As soon as he heard the three women howl loudly, he turned his horse about and trotted back until he reached them where they sat on the coffin. He started to lash them with his whip, as the cart passed by, and ordered them to be silent. This they did, but on reaching the graveyard, they again took up their wailings, whereupon the priest forced them down from the coffin with his whip. They were afraid to enter the grave-yard to howl at the graveside. This put an end to the hiring of keening women in that parish (Taylor, p.186).

While much more can be discussed on the subject of the Goddess, I would like to move on to examine how her themes are blended into texts, folklore, and practices displayed in devotion to the Saint – and how they are not.

## BRIGIT<sup>3</sup> AS SAINT

### Changing notions of the feminine

In his 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown drew torrents of criticism for daring to challenge the issues of the feminine in Christianity, thereby casting doubt on fundamental

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<sup>3</sup> The spelling of the Saint’s name appears either in Irish form as Brigid or in Anglicized form as Brigit. Unless otherwise noted, I will use the Anglicized spelling “Brigit” in reference to the Saint to distinguish her from the Goddess Brigid.

Church teachings. While a commercial work of fiction (which people tended to forget), the novel nonetheless made a valid point:

The concept of woman as life-bringer was the foundation of ancient religion. Childbirth was mystical and powerful. Sadly, Christian philosophy decided to embezzle the female's creative power by ignoring biological truth and making man the Creator ... When Christianity came along, the old pagan religions did not die easily. Legends of chivalric quests for the lost Grail were in fact stories of forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine. Knights who claimed to be searching for the chalice were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned nonbelievers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine.

When examining the issue of syncretism, it is important to note the extent to which the pre-Christian (pagan) tradition celebrated the feminine and how that reverence shifted in Christianity. Irish mythology is filled with women – human or divine – who were not subordinate to men, and every bit as powerful as their mates or male counterparts. Druids were women as often as they were men. In the early days of the Church, women held prominent positions of leadership, including Brigit of Kildare. Yet that was changing. As Rome moved toward a male-dominated structure, they began eliminating the role of woman as leader and -- as Linda Bridges states in her article, "Women in Church Leadership" -- "diminishing her position to that of helper or even seductress" (Bridges, 1998, p. 6). Bridges goes on to make a very strong claim about what happened next:

The active role of women in the Church was frozen in the one-dimensional figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Church who would not tolerate women's leadership in the flesh was much more comfortable worshipping the feminine that was encased in patriarchal stone and oppression. The free-flowing spirit of the Celtic Goddess Brigid, whose memory lived on the early Christian Irish church as abbess leader, Brigid of Kildare, became concretized in Mother Mary. (Bridges, p. 7)

Clearly, writers of the *Vitae* worried about the Saint's ecclesiastical authority as a woman; she was carefully portrayed as powerful yet always suitably submissive to male authority, whether Patrick's or other hierarchical Church authorities. Aoife Curran, in *Ireland Legends and Folklore*,

suggests that the etymology of our word “bride” may have come from the Saint (Curran, 2012). That particular notion is perpetuated in Church teaching and folklore, only one example as what appears on a website of a Catholic church, St. Brigid Catholic Church in Baltimore, Maryland: “During the Age of Chivalry, Brigid was so revered as a model of women of every age, that gentlemen, knights and nobles began the custom of calling their sweethearts their ‘Brides’ - a custom that has come down to this very day” (Website: Saint Brigid Catholic Church, “About our Patron Saint”), thereby underscoring typical Catholic teaching regarding the submissive nature of women that should be emulated.

Even Saint Brigid’s miracles are of a non-threatening, feminine concern: domesticity, hospitality, the provision of food, care of animals, and – most interesting, I believe – the purification of the female, either physically or spiritually. One of the most fascinating powers of the Saint was her extraordinary ability to make unwanted pregnancies disappear. Cogitosus writes: “In the potent strength of her ineffable faith, Brigit blessed a woman who, though she had taken a vow of chastity, fell through weakness into youthful lust so that her womb swelled with child. The fetus disappeared, without coming to birth or causing pain, and the woman was restored to health and to penance” (Davies, *Life of St. Brigit* by Cogitosus, p. 126). While this story was not mentioned in the Saint’s other hagiographies, she nonetheless was concerned with the process of female health care, offering “an array of miracles for every stage of the pregnancy process, from facilitating conception to soothing sore nipples to ensuring the safety of a disabled child” (Callan, 2012, p. 291). Saint Brigit, said to be herself the child of an unmarried bondmaid and her druidic master, is today known as the patron Saint of illegitimate children (Callan, p. 286) – or euphemistically, the patron Saint of



“children whose parents are not married” (Website, Saint Brigid Catholic Church, “About our Patron Saint”).

Hagiography was not intended to be historically accurate, but rather, didactic in nature. As Maeve Callan writes, “... the goal was not to record an objective biography of the Saint but to present an idealized form, a human being so transformed by God's grace that he or she could accomplish unheard-of feats, including bending the divine to his or her will” (Callan, p. 284). Despite that fact, anti-nativists cling to the hagiographic texts only for evidence of their argument. For example, Kim McCone bases his argument on the fact that the hagiography of Saint Brigit “displays little thematic affinity with the identically named daughters of the Dagdae” (McCone, p. 162).

However, as this paper has discussed earlier, countless other scholars would disagree, particularly when considering common folklore, practices, and rituals. For example, in *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint*, Pamela Berger argues that “Saint Brigid shows an incredible likeness to the Celtic Goddess from whom she takes her name, Brigid, the great guardian of fertility and the land.... Like most Celtic Goddesses, Brigid was intimately connected with topography, particularly with sacred waters and wells. Prayers and sacrifices would have been offered to Brigid, though the druidic liturgy and oral formulas were not set down by the medieval monks who recorded the mythology. Instead, they recast the pagan Brigid's legends and perhaps even some of her ritual (such as processions and pilgrimages) in a manner acceptable to the church” (Berger, p. 71). Again, this underscores the point made earlier and supported by Cusack – that once folkloric evidence is considered in the equation, it is possible to see much more clearly the blending of the persons of the Goddess and the Saint.

For example, let us return to the theme of milk, dairy, and Otherworld cows as referenced in the Goddess section earlier (p 5). The association with cows and cattle (both natural and supernatural) is a consistent theme in written texts and folklore of the Saint, from medieval texts to the late nineteenth century / early twentieth century works of folklorist and playwright Lady Gregory (“Mary of the Gael,” in *A book of saints and wonders*, 1908). Even today, Saint Brigit is recognized as the patron Saint of dairy farms and dairy workers. She is said to have been born of an unmarried bondmaid carrying a pail of milk, as she stepped across the threshold at dawn, symbolizing the liminal position of Brigit between the human and supernatural worlds. The baby was washed in milk from her mother’s pail, a custom going back to a pre-Christian rite of washing a newborn in milk (Davidson, p. 99). As a baby, Brigit was nourished on the milk of a special cow – a white cow with red ears – procured from the Otherworld by her foster-father. Drawing upon the *Vitae* and in folklore, Lady Gregory writes of the Saint: “Now as to Brigit she was born at sunrise on the first day of the spring, of a bondwoman of Connacht. And it was angels that baptized her and that gave her the name of Brigit, that is a Fiery Arrow. She grew up to be a serving girl the same as her mother. And all the food she used was the milk of a white red-eared cow that was set apart for her by a Druid” (Glassie, 1985, p. 58).

The association with milk (clearly a maternal reference) continues in devotions to *Brigid* today. In the 1990s, folklore researcher Séamas Ó Catháin documented materials from the Irish Folklore Commission attesting to customs celebrating Brigit on or around February 1, including her role in enhancing the milk supply:

It is still said here that the milk has gone up into the cows’ horns from Christmas until after the Feast of St Brigit. This means that there is a scarcity of milk during this time. Usually milk is very scarce in January but the old people used to say during the month when they heard anyone complaining of the scarcity of milk – ‘It won’t be scarce very long now as St.

Brigid and her white cow will be coming round soon'. I heard that some of the older women of the Parish take a Blessed candle to the cow's stall on Brigit's Eve and singe the long hair on the upper part of the cow's udder so as to bring a blessing on her milk. (Ó Catháin, 1999, as quoted in Cusack, p. 93).

Ó Catháin also examined the symbolism of the some of the other overtly feminine or sexual nature of some of the ritualistic activities associated with the Goddess-turned-Saint, especially those involving churning milk into butter. Cusack states that the net effect of Ó Catháin's extensive research strengthens the connection of Brigit to fertility and to pre-Christian traditions that had survived as folk practices, as opposed to "higher order" textual sources that indicated no such syncretism.

### **As companion to Mary and foster-mother to Jesus**

Because of her purity, submission, and feminine power, Saint Brigit is commonly equated with the Virgin Mary and is known as Mary of the Gael. Despite the common historical premise that the abbess for whom the Saint is named lived in the late fifth or early sixth centuries and contemporaneous with Saint Patrick, some particularly intriguing Scottish versions of Brigit folklore anachronistically depict her as contemporaneous with the Virgin Mary. In the Hebrides of Scotland, Brigit is known as the foster mother of Christ, and as such, exceptionally honored, with the relationship being considered extremely sacred.

Scottish writer William Sharp, publishing under the pseudonym of Fiona MacLeod beginning in 1893, wrote much about *Brigid*, including *Bride of the Isles* and *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* (1904). In *The Winged Destiny*, he, too, writes of Brigid as foster-mother of Christ, not as a true saint, but as a being much older than Mary:

St. Brigid (in Gaelic pronounced sometimes Bride, sometimes Breed), St. Bride of the Isles as she is lovingly called in the Hebrides, has no name so dear to the Gael as 'Muime-Chriosd,' Christ's Foster-Mother, a name bestowed on her by one of the most beautiful of Celtic legends. In the isles of Gaelic Scotland her most familiar name is Brigid nam Bratta -- Bridget or St. Bride of the Mantle--from her having wrapt the new-born Babe in her Mantle in Mary's hour of weakness. She did not come into the Gaelic heart with the Cross and Mary, but was there long before as Bride, Brigid or Brithid of the Dedannans, those not immortal but for long ages deathless folk who to the Gael were as the Olympians to the Greeks (Sharp, *The Winged Destiny*, 1904, p. 196).

Variations of the legend say Brigit was the midwife present at the birth of Jesus, placing three drops of water on his forehead. According to neo-pagan sources, this seems to be a Christianized version of an ancient Celtic myth concerning the Sun of Light upon whose head three drops of water were placed in order to confer wisdom (Website, The Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids, Library of Gods and Goddesses). The full story is told in *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of prayers, hymns, charms, incantations, blessings, literary-folkloric poems and songs, and miscellaneous lore gathered in the Gaelic-speaking regions of Scotland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by folklorist Alexander Carmichael. An excerpt follows (the name of the Saint appearing in the Scottish Gaelic form "Bride"):

It is said that Bride was the daughter of poor pious parents, and the servingmaid in the inn of Bethlehem ... As Bride was working in the house two strangers came to the door. The man was old, with brown hair and grey beard, and the woman was young and beautiful, with oval face, straight nose, blue eyes, red lips, small ears, and golden brown hair, which fell below her waist. They asked the serving-maid for a place to rest, for they were footsore and weary, for food to satisfy their hunger, and for water to quench their thirst. Bride could not give them shelter, but she gave them of her own bannock and of her own stoup of water, of which they partook at the door; and having thanked Bride the strangers went their way, while Bride gazed wistfully and sorrowfully after them .... Bride went out to look after the two who had gone their way, but she could see no more of them. But she saw a brilliant golden light over the stable door, and knowing that it was not 'dreag a bhais,' a meteor of death, she went into the stable and was in time to aid and minister to the Virgin Mother, and to receive the Child into her arms, for the strangers were Joseph and Mary, and the child was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, come to earth, and born in the stable of the hostel of Bethlehem .... When the Child was born Bride put three drops of water from the spring of pure water on the tablet of His forehead, in name of God, in name of Jesus, in name of Spirit. (Carmichael, 1900, p. 165)

Since that time, according to *Carmina Gadelica*, Bride was known as “the aid-woman of Mary” and was carried into folk practice and ritual; hence, “When a woman is in labour, the midwife or the woman next her in importance goes to the door of the house, and standing on the ‘fad-buiun,’ sole-sod, door-step, with her hands on the jambs, softly beseeches Bride to come: ‘Bride! Bride! come in, Thy welcome is truly made, Give thou relief to the woman, And give the conception to the Trinity’” (Carmichael, p. 166). The text goes on to note that the aid-woman further mimicked the actions of Bride at the birth of Christ by letting three drops of clear cold water fall on his forehead, thereby dedicating the child to the Holy Trinity.

Also within the *Carmina Gadelica*, we find many examples of prayers to Bride for protection. In the example below, note the references to her again as the foster-mother of Christ, in addition to her lineage springing from the ancient mythology, a curious blending of traditions. It is said that the recitation of this “genealogy” prayer offers protection to the speaker and the household, a practice continued in contemporary devotions to *Brighid*:

This is the genealogy of the holy maiden Bride,  
 Radiant flame of gold, noble foster mother of Christ,  
 Bride, daughter of Dugall the Brown,  
 Son of Aodh, son of Art, son of Conn,  
 Son of Creator, Son of Cis, son of Carmac, son of Carruin,  
 Every day and every night  
 That I say the genealogy of Bride,  
 I shall not be killed, I shall not be harried,  
 I shall not be put in a cell, I shall not be wounded,  
 Neither shall Christ leave me in forgetfulness.  
 No fire, no sun, no moon shall burn me,  
 No lake, no water, nor sea shall drown me,  
 No arrow of fairy nor dart of fay shall wound me  
 And I under the protection of my Holy Mary  
 And my gentle foster-mother is my beloved Bride.  
 (Carmichael, p. 175)

The legend of Saint Brigit as foster-mother to Jesus and companion to Mary, his mother, was carried over from the Scottish and into Irish literature and retold in Lady Gregory's 1924 play, "The Story Brought by Brigit." In the play, the Irish Saint travels to Jerusalem and witnesses the Passion of the Christ and takes his story of redemption back to Ireland. Excerpts follow which illuminate the relationship:

ST. BRIGIT. I am come from the West, from the edge of the great ocean. I have crossed land and sea; I have seen many a rising and setting of the sun.

2ND WOMAN. Oh, wasn't the journey long on you!

ST. BRIGIT. Winter came on me and the heat of summer, and winter again, till I hardly knew the seasons of the year, through the way they change according as I travel.

3RD WOMAN. It should be to look for some friend or some one of your kindred you are come?

ST. BRIGIT. It was in a dream or a vision of the night I saw a Young Man having wounds on him. And I knew him to be One I had helped and had fostered, and he a Child in his mother's arms. And it was showed me in my dream there would trouble come on him but in the end he would put gladness in the heart of His friends. And it was showed to me that the place where I would find him would be in this country of Judea, a long, long way to the east.

2ND WOMAN. And was it in your own country you had fostered him?

ST. BRIGIT. There came to my own country about thirty years ago a Young Woman that was seeking shelter and a hiding place for her Child. There was some wicked king looking for his life, some cruel man, one Herod.

JOEL. That is it. A cruel man he was, and left a bad name after him.

1ST WOMAN. It's likely enough he would have made away with the child. There was great talk of it at the time.

3RD WOMAN. And what way could a young child and his mother go travel beyond the waves of the sea?

ST. BRIGIT. It might be that an angel opened a path before them. A shining Messenger, and a Young Woman, and a Baby on her arm, and they so beautiful that all the people were crowding on them to see the beautiful people that were passing by.

2ND WOMAN. Thirty years ago. He should be a grown man now and in his bloom. Do you think could it be the Man we are waiting for to-day?

ST. BRIGIT. It may be so, but up to this time it has failed me to get any tidings of that Mother and that Child.

I offer one final story on this particular subject, one I cannot resist. In modern folklore collected by Sean Ó Súilleabháin from western Ireland, the story of the friendship between the Saint and the Mother of God takes on local color and is tinged with a good dose of Irish humor<sup>4</sup>:

When the Blessed Virgin had Our Saviour she was ashamed to be churched in the chapel in front of the people; but she met Saint Brigid and told her she was going to the chapel to be churched, but that she was ashamed that everybody would be looking at her. Don't let that bother you at all!" said Saint Brigid. "I'll come along with you and I'll put on this fancy-dress.' So she dressed herself up. She put on the fancy dress over her body and head and covered herself completely in such a way that nobody would look at anything else but her, because nobody ever saw such a rig-out in their lives. Saint Brigid told the Blessed Virgin to go ahead of her and she'd follow on, and there'd be no question that anybody would look at her, since they'd all be looking at Brigid. That's how it turned out. They went ahead and the Blessed Virgin was blessed. Nobody looked at her from then on. The Blessed Virgin was very grateful to Saint Brigid and said to her: 'Brigid, I'm going to put your feast day ahead of my own from now on.' Saint Brigid has that day ever since - the first day of spring is her feast and the next day is called the Feast of Mary of the Candles in the Temple." (Ó Súilleabháin, ed., *Miraculous Plenty*, pp. 176-177).

## CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORE, RITUAL PRACTICE, AND NEO-PAGANISM

In the course of my research, I uncovered countless stories, poems, songs, and practices dedicated to the being of *Brighid*, couched as regarding either the Goddess or the Saint. I want to

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<sup>4</sup> As some of the folktales collected by Ó Súilleabháin demonstrate (several of which I offer as evidence in this paper), they held true to central motifs but were given their own special "flavor": "It should be stressed that these tales were composed and told, not merely for pleasure, but also for purposes of instruction.... The language is straightforward with no half-truths or hidden meanings. Certain things may strike theologians as odd or improper but these, in particular, should understand that any unorthodoxy, such as there might be, is not contrived. The composers of the tales were not learned scholars or theologians but ordinary \_\_\_ who preferred to tell a good story from their own perspectives, adding a large dash of colourful imagination here and there. They combined religious teachings with folk belief when it suited their purposes, without distinguishing between the two" (Ó Súilleabháin, *Miraculous Plenty*, p. 19).

include them all, but cannot. In most cases it is obvious the lines are blurred between the two. Is it possible to ever separate the Goddess from the Saint? As nativists would argue, it is not.

It is in ritual practice where we see the most blending of the traditions of Goddess and Saint. Sean Ó Súilleabháin, in his introduction to *Miraculous Plenty: Irish Religious Folktales and Legends*, discussed how the ancient tales and rituals have been passed on despite the people's "sufferings and the lack of official church teaching due to the severity of the Penal Laws. Those prayers, poems and tales were their comfort and inspiration and, by the grace of God, helped them to keep the Faith alive." (Ó Súilleabháin, p. 20). With that as a foundation, we can go back to Carey's argument stated earlier in this paper: that the blending of pagan and Christian lore demonstrates a commitment to both traditions -- both are true and important enough to the Irish to reconcile them with each other. Here I will discuss a few of the folk practices and rituals that clearly demonstrate a blending of the pagan Goddess and the Christian Saint.

### **Saint Brigit's Feast Day / Imbolc**

As is well-known, Saint Brigit's feast day is February 1, coinciding with the pagan celebration of Imbolc. Illuminating the roots of the festival and the customs tied to it uncovers the pre-Christian beliefs and practices that, though modified over time, were not completely destroyed (Berger, p. 73).

Scholars such as Donál Ó Cathasaigh make strong cases for the blending of the Goddess with the Saint on February 1. Ó Cathasaigh writes: "Brigid's several blood associations with the All-Father Dagda – as his mother, his bed partner, and his daughter(s) – and her connections with the symbolic riverine waters (life fluids) are additional manifestations of maternity. Moreover, if Imbolc, the spring rite celebrating the lactating of ewes, was her festival and if she functioned as 'household



protector,' the cult of a mother Goddess can be confirmed and collaborated from the syncretism of the pagan-Christian traditions" (Ó Cathasaigh, p. 81). Additionally, specific customs connecting Saint Brigid with tillage and sowing at Imbolc show a linkage between the Saint and the Goddess. "The etymology of the word Imbolc, the agrarian customs and activities associated with it, and its date in the agricultural year all suggest that a pagan tilling and sowing ceremonial was transformed into the Feast of Saint Brigid, and that the pagan mother Goddess, whose symbolic 'belly' or 'womb' was envisioned as producing the season's crop, was superseded by the Christian Saint who, until modern times, was honored at Imbolc/Saint Brigid's Day with baked grain cakes and stalks of grain" (Berger, pp. 71-72).

In his time with the Irish Folklore Commission, Séan Ó Súilleabháin published a handbook to serve as an instructional guide for field collectors from the 1940s through the 1960s. The following passage, although lengthy, is significant because it demonstrates the incredible detail associated with the ritual practices surrounding St. Brigid's Feast and the quest for their meanings; through the passage alone, we are also able to see in some cases how the rituals might have had roots in pagan lore:

**St. Brigid's Feast.** This feast was very popular in Ireland. The cult of St. Brigid was widespread. Many folk-stories make her contemporaneous with the Blessed Virgin, and are told to explain why St. Brigid's Feast has priority to that of Our Lady on the calendar. Write down versions of these tales or of any others about the saint. Were the high tides at St. Brigid's Feast specially prominent in Irish weather-lore? **The Vigil of St. Brigid's Feast.** By what names was this known (*Oidhche Fheil' Brighde, Oidhche'l Bhrighde bricin, St. Brigid's Night etc.*)? Was honour given to the saint by the recital of a special prayer, by the lighting of candles, or in any other way? Describe this in detail. Were crosses made in your district on or before the Feast of St. Brigid? What were these crosses called? Of what materials were they made? Where were these materials obtained? Who made the crosses? When were they made? Where? How many were made in each house? Did any ceremony take place in connection with the making of the cross or its introduction or installation in the house? Were any special words used during the ceremony? What was done with the cross(es) when made? Where was it put? What was done with the old cross(es) when a new one was introduced? Were these

crosses supposed to have curative or other miraculous powers? Any stories about this? Was use made of these crosses for the protection or prosperity of the livestock? Were the cattle driven through one of these large crosses placed at the cow-house door? Any explanation for this? Can you illustrate by a drawing the design of the type of St. Brigid's Cross made locally? Also give the dimensions of the cross and its various parts. A photograph of the cross would also be of interest and value. Was a ribbon or piece of cloth exposed on St. Brigid's Night (or at any time during the festival)? What name was applied to this? Where was the cloth or ribbon procured? When? Had it to be of a certain quality, material, colour, or dimensions? Describe the exposal ceremony in detail. Who conducted it? How was it done? Where was the cloth or ribbon exposed? Indoors or outside? For how long? Was it inspected by anybody during the time? What was supposed to happen to it during the period? What curative or other properties was the cloth supposed to acquire as the result of being exposed? Any stories about the effects of this? For how long was the cloth supposed to be efficacious? Was it measured before and after exposal? Did a difference in its dimensions as shown by the two measurings portend anything? Was a sheaf of oats or bread of any kind left on the doorstep on St. Brigid's Eve? Why? Was the object so exposed of any special kind? What was done with it afterwards? Was St. Brigid's Eve celebrated by carrying about from house to house a decorated emblem or figure? What name was applied to this? What (whom) was it supposed to represent? Was any special object (such as a churn-dash) dressed up for the purpose? What materials composed it? Who prepared the effigy? Was it carried about by young people or by adults? How were they dressed? Did they sing any special songs, or recite certain words, or play music during the procession or at the houses visited? How were they received? Did they collect money, or a gift of any kind at these houses? To what purpose was this usually devoted? Was the night celebrated by a dance or other entertainment? How was the effigy finally disposed of? Have people any explanation of the origin of the custom?

**St. Brigid's Day.** Was this day looked upon as the point from which the weather improved day by day? Are there any stories told regarding this? Any sayings about it ("*Ni buan sneachta ar chraoibh 6 La Fheib Brighde amach*")? Did people abstain from work of any kind which involved wheel-turning on St. Brigid's Day? Had they any explanation for this custom? What types of work were involved? Did people turn clay or sods (with a spade) on that day? Are these customs still observed? Was it usual to throw a live shell-fish (periwinkle) or some such thing into the four corners of the house on St. Brigid's Day? Why was this done? (Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 324-326).

### Folk art: crosses and dolls

As Ó Súilleabháin noted and as is well-known, it is customary on Imbolc to make a Brigid's cross, whether in devotion to the Goddess or to the Saint. At times the cross is a three-legged *triskele*. Most often it has four arms or branches, possibly based on an ancient sun wheel or solar symbol, which appears in similar forms in a multitude of native cultures around the world. In

modern popular neo-pagan circles, the Brigid's cross symbolizes balance at the crossroads. The following is a typical reference among many I found: "It was a tradition on the night before Imbolg to go to a crossroads and symbolically bury something negative from your life. Brigid's cross, formed by the two arms, became a symbol of protection. The cross is sometimes made into a Sun Wheel: a quartered circle that represents the wheel of the year. Brigid is called upon during times of crisis when one is at a crossroads in life" (Kynes, 2008, p. 154). See also the excerpt from the popular contemporary novel, *Casting Off* (Dickson), referenced before the introduction to this paper (p. 2).

While countless variations of the Brigid's cross story abound, the Catholic religious order of nuns founded in the Saint's honor, the Brigidine Sisters, seem to be the official keepers of the practice. The Australian community has published on its website the following explanation and background:

Brigid's symbol is the cross made from rushes. As the shamrock is associated with St Patrick, this simple cross is associated with Brigid. Woven by her from the green rushes that formed the 'carpet' on the floor of a Chieftain's house as he lay dying, she explained the life and death of Jesus. When he listened to her story, he asked to be baptised before he died. The tradition of weaving the Brigid's cross is carried on throughout Ireland and in other parts of the world. According to tradition a new cross is woven each Saint Brigid's Day on the 1st February. The old one is burned to protect the house from fire, although customs vary. Some believe that keeping a cross in the rafters preserves the house from fire and disease. In Brigid's time, most of the houses were straw thatch and wood roofs. The cross is also placed under the barn eaves or in the cow byre to protect the animals. (Website, Brigidine Sisters of Australia)

The Brigidine Sisters of Kildare--who operate Solas Bhríde , their retreat center in Kildare--have taken the folk practice to new heights, boasting: "We are now Guinness World Record Holders in Weaving St. Brigid Crosses" (Website, Solas Bhríde , Brigidine Sisters of Kildare). They also produced and published a video on the proper way to make a Saint Brigid's cross:

<http://solasBhríde.ie/how-to-make-a-st-brigids-cross/> (Website, Solas Bhríde , Brigidine Sisters of Kildare).

Other folk crafts are associated with the celebration of *Brigid* on her feast day, including the creation of “Brigit dolls,” which also blends the motifs of the Goddess with those of the Saint. According to Ó hÓgáin in *The Lore of Ireland*: “In most of the country, it was customary on the eve of the feast day for groups of people, particularly young girls, to go in disguise from house to house, singing and dancing, and to collect either eggs or money from the householders. The leader of the group was usually a girl dressed as the saint and carrying a home-made doll, called a *brideog* (*little Bríd*) or in English a ‘biddy’” (Ó hÓgáin, p. 55). An entry in *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* states that “In Kerry, white-garbed young men—the ‘Biddy Boys’—sang at each doorstep, ‘Something for poor Biddy! Her clothes are torn. Her shoes are worn. Something for poor Biddy!’ Although the tradition faded during the latter part of the 20th century, it has been lately revived, with Biddy boys and girls in outrageous straw hats dancing in Kerry towns, begging donations for the poor” (Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, 2004, p. 44). The practice is also noted in Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*: “In Ireland, there the churn staff, not the corn sheaf, is fashioned into the form of a woman, and called ‘Brideog,’ little Bride. The girls come clad in their best, and the girl who has the prettiest dress gives it to Brideog. An ornament something like a Maltese cross is affixed to the breast of the figure. The ornament is composed of straw, beautifully and artistically interlaced by the deft fingers of the maidens of Bride. It is called ‘rionnag Brideog,’ the star of little Bride. Pins, needles, bits of stone, bits of straw, and other things are given to Bride as gifts, and food by the mothers” (Carmichael, p. 107).

## Fire and perpetual flames

Both the Goddess and the Saint are associated with fire; as an outgrowth, the famous perpetual flame in Kildare and other “flame-keeping” sites across the world. Brigid was known as a fire-Goddess, and legend says that when the Saint was born at that liminal time at the moment of dawn, a beam of light like a flame burst around her head. In pre-Christian mythology, it is said at a large shrine (or *Brudin*<sup>5</sup>) dedicated to the Goddess Brigid in Kildare, nineteen virgin Druidic priestesses -- known as daughters of the fire (*inghean an dagha*), or fire-keepers (*breochwidh*) -- kept a perpetual flame lit in her honor (Squier, 1851, p. 126).

Ó hÓgáin says in *The Lore of Ireland* that it is probable the once-pagan sanctuary at Kildare was tended by a holy woman of the Fotharta: “This would have meant that the cult of that sanctuary became attached to her, including the Goddess’ name Brighid, which may have been a title borne by the chief druidess there” (Ó hÓgáin, p. 52). When Christianity appropriated the Goddess’ cult, the priestesses became nuns. Legend says the flame continued to burn for a thousand years before it was declared a pagan symbol by the Church and extinguished in the twelfth century: “It was no earlier than 1220 that the Archbishop of London extinguished the perpetual fire which was maintained in a small cell near the church of Kildare; but it was soon rekindled, and actually kept burning until the suppression of the monasteries” (Squier, 1851, p. 126).

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<sup>5</sup> Re: Brudins: “Up to the beginning of the Christian era we had in various parts of Ireland a certain public establishment called Brudins.... We are told that these institutions were large farm-houses, always open for the king’s servants and all comers, but we are told also, that in each was a magical cauldron called Coire Ains’icen, which was never taken off the fire... This again is turning mythology into history. It seems strange that, with the birth of Christ these Brudins disappeared... Any person who reads the tale of the destruction of Brudin Da Derga, and contemplates the supernatural features attending that destruction, will see at once that this establishment was a religious institution.... The expression for being ‘in the fairies’ is, and has been for centuries, in spoken Irish the same as ‘being in the brudin.’ The word bruidhin, meantime, in the popular acceptance, does not mean a residence or a place, but is taken as a collective noun to mean ‘fairies’” (O’Beirne Crowe, 1868-69, pp 324-326).

The story is contained in the 12<sup>th</sup> century text, *The Topography of Ireland* by medieval author and clergyman Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), wherein Brigit and nineteen of her nuns took turns in guarding a sacred fire which burned perpetually and was surrounded by a hedge within which no male might enter:

**Chapter XXXIV: Of various miracles in Kildare; and first, of the fire which never goes out, and the ashes which never increase.**

At Kildare, in Leinster, celebrated for the glorious Brigit, many miracles have been wrought worthy of memory. Among these, the first that occurs is the fire of St. Brigit, which is reported never to go out. Not that it cannot be extinguished, but the nuns and holy women tend and feed it, adding fuel, with such watchful and diligent care, that from the time of the Virgin, it has continued burning through a long course of years; and although such heaps of wood have been consumed during this long period, there has been no accumulation of ashes.

**Chapter XXXV: How the fire is kept alive by St. Brigit on her night.**

As in the time of St. Brigit twenty nuns were here engaged in the Lord's warfare, she herself being the twentieth, after her glorious departure, nineteen have always formed the society, the number having never been increased. Each of them has the care of the fire for a single night in turn, and, on the evening before the twentieth night, the last nun, having heaped wood upon the fire, says, "Brigit, take charge of your own fire; for this night belongs to you." She then leaves the fire, and in the morning it is found that the fire has not gone out, and that the usual quantity of fuel has been used.

**Chapter XXXVI: Of the hedge round the fire, which no male can enter.**

This fire is surrounded by a hedge, made of stakes and brushwood, and forming a circle, within which no male can enter; and if any one should presume to enter, which has been sometimes attempted by rash men, he will not escape the divine vengeance. Moreover, it is only lawful for women to blow the fire, fanning it or using bellows only, and not with their breath.... (Giraldus Cambrensis, c1187, *The Topography of Ireland*, pp. 53-54)

The flame was relit in 1993, in the Market Square, Kildare, by Mary Teresa Cullen, leader of the Roman Catholic order of the Brigidine Sisters, at the opening of a justice and peace conference.

Since then, the Brigidine Sisters in Kildare have tended the flame at Solas Bhríde , a popular retreat and attraction for pilgrims (Websites of County Kildare, Ireland and Solas Bhríde ).

In Celtic folklore practice, the household fire is sacred and is dedicated to *Brighid*. It was imperative that the fire should be kept going<sup>6</sup>, and each evening the woman of the household would “smoor” the fire (that is, subdue but not extinguish it) while asking for the protection of Mary and *Brighid* on all its occupants. Variations of the prayer abound. The following is from the Scottish

*Carmina Gadelica*:

*Smúraidh mi an tula*  
*Mar a smúradh Brighde Muime.*  
*Ainm naomb na Muime*  
*Bhith mu'n tula, bhith mu'n tán,*  
*Bhith mu'n ardraich uile.*

I will smoor the hearth  
 As Brighid the Fostermother would smoor  
 The Fostermother's holy name  
 Be on the hearth, be on the herd  
 Be on the household all. (Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*)

Likewise, Lady Gregory writes of the practice in “Mary of the Gael”:

THE BINDING. And when the people are covering up a red sod under the ashes in the night time to spare the seed of the fire for the morning, they think upon Brigit the Fiery Arrow and it is what they do be saying: ‘I save this fire as Christ saved everyone; Brigit beneath it, the Son of Mary within it; let the three angels having most power in the court of grace be keeping this house and the people of this house and sheltering them until the dawn of day.’ For it is what Brigit had a mind for; lasting goodness that was not hidden; minding sheep and rising early; hospitality towards good men. It is she keeps everyone that is in straits and in dangers; it is she puts down sicknesses; it is she quiets the voice of the waves and the

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<sup>6</sup> The motif and practice appears in modern novels, such as the following: “The fire burns steadily in the hearth, and Robert’s mother tells him that the fire should never be allowed to go out, because if it does, the soul leaves the house. Da agrees. There were houses in Ireland, he said once, where the fire had burned day and night for more than a hundred years ....” (Hamill, *Forever*, p. 5)

anger of the great sea. She is the queen of the south; she is the mother of the flocks; she is the Mary of the Gael. (Gregory, *Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 16).

### **Contemporary Brigidine devotion: neo-pagan or Christian?**

Where does *Brigid* “fit” in contemporary times? Is she venerated as a Saint or worshipped as a Goddess? From what I have been able to find, it appears that in contemporary folk and/or religious practice, Brigidine devotion is a bit of both and easily crosses such boundaries. Google her name and you are rewarded with a host of neo-pagan-esque sites. To the novice researcher, some seem over the top, far-fetched, commercialized, and clearly unsubstantiated – as is the nature of “folk” practice. Others are grounded more solidly in history, literature, and religious studies. While a full discussion of Goddess Worship and neo-paganism is out of scope for this paper, I would like to summarize some of my curious findings.

First of all, what is “neo-paganism”? Extending far beyond Ireland into all cultures of the world, neo-paganism is defined by some as an umbrella term for various religions, or spiritual movements, whose practitioners are inspired by indigenous, pre-Christian traditions. In *The Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (2009), scholars such as Michael York, Carole Cusack, and Sabina Magliocco address current “neo-pagan” issues, histories, and trajectories; the editors (Lewis and Pizza) say that Contemporary Paganism—which consists of Wicca and Witchcraft, Druidry, Heathenry, Asatru, Goddess-worship, Ethnic Reconstructions, and many other traditions – is polyvalent, syncretic, and creative—thereby making it nearly impossible to accurately define it (*Handbook* Introduction, p. 11). As a spiritual movement, neo-paganism has been influenced by folklore and anthropology, and books such as Margaret Murray’s *The Witch Cult of Western Europe*



(1921) and Marija Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) are considered seminal works for neo-pagans (Rinallo, 2009, p. 61).

With that definition in mind, then, classifying modern Brigidine devotion is nearly as impossible as defining *Brighid* herself. The practice can be strictly Christian (veneration of the Saint); tied to what is known as “New Age” or loosely based on a broader interpretation of some sort of Celtic spirituality; Goddess worship; Wicca; *Sinnsreachd*, defined as a traditional, historical-based Gaelic polytheistic tribal faith (*Sinnsreachd* website); or neo-druidic, some organizations including individual Brigidine devotees as well as groups (such as flamekeepers) devoted to *Brighid*. One such neo-druidic group, The Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids, Library of Gods and Goddesses, was a reference earlier in this paper (see page 20). Very often, contemporary devotees of *Brighid* cross boundaries between “pagan” and Christian – including the Catholic order of nuns, the Brigidine Sisters, who acknowledge and embrace the blended imagery of the Saint and Goddess: “Solas Bhríde (Brigid’s light/flame) is a small Christian centre, which has as its focus St. Brigid and Celtic Spirituality. We seek to unfold the legacy of Brigid of Kildare and its reverence for our world. The Centre welcomes people of all faiths and of no faith” (Solas Bhríde website).

In addition to Solas Bhríde , it seems flamekeeping is one of the most popular devotions to *Brighid*, with a number of neo-pagan organizations conducting the practice. It involves tending a candle or flame for Brighid on a twenty-day cycle, modeling the ancient practice. One such group, *Ord Brighideach* (Website of Ord Brighideach) has a worldwide following, and includes both Christian and pagan devotees.

Another fascinating and popular devotional practice in Ireland takes place at the Saint’s Holy Well in County Clare and seems to reflect an evolution of syncretized devotion to *Brighid*. According

to Darach Turley In “Bidding Brigid: Objects of Petition and the Euhemerized Goddess,” (2005), the ritualistic placement of material objects at the holy site demonstrates a contemporary trend sometimes referred to as “vernacular religion, in which consumers either produce ritual objects themselves, re-purpose traditional religious props, or shop ‘off the shelf’ from other religious traditions—to use for their own inventive, often empowering, spiritual practices” (Maclaran and Scott, “Roll Your Own Religion: Consumer Culture and the Spiritual Vernacular”, 2009, p. 60).

At St. Brigid’s Holy Well in County Clare, Irish consumers marshal an array of objects and possessions to both reflect and shape religious and mythological beliefs. The well itself is situated at the back of a stone grotto. Shelves along the entrance to the grotto are bedecked with a dizzying assortment of objects left by pilgrims: romantic religious artifacts such as rosaries, Italianate holy pictures and statuary together with an array of what appears to be tawdry everyday household bric a brac: pins, buttons, combs, biros, walking sticks, eyeglasses, rags, and scarves. Pilgrims leave these objects after traveling to the well to drink its waters on designated holy days— and often attach explanatory written messages to the objects they leave behind... The objects left here do not appear to function as votive offerings, brought to a saint or Madonna in thanksgiving for favours received. Instead, pilgrims at this well, come to St. Brigid seeking a favour, physical or spiritual, and the good left behind appears to function more as a material metaphor enabling the supplicant to visualize in a concrete manner what they wish the saint to accomplish on their behalf ... A second performative role was evidenced in the way many of the items—biros, combs, pins—were deliberately bent or broken. Local lore has it that this is to underscore the fact that these items are no longer intended for use in this world. (Turley, p. 61)

These examples, among a myriad of others fitting into the extensive category of Brigidine devotion, show the syncretism of the Goddess and the Saint, a continuation of the process that has existed since ancient times – despite heated debate to the contrary.

## CONCLUSION

The Cult of *Brighid* is alive and well in the twenty-first century. *Brighid* – whether the Goddess, Saint, or hybrid being – continues to be an economic, spiritual, and cultural boon for the faithful, the inquisitive, and the entrepreneurial – not just in Ireland, but the world over. She is an unending source of intrigue for scholars and students who are curious about indigenous lore and its

bastardization by institutional forces (religious or political), its blending with macro societies, or its parallel existence alongside them. In this paper, I have attempted to support Carey's contention that medieval Irish intellectual culture struck an effective balance between native origins of *Brighid* and wider, external cultural influences, including Christianity. I have used folkloric evidence to support Cusack's argument that the debate must be lifted out of the limiting realms of texts to create a full, multi-faceted picture of *Brighid* and the survival of devotions to her into the modern era. Along the way I have found texts, stories, and folklore practices enduring to contemporary times that still strive to, first – keep the Goddess alive; and two – encompass other traditions and teachings, such as Christianity and non-Irish native mythologies.

At the end of the day, the being of *Brighid* still captivates and challenges us. Most important, she keeps the fires of a fading culture alive. As Ó Súilleabháin once said, “Our forefathers have kept alive these and hundreds more tales, as yet uncollected, passing them down from generation to generation by the fireside, since the time they were first composed or imported from abroad... These tales give us an insight into a way of life and civilization that has changed drastically, if it has not vanished altogether” (Ó Súilleabháin, *Miraculous Plenty*, pp. 18-19).

On the other hand, Ó Súilleabháin also said, “They say that tales get legs and no sooner were new ones invented than they spread like wildfire throughout the country” (*Miraculous Plenty*, p. 18). I offer that the contemporary stories and devotions to Brighid are simply the old tales with new legs, and she will continue to live at the heart of Irish people, who've always known who they are.

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