

# On Saint Brigit and Pagan Goddesses in the Kingdom of God

by Sherry Rowley

*Cet article explore quelques uns des traits que Ste Brigitte partage avec le déesse pré-chrétienne du même nom, responsables de la formation des montagnes et des tertres d'Irlande et d'Écosse.*

According to popular Christian tradition, Saint Brigit was Abbess of Kildare and died some time in 523 or 524. The patron saint of fugitives, Irish nuns, midwives, new-born babies, and cattle, she is known as the "Mary of Ireland" and is the midwife of the Virgin Mary in the Irish Catholic tradition. Held on the same day as *Imbolc*, the ancient festival honouring her pre-Christian namesake, the goddess Brigit, St. Brigit's day is celebrated on February the first, the first day of spring in Irish folk tradition. Daughter of a slave, Saint Brigit continues to be one of the most highly venerated Irish saints, with churches dedicated to her throughout the British Isles (Butler; Smith and Wace). How is it that symbols of a pagan goddess can become attached to a Christian saint and that saint can become second among women in the kingdom of God?

The mighty sacred females of Ireland may have faded into the island's mounds and waters, yet some of their sacred power persists in Saint Brigit. Indeed, the figure of Saint Brigit is layered with symbols drawn from pre-Christian Ireland, symbols that have survived the conversion from pre-Christian to Christian religion. In this article I will explore some of the traits and abilities which Saint Brigit shares with her pre-Christian namesake, the goddess Brigit, and with the *Cailleacha*, the sacred females responsible for the formation of the mountains and cairns of Ireland and Scotland.

The early Irish Christian period (fourth to fifth century CE) from

which Saint Brigit originates was greatly affected by pre-Christian politics, religion, economics, and ecology. A strong oral tradition existed contemporaneously with the early Christian writings. Pre-Christian symbols and images of the sacred were still present in the culture as Christianity expanded in Ireland. As the new religion complex developed and strong figures who embodied the hopes and values of early Christian Ireland emerged, those images and symbols that were the most compelling to the pre-Christian Irish were gradually drawn into the iconographic lexicon of the Christians. Early Christian writings became a repository for "pagan" and Christian images that merged one into the other.

Some scholars suggest that source materials do not necessarily reflect an accurate historical account of Saint Brigit (Bieler; de Blacam; Mac-Curtain). The historical grounding of Brigit as a woman, however, plays a very small role in her efficacy as a sacred and dynamic force. It is the figure of Saint Brigit in its entirety that has an impact on all those who love her.

structed from the huge boulders which the *Cailleacha* dropped from their aprons. The *Cailleacha* have also created wells and springs by causing water to burst forth from the earth. Probably an amalgam of indigenous and Celtic deities, these mighty females appear most frequently in Ireland as ancient hags, although they are able to renew their youth and can change shape from old hags to young women. Indeed, the *Cailleacha* have many lovers and are the ancestors of numerous tribes and races. The word *Cailleacha* means "one who wears a hood or veil." Early Christian writers transformed images of the *Cailleacha* into the *Cailleach Bheara* or Old Woman of Beare, whose descendants have become whole tribes in Ireland (Hull 1927).

The goddess Brigit is of the *Tuatha de Danann* (the deities of pre-Christian Ireland), and is the goddess worshipped by poets. She is a daughter of *The Dagda* who is chief of all of the gods and the owner of the mighty cauldron that constantly replenishes its contents. Her name means "the High One" and "fiery arrow." In her triple form she is goddess of healing,

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## The sacred females of pre-Christian Ireland

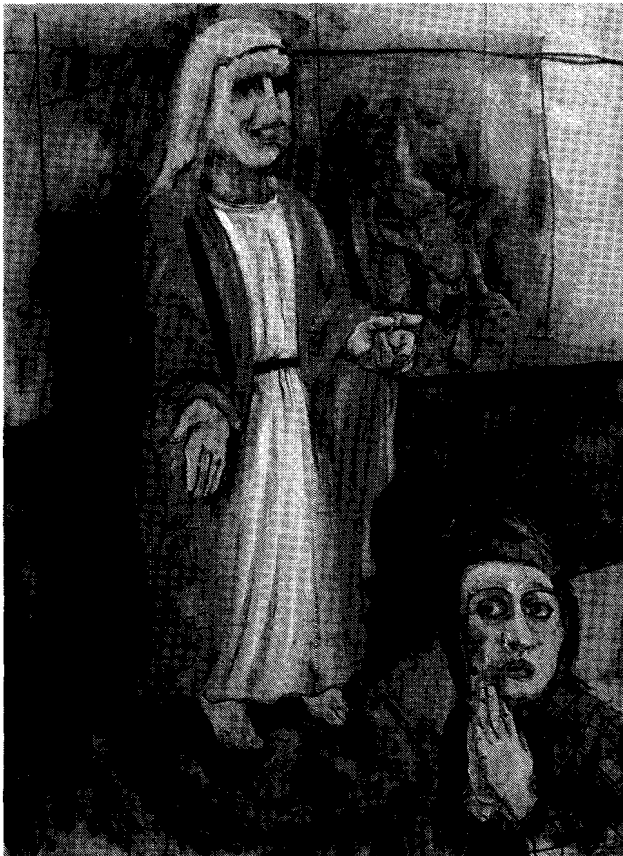
Guardians to a number of animals, deer, swine, wild goats, wild cattle, and wolves, the *Cailleacha* or *Cailleachs* are the creators of both the natural land formations and the great megalithic structures of the British Isles. All of these have been con-

poetry, and smithcraft, and chief poets are said to have carried a golden branch with tinkling bells in her honour (Condren). In her triple goddess form, she is the mother of *The Dagda*, the mate of *The Dagda*, and the daughter of *The Dagda*. The ancient festival dedicated to Brigit, known as *Imbolc*, fell on the first day of February. Evidence reveals that this festival was a

celebration of the return of spring and of the reawakening of the fire that would purify the land in preparation for the new season (Danaher).

### Saint Brigit

The life of Saint Brigit is recorded in early Christian sources (Esposito; O hAodha; O Briain; O'Brien; Stokes; McCone; Plummer; Kenney). From these we learn that when Saint



Rita Duffy, "Trio," oil on wax paper, 116 x 122 cm, 1994.

Brigit's mother, Broicsech, is pregnant with Brigit fiery pillars appear over the place where she sleeps and druids foretell Brigit's holiness. Brigit's birth takes place at sunrise as her mother is stepping across the threshold with a pail of milk. The new baby is washed in the milk. Then she is immediately taken to the still-born son of the queen and performs her first miracle by restoring him to life with her breath. Brigit is born neither at night nor at day, neither inside nor outside. Threshold images such as this are common to pre-Chris-

tian Irish tradition, the threshold representing a liminal space in Ireland. The place just inside the door is considered sacred, and passing over it is a sacred act. Thus the birth of Saint Brigit on the threshold reveals her connection to Ireland's pagan past, and she serves to bridge the threshold between pre-Christian and Christian ideas.

Two key issues in Saint Brigit's early life reveal similarities between her powers and the powers of the sacred females of pre-Christian Ireland. First, throughout her formative years the only source of milk pure enough for the baby Brigit to consume is that of the white, red-eared cow. Cows, and especially red-eared cows, have a very powerful role in pre-Christian Irish tradition—such cows are sacred to the goddesses of Ireland (Hull 1928; MacCana). Thus Brigit is not only fed miraculously, she is tied very specifically with that which is sacred in pre-Christian tradition. Second, we are told that when Brigit finally takes her orders, she is veiled by angels and then, according to the will of God, is consecrated with the orders of a bishop. This gives Saint Brigit (and her successors) an authority which surpasses that of other nuns and abbesses; it extends to her a position which equals that of bishops and rivals the powers of her male contemporaries.

Saint Brigit is beloved as much for her miracles as her patronage of poetry. As Christ changes water to wine, Saint Brigit frequently changes water to ale or increases the quantity of ale and food that is available. More often than not, these miracles are performed in order to provide the community with food and ale where there is little or none to be had. In one story she turns a small collection of butter churnings into butter enough for everyone, in another, she makes cows which have already been milked dry provide so much milk that a lake is formed from the excess. In Christian terms this motif "marks" Saint Brigit as being particularly holy

because of the tremendous power granted to her by God (Atkinson). However, it also reflects the image of the mighty cauldron of *The Dagda* which constantly replenishes its contents, and reinforces the pre-Christian link between sacred females and their supernatural red-eared cows.

People can be healed directly by Brigit's touch, even merely by being placed in her shadow or by washing with water that has touched her feet. Wells dedicated to Saint Brigit are all over Ireland and the British Isles. All have miraculous healing powers. The stories about the well at Ardagh, though complicated, tell of how the well springs up as a result of Saint Brigit dropping burning coals that she is carrying in the apron of her dress (Bord and Bord). This reflects the image of the *Cailleach* who carries rocks in her apron and leaves great cairns and wells in the places where the rocks finally drop to the earth.

Most of the material describing Kildare originates in the work of Giraldus Cambrensis, who was writing some six centuries after Saint Brigit is said to have died. Scholars do suggest that the Abbey at Kildare was a great centre of learning where the transcription and illumination of manuscripts took place, as well as the crafting of croziers, chalices, and shrines. Indeed, appeals to Saint Brigit appear frequently in the margins of the manuscripts of eighth- and ninth-century Irish transcribers (Atkinson). Some scholars also suggest that a perpetual fire was kept alight at Kildare, tended by the holy virgins. It is supposed to have burned unextinguished from the time of Saint Brigit until the fire was ordered extinguished by the Archbishop of Dublin in 1220 (qtd. in Plummer) Records, however, suggest that the fire at Kildare was not finally extinguished until the dissolution of the monasteries at the time of the Reformation (Montague).

Stories of the actual marking out and building of Kildare contain elements that are remarkably similar to elements within the pre-Christian Irish material. One important tale reveals that the community at Kil-

dare grows at a rapid pace, and the abbey and its lands have to be expanded. A neighbouring lord refuses Saint Brigit's request for the granting of a field. She shames him into admitting that he will at least grant her as much land as her mantle will cover. Four of Saint Brigit's nuns take hold of the mantle and run in opposite directions, and the mantle expands until it threatens to cover all of Ireland. He begs her to call the sisters back and promises to give her the original piece of field which she had requested (Atkinson; Lady Gregory).

This story suggests that Saint Brigit marks out the boundaries of Kildare in much the same way that the sacred females of pre-Christian Ireland mark out the boundaries for their forts. Moreover, this story, and stories of the coal-carrying Saint Brigit at the Well at Ardagh, clearly link her with the ancient sacred *Cailleacha*. They share the role of guardian over wells and springs, and have the power to forever alter the landscape when the objects they carry touch the earth. Whether it be through the wills of the *Cailleacha* or of Saint Brigit, all such places have retained their sacred aura throughout the centuries.

Saint Brigit does not fit neatly into the model for women saints. However, it is not sufficient to suggest that Saint Brigit is a female saint who has, for whatever reasons, been assigned a role commonly given to male saints. Born on the threshold, Saint Brigit is a threshold figure who seems to be neither one thing nor another, but somehow a bridge between the two. Neither a typical abbess nor a typical bishop, a purely Christian figure, nor a purely pre-Christian figure, Saint Brigit traverses the two sacred traditions and embodies symbols that weave the traditions together. The images associated with Saint Brigit and identified here as vestiges of the sacred female images of pre-Christian Irish religion have helped to establish the Christian saint as the descendent of a group of strong, independent, and powerful sacred Irish females. Saint Brigit reaches across time and across belief. She is second only to

Mary among the Irish, for she embodies the special qualities of the pre-Christian sacred female that continue to speak to the people of Ireland.

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