

# The Brigid and Mary stories in Gaelic Culture: 'and anyway she was always going about with the Mother of God'

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‘And anyway she was always going about  
with the Mother of God’:  
the Brigid and Mary stories in Gaelic culture

Mary O’Connell 🌐

And there are some say Brigit fostered the holy Child,  
and kept an account of every drop of blood he lost  
through his lifetime, and anyway she was always going  
about with the Mother of God.<sup>2</sup>

It is now widely — although not universally — accepted that Saint Brigid<sup>3</sup> (c 450–c 523), miracle worker, founder and abbess of Kildare, patron saint of Leinster and Ireland, is a Christianised version of an earlier Celtic goddess of the same or a similar name.<sup>4</sup> The goddess Brigid was a corn mother or triple goddess also associated with healing, sacred knowledge, poetry and smithcraft. Like the saint,

🌐 Charles Sturt University.

2 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, (1906) Third ed. (Bucks, 1971) 20.

3 Brigid is also known as Bridget, Brigit and Bride. This article follows contemporary scholarly practice in using Brigid.

4 eg Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint*, (Boston, 1995); Angela Bourke, ‘Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid’ 13–31 in Marilyn Cohen & Nancy Curtin (eds) *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland*, (New York, 1999) at p 16; Walter L Brenneman Jr & Mary Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland*, (Virginia, 1995) 88; Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: the Masks of God*, (New York, 1959) at 431–2; J G Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1922 (London, 1978) 177–8; Barbara Walker, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, (San Francisco, 1983) 116–118; Roy Willis (ed), *World Mythology: the Illustrated Guide*, (London 1993) 186.

she is also associated with a sacred and eternal fire.<sup>5</sup>

Like the goddess, Brigid the saint has a very large portfolio. As well as being patron saint of Leinster and Ireland she is the patron saint for ‘babies and infants, blacksmiths, boatmen, cattle, chicken farmers, children whose parents are not married, dairy maids, dairy workers, fugitives, mariners, midwives, nuns, poets, poultry, printing presses, sailors, scholars, travellers, and watermen.’<sup>6</sup> Nor is Saint Brigid confined to Ireland. In Scotland she is known as Bride, in Wales as Ffraid and in England both as Brigid and Bride.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the current scholarly and popular consensus that an earlier goddess metamorphosed into saint, there are other views. Lisa M Bitel inverts the goddess-precedes-saint thesis with her argument that in fact it was the historical Brigid’s various seventh- to ninth-century hagiographers who ‘gave us the goddess Brigit.’<sup>8</sup> That is, in order to boost Brigid’s — and their — status they used ‘local literary traditions and heroic history’ in order to cast their saint as ‘a mistress of the animals, territory and landscape.’<sup>9</sup>

For a being — either human or divine — who may never have existed, Brigid has lived now for centuries within Irish (and Scots) cultural texts and practices: in walking rituals and pilgrimages, in place-names and women’s names, in sacred and magical symbols, in prayers, poetry and invocations, and in dramatic, magical and often humorous stories.

Saint Brigid’s Feast day is 1 February, the same date as the

pre-Christian Celtic early Spring festival of *Imbolc*.<sup>10</sup> To this day, in many parts of Ireland, her special cross is woven from rushes on the eve of her feast day — a time when the saint is understood to spiritually traverse the countryside — and hung above the front door for protection against fire, storm and disease throughout the year. Brigid still has holy wells in her name scattered throughout Ireland. Moreover, in recent years, the saint has seen a resurgence of devotion in both new age and Catholic cultures, in Ireland and beyond.<sup>11</sup> In 1993, the flame of Saint Brigid was rekindled at Kildare by a community of Brigidine sisters.<sup>12</sup> Then on Saint Brigid’s feast

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- 5 The Celtic goddess Brigid has also been associated with the Roman goddess Minerva who was also commemorated with an eternal flame. Roy Willis (Ed), *World Mythology*, 186.
  - 6 Catholic Forum Online [www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintb3.htm](http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintb3.htm) [2 July 2007].
  - 7 D Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, (Harmondsworth, 2nd edition 1983) 71–72.
  - 8 Lisa M Bitel, ‘Body of a saint, story of a goddess: origins of the Brigidine tradition’, 209–228 in *Textual Practice* 16(2), 2002: at p 211. Available online at [www.tandf.co.uk/journals](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals) [1 Feb 2008].
  - 9 *Ibid*, 225.

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- 10 The etymology of the word *Imbolc* itself, which has not survived into modern Irish, is still disputed. *Imbolc* is often said to be a festival related to lambing, and lactation of ewes, although Feb 1 is very early for any lambing. Thomas Torma points out, however, that in the centuries before a major calendar revision in 1752 cut eleven days, *Imbolc* was celebrated in what is now mid February — a time more suited to lambing. Thomas Torma, ‘Milk Symbolism in the ‘Bethu Brigte’ *The Heroic Age*, Issue 7, Spring 2004, 3: available online at [www.heroicage.org/issues/7/torma.html](http://www.heroicage.org/issues/7/torma.html) [20 Feb 2008]. Angela Bourke also notes that the milder Irish climate meant Spring pastoral and agriculture practises could start earlier than in Northern Europe. Bourke also indicates a connection with cereal rather than milk in that Brigid’s feast marks the beginning of spring sowing, while Lughnasa, the festival named after the Irish god Lugh (and possibly Brigid’s masculine counterpart) marks the beginning of harvest. Angela Bourke, ‘Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid’, 19–21.
  - 11 Marion Bowman discusses the renewal of Brigid rituals in modern Glastonbury, where she is celebrated as both Goddess and Saint. Marion Bowman, ‘Arthur and Bridget in Avalon: Celtic Myth, Vernacular Religion and Contemporary Spirituality in Glastonbury’, *Fabula*: 2007; 48,1/2, 16–32.
  - 12 The eternal flame which the saint is said to have established at her double monastery in Kildare, tended only by women, survived for hundreds of years, at least until the twelfth century. Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) who visited Ireland in the twelfth century attested to the flame’s existence. His text has added weight to the concept of Brigid as pagan goddess, with the idea of vestal virgins in a pre Christian sacred community of women. The restoration of Brigid’s flame in contemporary Kildare is acknowledged as a flame for both Goddess and

day in 2006 President Mary McAleese visited Kildare to officially present the sacred flame 'to the People of Ireland and beyond'. In her speech, the Irish president spoke of 'the sheer power' of the saint's continuing presence, and of Brigid as the point of intersection between the Irish Christian and Irish Celtic pagan worlds, in an address which indicated the new politically correct Ireland, including both protestant and pagan histories into the national story.<sup>13</sup>

The early medieval stories indicate a woman marked from birth as both special and marginal. Brigid was a love child, born at dawn over a threshold, reared for some years in the household of a druid. Her pregnant mother, Broicsech, had been sold as a slave by her father Dubhtach, under pressure, so the stories say, from his jealous principal wife, but his daughter remained free. Growing up, Brigid worked willingly as sheep minder, pig and cow herder, cook and dairy maid but her constant giving away of food, ale and goods to the poor annoyed both her foster and biological kin. She eventually so wore out the patience of her father Dubthach that he tried to sell her as a slave to the King of Leinster.

'What cause of annoyance has she given?' said the king.

'Not hard,' said Dubthach. 'She acts without asking permission; whatever she sees, her hand takes.'<sup>14</sup>

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Saint. Interestingly, earlier writers record that the flame was suppressed by Henry Launders, Archbishop of Dublin in 1220. See David P Conyngham, *Lives of the Irish Saints and Martyrs*, (New York, 1871) 175, also JSP Tatlock, 'Greater Irish Saints in Lawman and in England', *Modern Philology*, (1945) 72–76, at p 73. Tatlock does not state who or what ended the flame but gives the same date of suppression as Conyngham, 1220. Yet the twentieth century revivalists of the flame claim it was the Tudor invasions and the suppression of the monasteries. *Solas Bhride*, Christian Community Centre for Celtic Spirituality, available online at [www.solasbhride.ie/flame-of-brigid.htm](http://www.solasbhride.ie/flame-of-brigid.htm) [2 July 2007].

13 *Solas Bhride*, *Ibid*.

14 *Bethu Brigte*, 13, Transl: Donnchadh Ó hAodha (Dublin, 1978). Available online at [www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G201002/index.html](http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G201002/index.html) [3 March 2008].

While waiting in her father's chariot as this exchange was taking place, Brigid gave his sword away to a passing beggar. When her father demanded what she had done with his sword, she replied, 'Christ has taken it'. As the admiring king told Dubthach, 'Truly, this girl can neither be sold nor bought'.<sup>15</sup>

The story of Brigid crosses gender boundaries as well. Many of the texts assert that she had been consecrated as a bishop, instead of as a nun, by her bishop Mel, he being 'intoxicated with the grace of God'.<sup>16</sup>

Many aspects of her Christian legend link Brigid to fertility, fecundity and abundance. She could churn limitless amounts of butter out of small supplies of milk. When guests came unexpectedly to her monastery she went out to milk the community's cows and their milk flooded the plains and created a lake of milk in Leinster. But the generous saint was not above a little bit of cheating. She famously obtained her lands from the king of Leinster when he granted her as much land for her cows as her cloak could cover. Her magical cloak spread out for miles on every side until he begged her to stop.<sup>17</sup>

Generous beyond fault, the saint was often tough on the mean and niggardly. She cursed the fruit trees of a woman who had given apples to her community but had then protested when she heard the saint had given them away to lepers. The ninth-century *Bethu Brigte* records with satisfaction that that orchard 'remains barren forever'.<sup>18</sup>

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15 *Bethu Brigte*, 13.

16 *Bethu Brigte*, 19. In another version, the young cleric MacCaille protests at Mel's act, to which Mel replied, 'No power have I in this matter.' *Leabhar Breac*, transl. Whitley Stokes, 69. Available online at [www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T201010/text001.html](http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T201010/text001.html) [18 Feb 2008].

17 Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, (First ed 1866), (London, 1969) 334.

18 *Bethu Brigte*, 32. There are other examples of saintly cursing in the various medieval *Vitae*. These aspects of her story do not necessarily reflect a pagan origin; Christ also cursed a fig tree into barrenness, as well as famously whipping the money lenders out of the temple.

Regardless of the occasional attempts to confine the figure of Brigid into more patriarchal models of womanhood – as when the later medieval text *Leabhar Breac* asserts that she never looked a male person in the eye, and never spoke without blushing!<sup>19</sup> – the medieval texts, early and late, describe a dynamic, bold and essentially libertarian figure, travelling widely through much of Ireland, friends with kings, bishops and lepers, reckless in her generosity, almost relentless in her miracle-working.

Centuries later, faith in Brigid's powers of healing remained strong in Ireland. Lady Gregory tells of a local woman's story of being healed of an eye affliction by seeing the miraculous fish in the local Saint Brigid's well, which 'was surely Saint Brigid I saw that time; who else would it be?'<sup>20</sup> Here the shape-shifting saint and the supernaturally powerful fish are pure Celtic inventions. While the fish is certainly also a Christian symbol, miraculous salmon and trout dwelling in sacred waters form no part of Roman Catholicism, but instead hark back to the earliest sagas of Finn, the salmon of wisdom and the well of Seaghais, the spring of the otherworld.<sup>21</sup>

Like the Celtic faery people Brigid has an element of caprice in the bestowing of any favours. The healed woman wondered to Lady Gregory why she had been so honoured with a miraculous cure. 'Did I say more prayers than the rest? Not a prayer. I was young in those days. I suppose she took a liking to me, maybe because of my name Brigit the same as her own.'<sup>22</sup>

Lady Gregory recorded many Brigid stories, both from oral and from textual sources, and placed them first in her published work, *A Book of Saints and Wonders: according to the old writings and the memory of the people of Ireland*. We can be grateful for Augusta Gregory's fondness for Brigid, because many other Gaelic revivalists were not interested.<sup>23</sup> The non-Irish-speaking Yeats was

of course more interested in Celtic myth than the embarrassment of Catholicism, while Douglas Hyde, who also published a work on Irish 'legends of saints and sinners' claimed that he heard no stories at all about St Brigid.<sup>24</sup> But Lady Gregory repeats the *Leabhar Breac* claim that Brigid was 'the queen of the south, she is the mother of the flocks, she is the Mary of the Gael'.<sup>25</sup>

In Scotland's Hebrides, in the last half of the nineteenth century, Alexander Carmichael recorded many rituals, ceremonies, chants, invocations and images used to honour Bride, 'the beauteous, the shepherdess of the flocks', and commented that in some areas Bride was more important to the people than the figure of Mary.<sup>26</sup>

Yet a love of Brigid did not prevent an affectionate popular engagement with Mary. Devotion to the virgin mother by the

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O'Coole.' O'Casey thought LG looked 'like an old, elegant nun of a new order, a blend of the Lord Jesus Christ and of Puck,' Colm Toibin, *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush*, (Madison, 2002) 105. The description may encompass the saint herself, if Puck means mischief, faery, the natural world.

24 Douglas Hyde, *Legends of saints and sinners: collected and translated from the Irish*, (Dublin, 1916) ix. Hyde makes one passing reference to Bridget's Well at Kilbride at p 11. The folklorist Patrick Kennedy did however record five stories of Brigid in his 1866 publication, *Legendary fictions of the Irish Celts*, 329–335. Ignoring or simply not seeing the divine feminine in action is not confined to nineteenth century researchers. In his book written to accompany a ten part TV series made for Scottish television in the 1990s, Alistair Moffat fails to mention the goddess or saint or any vernacular traditions and practices involving her at all. Alistair Moffat, *The Sea Kingdoms: the History of Celtic Britain and Ireland*, (London 2001). Likewise Ken Loach in his 2006 film on the Irish War of Independence and civil war, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, depicts a devout rural Ireland completely devoid of Marian images.

25 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 22. The lines are from *Leabhar Breac*.

26 Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica: hymns and incantations with illustrative notes on words, rites, and customs, dying and obsolete/orally collected in the highlands and islands of Scotland*, 2nd edition, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1928, 173.

19 Possibly a later gloss, in *Leabhar Breac*, 85.

20 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 21.

21 Roy Willis (ed), *World Mythology*, 185.

22 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 21.

23 Indeed, Sean O'Casey referred to Lady Gregory as 'Blessed Bridget



Gaelic-speaking Catholic communities of Ireland and Scotland is embedded in the language of poetry, invocations, prayers and – in the Irish language – in the very greeting, ‘*Dia duit*’ (God be with you), and its response, ‘*Dia ’s Muire duit*’ (God and Mary be with you). While scholars dispute how widespread Marianism actually was in Ireland before the massive (and Europe-wide) explosion in Marian devotion in the embattled nineteenth century, it is known that Marian prayers, poems and even moving statues existed in Ireland from at least the thirteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the very first textual reference to Mary is in the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte* where Bishop Ibor dreams of the virgin Mary and then the next day recognises the young Brigid as the woman he saw in his dream vision.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly by the nineteenth century, Mary was the official Church favourite, within Europe and the Catholic diaspora in the new worlds. With an increasingly dominant middle-class ideology constructing femininity as essentially passive and fragile, Mary — her traditional blood-red dress replaced by virginal white — was undergoing a reduction in height, age and breast size.<sup>29</sup> Her obedience and meekness were stressed. It could never be said about Mary as it was of Brigid, ‘She acts without asking permission; whatever she sees, her hand takes’.<sup>30</sup> Yet for many of the faithful, Mary was still a powerful regal figure, a dealer in miracles and capable of transforming and healing human lives and hearts. She

27 Annals stated that the statue of Mary spoke miraculously at Cell Mór in Tír Briúin in 1381. Peter O’Dwyer, *Mary: a history of devotion in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1988) 98–99.

28 *Bethu Brigte*, 11.

29 Medieval and renaissance images show the Madonna almost always in a blood red dress with dark blue cloak, but the royal blue had faded to baby blue in the nineteenth century and the virginal white dress becoming de rigeur, leaving Mary, Charlene Spretnak notes, ‘with no hint of maternal potency.’ Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: the Queen of Heaven and her re-emergence in the modern church*, (New York, 2004) 221.

30 *Bethu Brigte*, 13.

was the Mother of Sorrows, Star of the Sea and Queen of Heaven and Earth, hardly petit bourgeois occupations.

Of course, the powerful presence of the divine mother in nineteenth-century Catholic spirituality was not just an Irish phenomenon. Apparitions of Mary had been recorded all over nineteenth-century Europe, the most famous ones being in La Salette, France, in 1846; Lourdes in 1858; Marpingen, Germany, 1876; as well as at Knock, Ireland in 1879. The visions provoked massive gatherings of people, and prompted pilgrimages. While many contemporary commentators and later historians of these gatherings and pilgrimages saw them as essentially conservative, if not actually reactionary, new readings are emerging.

David Blackbourn, in his study of the conflict between rationalism and religion in nineteenth-century Germany, feels that Our Lady was a potent religious symbol to be used against controlling civil authority.<sup>31</sup> He draws comparisons between nineteenth-century Marian pilgrims and contemporary political forms of passive resistance. For one thing, Marian pilgrims continued singing and carrying flowers and candles in the face of police and military hostility to their gatherings. These pilgrims in their heightened emotional states threatened a social order based on work and obedience to the machine. It was a form of cultural and often gendered resistance to modernity, sometimes diffuse and inchoate, sometimes more sharply and locally focussed.

That Marian visionaries themselves were mainly women or children further indicates the liminal and oppositional nature of devotional and miraculous Marian Christianity in the new age of reason. Traditionally, Mary appears most often to the ‘have-nots’, the divine mother making common cause with the poor, the oppressed, women and children. The Virgin of Guadalupe said to Juan Diego, the Aztec Indian who met her on the road in 1531, ‘am I not of your kind?’<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Ruth Harris noted that the Lourdes pilgrimage

31 David Blackbourn, *The Marpingen Visions: rationalism, religion and the rise of Modern Germany*, (London, 1995) 42.

32 *Abundant Life*, Catholic Pregnancy Assistance Newsletter, East Perth,

movement became the leading spiritual event 'of a Catholic counter culture' in an aggressively secular state.<sup>33</sup> Certainly throughout the nineteenth century in Europe, Marian sites 'attracted large numbers of those whose mobility was least expected or desired: women, children, the poor'.<sup>34</sup>

Despite its championing by patriarchal elements, the delights and depths of Marianism are not to be lightly dismissed. Indeed, its persistence within Catholicism, despite outside opposition and internal ambivalence, indicates the powerful psychic drive for wholeness in a one-sided masculinist system.

In nineteenth-century Ireland, where Catholicism and nationalist identity became inextricably intertwined, Mary had become a political as well as cultural and spiritual figure. When Daniel O'Connell held his largest 'monster meeting' in the campaign to repeal the Act of Union at the ancient Celtic royal site of Tara in 1843, he deliberately chose a Marian date: August 15, the feast day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thirty-six years later, many people believed that the appearance of the Virgin at Knock 'was a sign of divine support for the Land League'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, one of the first cures there involved the daughter of a well-known Fenian and Land League activist. The rosary itself had become such a symbol of both Marian devotion and Irish resistance that the Irish Volunteers were reciting it in the Dublin GPO and Boland's Mill in the armed Easter uprising of 1916.<sup>36</sup> Padraig Pearse's poem, *Mise Eire* ('I am Ireland'), links the sorrowful maternal figures of Mary,

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WA, March 2001, 2. See also Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary*, 186–92.

33 Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, (London, 1999) 17.

34 David Blackbourn, *The Marpingen Visions*, 40.

35 Paul Bew, 'A Vision to the Dispossessed? Popular piety and revolutionary politics in the Irish Land War, 1879–82', in Judith Devlin & Ronan Fanning (eds) *Religion and Rebellion, Historical Studies XX, Papers read before the 22nd conference of Irish historians*, UCD May 1995, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 1997, at p 138.

36 Peter O'Dwyer, *Mary*, 297–9.

Ireland and Pearse's own mother, soon to be bereft of her executed son.<sup>37</sup>

Mother Mary had merged with Mother Church and Mother Ireland. She was the weeping mother at the grave of a crucified Ireland: *Mater Dolorosa*, the Mother of Sorrows. In fact, Mary is a much sadder woman than Brigid can ever be. There is a liveliness about the figure of Brigid, an eternal youthfulness, which may have moulded the archetypal pattern of one the most popular motifs in Irish storytelling, the clever country girl.<sup>38</sup> Mary, for all her beauty and kindness, has no such wit. It could be said that, while Brigid was the maiden, Mother Mary had become the *Cailleach* aspect of the Goddess, the portal of death, reflected in the oft-repeated Marian prayer: 'pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.'

Honoured and loved though Mary was, within the lived spiritualities of Gaelic-speaking Irish and Scottish communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she did not reign alone, especially not on Earth. Outside of official church texts, but in stories told throughout Scotland, Ireland and some parts of the diaspora, the earthly Mary was very often joined by a brave, resourceful, loyal and spirited companion. In these tales, Brigid has far more divine powers than Mary, and it is a wonder how the holy family got on at all without her.

Lady Gregory retells a story where the pregnant Mary is halted by crowds admiring her radiant beauty. This, however, distresses Mary and prevents her from moving on. Luckily, she then meets Brigid:

They met then with Brigit, and the Mother of God said to her, 'What can we do to make these crowds leave following us?'

'I will do that for you,' said Brigit, 'for I will show them a greater wonder.'

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37 Interestingly, it was Lady Gregory who translated Pearse's poem from the Irish. CI Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880–1935* (Athens, USA, 1993) 160–2.

38 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition*, (Cork, 1973) 20.

The greater wonder is the agricultural implement, the harrow, used for ploughing the earth. In Brigid's upraised hands, however, the humble harrow blazes forth and 'every one of the pins gave out a flame like a candle', thus diverting the attention of the crowd and enabling Mary to make her escape. The grateful Mary then asks what she can do for the saint as a reward. "Put my day before your own day," said Brigit. So she did that, and St Brigit's Day is kept before her own day ever since.<sup>39</sup>

As noted, St Brigit's Day is 1 February, and Candlemas (Mary's Day) is 2 February.<sup>40</sup> Candlemas was also known as the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, according to the Judaeo-Christian law that women, being unclean after childbirth (of sons), had to wait 40 days before returning to the temple, to be ritually purified.<sup>41</sup> In Christianity, this practice was called 'being church'd'. In Willeen Keough's research on the lives of women of the Irish diaspora of Southern Avalon in Newfoundland (1750–1860), she describes how women treasured the blessed candles from the church given out on Candlemas Day. The candles were associated with Mary and her power to ward off evil.<sup>42</sup> But Candlemas also included Brigid, again as friendly supporter and protector of Mary. According to southern Avalon versions, Mary was on her way to be 'church'd', and Brigid went ahead of her, with 'rays of light pouring from her

head to distract attention from Mary's shame'.<sup>43</sup>

This sisterly intervention by Brigid to protect and support a more tentative Mary is, according to Angela Bourke, one of the most common stories told about her feast day in both Irish- and English-language sources. Bourke relays a further version of this story from Cork, where Brigid lit a candle and put it in the tail of her own dress, 'and she was so holy that the candle didn't burn the dress and while they were all looking at St Brigid, the Blessed Virgin slipped into the church and no-one noticed her'.<sup>44</sup>

In Alexander Carmichael's outer Hebrides, the Candlemas story says that Bride lit the way for Mary when she went up to the temple. Bride's candles shone on through a fierce wind, and did not flicker or fall.<sup>45</sup> In a story from Valentia Island, off Kerry, the irrepressible saint wore a hoop with lighted candles around her waist as she 'danced up the aisle before the Virgin and down again'.<sup>46</sup>

None of these stories in the oral tradition about Brigid and Mary feel the need to explain or explain away Brigid's presence in the Holy Land, a presence which breaches both temporal and spatial laws. They are, as Shirley Toulson notes, 'a venture into the spiritual, timeless world that makes nonsense of chronology'.<sup>47</sup> Keough also notes a Newfoundland story that the ever-helpful and resourceful Brigid wove a woollen web from her ewes to protect the infant Jesus

39 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 19–20.

40 The candles used in Candlemas may originally have derived from an earlier Roman pre-Christian festival of the same date sacred to women and to the Goddess of Love (Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia*, 134–5). The candles are also associated with Brigid: in all of the Brigid and Mary stories, it is Brigid who holds them.

41 Angela Bourke, 'Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid' at p 26.

42 Women dripped blessed candle wax at the windowsills of their homes praying to Mary for protection of these homes, and dabbed the wax into their children's shoes, for Mary to guide their children's footsteps. Willeen Keough, *The Slender Thread, Irish women on the Southern Avalon 1750–1860*, Columbia University Press, e-books. Available online at [www.gutenberg-e.org/keough](http://www.gutenberg-e.org/keough) 2006 ch 5, p 13.

43 Here the harrow of Lady Gregory's story is now St Brigid's miraculous rays of light. Keough notes the goddess Brigid was sometimes portrayed with rays of light pouring from a headress of candles. Willeen Keough, *The Slender Thread*, ch 5, p 14.

44 Story from Irish Folklore Collection (IFC 900:16–17) quoted in Angela Bourke, 'Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid' at p 27.

45 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 169.

46 Elizabeth Andrews, 'A Legend of St Brigid,' *Man*, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (Dec 1922): available online at [www.jstor.org/view/00251496/dm995197/99p1386m/0](http://www.jstor.org/view/00251496/dm995197/99p1386m/0), [28 February 2008].

47 Shirley Toulson, *The Celtic Year: a Month-by-Month Celebration of Celtic Christian Festivals and Sites*, (Shaftesbury, 1996) 80.



from harm during the flight into Egypt.<sup>48</sup> Such stories are part of a deeper mythological and spiritual storytelling tradition, which, as Keough notes, ‘wreaks havoc with history’s love of time lines.’<sup>49</sup>

Other Irish stories on occasion combined the heroes of the Ulster Cycle with Christian figures. Some accounts placed Cúchulainn at Calvary, and other versions told how King Conchobar died as a result of rage at the news of Christ’s crucifixion. News, interestingly enough, told him by a druid, when the king asked why the day had suddenly turned very dark.<sup>50</sup> Sometimes an explanation — of sorts — was given to reconcile time and place. In County Galway, local women told Lady Gregory that a heavenly messenger brought both Mary and Jesus over to Ireland to escape the persecutions of Herod, and to place them under the care and protection of Brigid.<sup>51</sup>

A story reported in the *Carmina Gadelica* places Brigid as serving maid in the inn at Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Christ. She was unable to give the old man and his beautiful pregnant wife any shelter, but characteristically she gave them her own last piece of bread. When she returned to the kitchen to find the bannock of bread still there, the young saint knew she had met no ordinary woman. She ran out and, following a golden light, arrived at the stable in time to assist Mary in her birthing. Brigid then blessed the baby with three drops of water from a nearby spring.<sup>52</sup>

Alexander Carmichael also recorded a beautiful Scottish Gaelic prayer for women in labour, calling on Bride’s midwifery skills:

48 Willeen Keough, *The Slender Thread*, ch 5, 14–15. The association of cloth with Brigid is strong, with much folklore asserting that St Brigid wove the first piece of cloth in Ireland, (Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 15) and that she wove the shroud of St Patrick, as he had requested.

49 Willeen Keough, *The Slender Thread*, ch 5, p 15.

50 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Storytelling in Irish Tradition*, 27.

51 Irish Theatre Institute, Playography, play listing. Available online at [www.irishplayography.com/search/play.asp?play\\_ID=2076](http://www.irishplayography.com/search/play.asp?play_ID=2076) [28 February 2008].

52 Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 164.

‘S mar a chòmh’n thu Òigh an t-solais,  
Gun òr, gun odh, gun nì,  
Còmh’n orm-sa, ’s mór mòthrais,  
Còmh’n orm a Bhrìde!

(And as thou didst aid the Virgin of joy,  
without gold, without corn, without kine,  
Aid thou me, great is my sickness,  
Aid me, O Bride!)<sup>53</sup>

The tradition that Brigid was Mary’s midwife is also well known in Ireland. In certain areas women hung out a piece of cloth on St Brigid’s Eve hoping that the saint would touch it, and infuse it with her healing powers, giving it power to relieve the pain of their own childbirth. The cloth varied in colour from region to region, and was called *brat Bhrìde*, Brigid’s cloak.<sup>54</sup> In Donegal, oral folklore tradition states that women sometimes used the *brat Bhrìde* to ease the pain of calving cows.<sup>55</sup> The tradition of Brigid as midwife to Mary reveals an integrative and inclusive spirituality, whereby the old goddess is the first to assist the new. Brigid is also the first person to hold the Christ child in her arms, and with the water from a sacred spring she is his baptiser. Thus not only is she Mary’s midwife, she is also the midwife of Christianity.

The stories of Brigid and the Holy Family attracted the attention of Celtic revivalists and artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the story was re-performed in new cultural texts and contexts. Lady Gregory wrote a play which was performed by the Abbey Theatre at Easter 1924, called ‘The Story Brought by Brigid’, in which Lady Gregory extended the oral

53 Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 177.

54 Angela Bourke, ‘Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid’ at pp 22–23.

55 Lisa M Bitel, ‘St Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess’, paper presented at Fordham University, Feb 2001. Available online at [monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/article.php?textId=6](http://monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/article.php?textId=6) [14 Feb 2008].

tradition of Brigid's presence at the birth of Christ to place her also at the scene of his death.<sup>56</sup> In England in 1914, a pageant play was staged in Glastonbury, which also has an oral tradition of Saint Brigid, as well as a chapel and well in her name.<sup>57</sup> *The Coming of Bride* showed Brigid taking care of the weary and frightened holy family in a saintly dream vision. When Brigid woke, she was still in her fields in Ireland, but Saint Joseph had kindly left her a bejewelled cloak as proof of their visit.<sup>58</sup>

In Scotland in 1913, the painter John Duncan, one of the leading representatives of the Celtic Revival, created a luminous canvas now held in the National Galleries of Scotland which depicts angels carrying a sleeping Saint Bride to Bethlehem, to be present at the birth of Christ.<sup>59</sup> A seal accompanies them over the seas. The white-gowned saint, lying stiffly between the two magnificent and richly robed angels, is golden-haired as Bride is in Scottish lore, but also rather thin and frail: a girl much like the scared and skinny Mary in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1850 *Annunciation*, and nothing like the energetic self-willed saint of the medieval texts.

Not only was Brigid Mary's midwife, she was also honoured in Gaelic oral and written culture as Christ's foster-mother, which meant — as in Celtic cultural practice — that she also breastfed him.<sup>60</sup> As noted, the figure of Brigid is often associated with milk,

56 Irish Theatre Institute, Playography, play listing. The play drew upon the popular connection between 'the Easter Rising and the martyrdom of Christ.' CI Innes, *Woman and Nation*, 161.

57 There is also an image of St Bride with a cow on the 14th Century St Michael's Tower on the Glastonbury Tor. Marion Bowman, 'Arthur and Bridget in Avalon,' 24.

58 Marion Bowman, 'Arthur and Bridget in Avalon,' at 24–25.

59 Even the inclusion of angels indicates a rational element when so many of the stories offered no such 'logical' explanation for Brigid's presence at Christ's birth. Duncan's painting is viewable online at [www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/online\\_az/4:322/result/0/17484?artistId=3210&artistName=John%20Duncan&initial=D&submit=1](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/online_az/4:322/result/0/17484?artistId=3210&artistName=John%20Duncan&initial=D&submit=1) [12 December 2007]

60 From Peter Parkes, *Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship, Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48. (2006) p362

a nurturing and life-giving substance.<sup>61</sup> Though virginal, she is also a fertile and fecund personage, and in a life and age abundant in miracles, suckling the Christ child was just one more of her 'greater wonders'.

Another Irish female saint also said to have shared in this cosmic mothering of Christ was the sixth century saint of Limerick, Saint Ita, teacher of Saint Brendan the Voyager. An early Irish poem in Ita's voice says:

I nurse him in my lonely place  
though a priest have stores of wealth,  
all is lies save Ísucán [The Christ Child]  
[...]  
in his dwelling high above,  
though at my breast, is Ísucán.<sup>62</sup>

There is an erotic sweetness to the breastfeeding maternal figure, which even warrior or monastic cultures, or perhaps especially such masculinist cultures, would find comfort and sustenance in.

Moreover, the Celtic practice of fostering out babies born into leading families to be raised by relatives or clients increased social cohesion within the *tuath* or clan. It forged, as Alistair Moffat notes, 'two sets of social bonds of immense intensity'.<sup>63</sup> Thus, with Brigid as his foster-mother, Christ enters the Celtic world as a milk-son to the Celtic divine feminine, and a milk-sibling to the Celtic community; a bond as strong as blood. Indeed, as the twelfth-century visitor, Gerald of Wales, and other later commentators would note, the milk connection in Irish society was often stronger than blood. Gerald complained of the warring Irish: 'If they have any love or loyalty, it

61 Thomas Torma notes that not only were dairy products and cattle a crucial part of the early and medieval Irish economy, milk was also biologically vital, the vitamin D in milk making up for the lack of sunlight in Ireland. Thomas Torma, 'Milk Symbolism in the *Bethu Brigte*,' at p 2.

62 James Carney, *Early Irish Poetry*, (Cork, 1969) 51.

63 Alistair Moffat, *The Sea Kingdoms*, 167.

is only for their foster-sons and foster-brothers'.<sup>64</sup>

Sometimes within the medieval Irish texts there was also a total merging of Mary and Brigid. In one example, a hymn attributed to the seventh-century *Últán* of Ardraccan conflates the two figures:

Brigit, excellent woman, sudden flame [...] May she do away with the rent sin has put upon us; the blossomed branch; the Mother of Jesus; the dear young woman greatly looked up to. That I may be safe in every place with my saint of Leinster!<sup>65</sup>

As one mother or as joint mothers of Christ, it is clear that Mary and her divine sister Bride formed a powerful protective and nurturing spiritual force constantly invoked in prayers and poetry, and especially within women's devotional practices and stories in Irish and Scottish Gaelic cultures. Their invocations and prayers sometimes put Mary first and sometimes Brigid, but there is no sense of rivalry or competition, just two lovely women taking care of us all. One Irish prayer that was said over smooing the hearth fire goes: 'I save this fire as holy Christ saves, may Mary be on the roof of the house and Brigid within it'.<sup>66</sup>

Brigid and Mary, then, lived together within Gaelic oral traditions, in creative works by Celtic revivalists, as well as within at least one diasporic community, that of Newfoundland. But it is important to note that the southern Avalon community was established before the catastrophe of the potato famines, *An Gorta Mór*, the Great Hunger of 1846–1850 which swept away millions of the Irish rural poor, by death or emigration. It was this class

which had held onto the language and the older traditions of Gaelic Ireland.

As Angela Bourke notes, 'rich resources of imagination, memory, creativity and communication were jettisoned' when the Irish language and its worldview and traditions, including its awesomely rich, varied and layered oral narratives, were discarded and even denigrated throughout Ireland.<sup>67</sup> Without the labouring and landless poor, their language and their narratives, the nineteenth-century 'ideology of rationality',<sup>68</sup> in both its imperial/colonial and its episcopal forms made deeper inroads into the cultural landscapes of Ireland and Scotland. The increasing standardisation and ultramontanistism of the Catholic church would also assist in drying up the local verdant landscape, with its standardised saints for a new globalised spiritual economy.

To some extent, the cult of Brigid in Ireland has — at least partially — survived these grinding down processes, possibly because her cult was wedded to physical landscape and seasonal rituals — of cloth, pilgrimage, holy wells, feast day bread baking, and of course the making of her cross — as much as it was embedded in story and language. And partly because, in the early twentieth century, the Irish state embarked on a recovery process, 'setting seriously about the task of cultural decolonization by investing heavily in the repriviling of native tradition'.<sup>69</sup> The old stories of Brigid were told again, this time for children through the official school system, including the tale of the magical cloak spreading over the lands of Kildare, and also how Brigid once hung her wet cloak upon a sunbeam to dry.

For the Catholic children of the Irish diaspora, there were no

64 Peter Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe,' 2006 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History, 359–395. Available online at [http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FCSS%2FCSS48\\_02%2FS0010417506000144a.pdf&code=ad8afdf296bf1290244640216120c97](http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FCSS%2FCSS48_02%2FS0010417506000144a.pdf&code=ad8afdf296bf1290244640216120c97)

65 Lady Gregory, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, 19.

66 Peter O'Dwyer, *Mary*, 277.

67 Angela Bourke, 'The Baby and the Bathwater: Cultural Loss in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,' 79–92 in Tadhg Foley and Séan Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, (Dublin, 1998) at p 79.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Angela Bourke, 'Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid' at p 18.

such beautiful, mythopoetic tales. As Patrick O'Farrell notes of the Irish in Australasia, they had come to lands 'whose antiquity was not Christian, whose sentiment and disposition was secular, and whose politics were British'.<sup>70</sup> In the absence of a known, beloved and spiritualised physical landscape, Catholic Irish emigrants came to rely more heavily, says O'Farrell, 'on the institutional machinery of formal religion'.<sup>71</sup> Locked out of her originary landscape and language, the Brigid of the diaspora is — like the sleeping girl in John Duncan's painting — a lovely but lesser woman.

The statues churned out in Italy for numerous Catholic parishes worldwide privileged the holy family, leaving out their midwife, Herod rescuer, web weaver and Candlemas dancer. Brigid, when she was represented in diasporic churches, was never accompanied by anything so heathen and so rural as a cow: she was now the abbess, the church builder. Although still the female patron saint of Ireland, and still often wielding a bishop's crozier, she was increasingly elided by her male counterpart, the glorious Saint Patrick. By the mid-twentieth century, in the ubiquitous 'Lives of the Saints' picture books for children, Church orthodoxy had dried up Brigid's lakes of milk and ale, and made no mention of any runaway cloak, as they presented a woman whose only power was in prayer. The grandeur of her establishment and church at Kildare which so impressed the eighth-century hagiographer Cogitosus becomes 'a lovely little convent'.<sup>72</sup> Even the eye which, in the medieval texts and persisting oral tradition,<sup>73</sup> she famously plucked out of her own face — to

70 Patrick O'Farrell, *Through Irish eyes: Australian and New Zealand Images of the Irish 1788–1948*, (Melbourne, 1994) 61.

71 *Ibid.*

72 **DA** Lord, *Miniature Lives of the Saints, Book IV*, New York, 1946

73 By contrast in both the *Bethu Brigte* and the *Leabhar Breac*, Brigid pokes her own eye out, and offers it to her irritating brother Beccán. In the *Bethu Brigte* it is not stated if her eye is restored but in the *Leabhar Breac* Brigid 'puts her palm to her eye and it was quite whole at once.' Her brother was less fortunate. In the *Bethu Brigte*, Brigid curses her brother and he loses the sight in both eyes. In the *Leabhar Breac* she has slightly more compassion, and Beccán loses only one eye. *Bethu Brigte*, 15 and

successfully put an end to familial pressure on her to get married — has become God making her ugly in answer to her prayer, and of course restoring her beauty once she became a nun.<sup>74</sup>

The 'most powerful of Irish women saints — a figure of the feminine in all its aspect'<sup>75</sup> became in the diaspora just one amongst many, left behind not just by Mary but also by Catherine, Therese, Margaret, Anne, Clare, Bernadette, etc. Even as early as the mid-nineteenth century, Irish women were beginning to drop the name which had once clearly identified them as Irish.<sup>76</sup> The men who named the parishes of burgeoning Catholic Sydney were even less mindful. Of over 140 parishes established in Sydney, NSW, since 1800, only two bear Brigid's name.<sup>77</sup> Of over 550 Catholic schools now operating in all of NSW, Brigid can only count nine in her protective care.<sup>78</sup> Mary has 100. Saint Joseph, a popular diasporic

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*Leabhar Breac*, transl. Whitley Stokes, 65. Angela Bourke also notes how the folk tradition differs from literary accounts in that in many of the oral tales, Brigid's eye is not restored. Bourke, 'Irish stories', at p 26.

74 Daniel A Lord, 'St Brigid of Ireland' in *Miniature Lives of the Saints, Book IV*, New York, 1946.

75 Angela Bourke, 'Irish Stories of Weather, Time and Gender: Saint Brigid', at p 28.

76 Of the four hundred women and girls who were sent from Irish workhouses to Sydney immediately following the Great Famine, one quarter were called Mary. Brigid did come in third, as forty four (approximately ten percent) were called Bridget or Biddy. The second most popular name was Catherine (fifty girls). After Bridget came Anne (32), Margaret (28) and Ellen (19). Irish Famine Memorial, 'Australian Monument Lists Four Hundred Names: Girls orphaned by the Irish Famine'. Available online at [http://irishfaminememorial.org/orphans/names\\_monument.htm](http://irishfaminememorial.org/orphans/names_monument.htm) [20 June 2007].

77 St Patrick has seven, the largest number outside of the Holy Family, and just beating St Therese of Lisieux (6) and the Archangel Michael (6), but the biggest winners are of course Mary (29 parishes), St Joseph (14) and JC (8). Archdiocese of Sydney, Parish register. Available online at [www.sydney.catholic.org.au/Parishes/parishMassTimes.asp](http://www.sydney.catholic.org.au/Parishes/parishMassTimes.asp) [29 Jan 2008].

78 List of non-government schools in New South Wales, NSW Board of Studies October 2007. Available online at Wikipedia. <http://>

saint, has 80. Katherine Massam has noted how, while Catholicism in Australia was dominated numerically and administratively by the Irish, Mary was increasingly used as the unifying symbol to gather and unite Irish and Italian, Polish and Yugoslav immigrants to Catholic Australia.<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps it was not possible for Mary's sister Bride, the free-wheeling saint of the fields and the sacred waters, to leave her homeland. But traces of her, surely, must survive, even in the dry rational colonial realm. Indeed, in the recent (2006) Australian film *Jindabyne*, a scene showed a Saint Brigid's protective cross put up in a contemporary Australian home (albeit by a controlling interfering Irish mother-in-law) with an Irish-language prayer said. As Brigid is re-emerging in Ireland, and even in England, so too — experienced time traveller that she is — the fuller figure of the archaic and anarchic Brigid may yet leap forward into the diaspora and descendant communities to enliven our spiritual landscapes with her boldness and magic; for we need her qualities, that woman who could neither be bought nor sold.

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[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_non-governmental\\_schools\\_in\\_New\\_South\\_Wales](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_non-governmental_schools_in_New_South_Wales) [29 January 2008].

79 Katherine Massam, *Sacred Threads: Catholic Spirituality in Australia 1922–1962*, Sydney 1996, 20. Interestingly the cover of *Sacred Threads* is adorned by Therese of Lisieux.