

# A Long Sip at the Well

## Brigit Book Reviews

by  
Mael Brigde

2014

*Blessings of Brigit on our work  
this day and every day.  
May we follow your way  
in wisdom and compassion  
giving thanks for others we meet  
along the path.*



*Brigit's Candles Cross-Stitch by Donna Amaral*

## Brigit Book Reviews: Introduction

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### Brigidine Books for Children and Adults

Twenty-five years ago or so I had difficulty finding much at all to do with Brigit. There was **Alice Curtayne's** *St Brigid of Ireland* (1954), and rummaging in scholarly journals and books I found a few brief references; a smattering more appeared in feminist and NeoPagan writings. Most presented the same few elements—her perpetual fire, her healing well, her triplicity, her sainthood—with an occasional new detail to whet my appetite.

I wanted more, and I was not alone. Due in large part to books like **Barbara Walker's** *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, interest increased in this western European alternative to the patriarchal Christian God, and so did the publications. We learned about folk traditions and discovered prayers to Saint Bride in the *Carmina Gadelica*. Chapters and whole books devoted to her

began to appear, from scholarly texts to children's picture books. With the introduction of the internet, sites of devotion to her as goddess and saint have mushroomed. There is a plethora now of writings (not to mention meditation and music CDs, sculptures, crafts, and images galore), and a wee bit of confusion if you look too closely at them.

Despite the antiquity and persistence of Brigit's cult, and many years of study of the ancient Celts, there are major gaps in our knowledge of the nature and traditions of Brigit and her people. This leads naturally to guess-work and differing interpretations, depending on the sources used and the background and orientation of the authors. This is inevitable and good, when supported by evidence and footnoted in such a way that the interested reader can retrace arguments and come to her own conclusions. In this way, our understanding deepens and evolves. But it can lead, when there is a desire to offer an easily understandable picture, or where information is looked at without a good understanding of its context, to oversimplifications and misunderstandings, and a mushing together of the known and the invented. Borrowings, conscious or unintended, from unrelated doctrines—the Four Directions of Wicca, for example, which don't exist in Celtic myth and religion—may be used to fill in the gaps: new traditions are grafted onto the old.

It can be argued that this is evolution, itself. The cult of Brigit is changed, now as in the past, by any new culture it comes in contact with. But for those of us who want to piece together an understanding based on what comes down to us from antiquity, it causes problems.

For some, historical accuracy is not as important as the lessons gleaned, the inspiration received, and the ease with which Brigit can be included in an existing practice or pantheon. This is a valid perspective. And surely, if we only wanted verifiable historical detail, Brigit would be a bad bet. Her "Lives" were all written long after she died (if she lived at all) and her appearance as a goddess in the old texts comes even later. What we know about her comes almost entirely from a mixture of late period folklore, customs, place names, and Christian vitae. Still, an examination of those materials can give us a clearer picture of who she was to her people at various points in history. For many, this is the most comfortable starting point for a modern interpretation. Piecing together the many fragments of the puzzle is for them a rewarding intellectual and spiritual endeavour.

Having a satisfying bibliography and thorough footnotes doesn't automatically prevent muddy thinking and misinformation, nor is it a case of academics being right and lay writers wrong. A healthy dose of skepticism is always advisable, and if you come across a particularly enticing piece of information, presented as fact, that you've never encountered before, you may want to follow it up and see where it comes from. There is a good chance that someone has made a guess and someone else has read that speculation as Truth.

For this reason you will find that I most prize authors who give their evidence, cite its origins, and then offer hypotheses based on that evidence. I am happier with gaps in the picture and a lack of certainty about ultimate truths than I am with murky provenance. On the other hand, I do appreciate reading a Brigidine's vision of his benefactor and his interpretation of that vision, upwellings of inspired poetry, and creations of new ritual and charms. These are valid and valuable additions to her cultus. I treasure modern manifestations of her cult, "UPG" (Unconfirmed Personal Gnosis: inspiration about one's personal deity), and spontaneous, joyful renderings, in addition to old traditions, academic observations, and considered conclusions. But I do like to know which is which.

When we can't retrace a writer's steps and weigh their conclusions, assertions once born as guesses or poetic imagery work their way into the literature as accepted fact. They may not be errors or even UPG—they may be legitimate pieces of historical information, but with no way of tracing them to their source they are untrustworthy and frustrating items to deal with. An example is the name Ingheau Anndagha or Daughters of the Flame.

I found this term in **Merlin Stone's** *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood* in 1992 and enthusiastically applied it to the group I had formed to relight Brigit's perpetual flame. Because the Irish was daunting to non-Irish speakers, I reserved it for the newsletter and called the group Daughters of the Flame. I didn't afterward find a single reference to the title Ingheau Anndagha in any but NeoPagan writings—presumably they, too, got it from Merlin Stone.

So where did it come from? I wrote to Ms Stone in the 1990s and got no reply, so I can't say. In time I dropped the dubious title from the newsletter, but we are quite content to this day to think of ourselves as daughters of Brigit's flame, wherever the name may have come from. (The Truth may be out there somewhere; I eventually stopped looking. If you know the origins of Ingheau Anndagha, do tell!)

In my reviews of Brigidine books, I will primarily attempt to distinguish between:

- ✧ works based on folk traditions, and/or written or geographical materials of ancient or medieval origin versus those which embark in new directions, infusing Wiccan and other ideas into their presentation of Brigit, versus works based largely on personal relationship with deity;
- ✧ works that are well written and well presented versus those which are not;
- ✧ works intended to further the study of or devotion to Brigit versus those which pursue other aims primarily;
- ✧ works that are more useful for inspiration than for scholarship. (Since I can find inspiration in the driest scholarly presentation, if the ideas are exciting enough, I may not be able to offer the opposite: works that are more useful for scholarship than inspiration.)

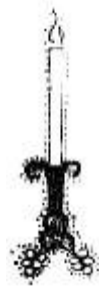
All of this is intended as a sketchy roadmap for people to whom such distinctions are important. I'm grateful for this upsurging of Brigidine materials and devotion, in its many forms, and my intention is never to discourage authors, but to ask for and celebrate clarity in intent and presentation. I won't be reviewing every book, or the many papers and articles available; if anyone is drawn to writing a scholarly critique of the literature, I would be delighted to read and link to it.

I distinguish in my categories between scholarly and popular books in part by the presence or absence of footnotes, index, and a bibliography based on primary and secondary source materials as opposed to one based on other popular books. This is not an indication of how serious or sincere a writer is. There are few books on the subject that have nothing at all to offer to our appreciation of Brigit and her cultus, and there are many perspectives available; mine is as subjective as any other.

I offer you, then, my sense of the books I have before me, pointing you in the direction of texts I personally find useful and raising a flag of caution here and there, in the hope this may help you in choosing which books you want to explore in more depth. If you have suggestions of other books that should be on the list—perhaps your own?—please let me know. If you are able to point me toward a review copy, so much the better.

Given all that, I invite you to dip into the waters of Brigit writings, and encourage you to add to that body of work if you are so inspired.

May you find many blessings in your research, and may her flame burn bright within you.



## Brigit Book Reviews: List of Books to be Reviewed



*Sneak Preview*

To be honest, I'm a little uncertain about some of my categories—particular works might be as happy in one as in another—so use them as general guides only, to keep the picture a little clearer on the table, not as Ultimate Pronouncements in every case.

### **Picture books:**

*Brigid's Cloak*, Reg Keating (1997)

*Brigid's Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story*, Bryce Milligan (2002)

*The Life of Saint Brigid, Abbess of Kildare*, Jane Meyer (2009)

(We need some goddess-oriented Brigidine picture books.)

### **Fiction:**

*The Tomb of Reeds*, by Sarah Baylis, (1987) (YA novel)

*Brigit of Kildare*, Ann Egan (2001) (novel/poetry)

*Brigid of Kildare*, Cindy Thomson (2006) (novel)

“The Brídeog” by Casey June Wolf. *Escape Clause: A Speculative Fiction Anthology*, edited by Clelie Rich (2009)

*Brigid of Kildare*, Heather Terrell (2010) (novel)

(I hope novelists start finding more unusual names for their Brigit books; it's getting a bit hard to tell them apart.)

### ***Fiction, Mention only:***

*Confessions of a Pagan Nun*, Kate Horsley (2001) (novel)

*Sister Fidelma* series, Peter Tremayne/Peter Beresford Ellis (1994—) (novels)

## Poetry/Play:

*The Story Brought by Brigit* by Lady Gregory (1924) (play)

*St Brigit of the Mantle*, Norah Kelly (1924) (play)

*Brigit of Kildare*, Ann Egan (2001) (novel/poetry) (SEE ALSO the review in the FICTION posting)

*Brighid's Runes*, ed. Rachel Mica McCann (2008) (poetry)

## Nonfiction, Popular (Saint):

"Brigit, the Mary of the Gael", from *A Book of Saints and Wonders* by Lady Gregory (1907)

*Saint Brigid of Ireland*, Alice Curtayne (1954)

*Saint Bride*, Iain MacDonald (1992)

*Power of Raven, Wisdom of Serpent*, Noragh Jones (1994)

*Rekindling the Flame: a Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Brigid of Kildare*, Rita Minehan CSB (1999)

*The Life of Saint Brigid*, Anna Egan Smucker (2009)

## Nonfiction, Popular (NeoPagan):

*Candlemas: Feast of Flames*, Amber K and Azrael Arynn TK (2001)

"The Well of Her Memory" in *Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, Patricia Monaghan (2003)

"Imbolc—Brigit", Alexei Kondratiev, in *Devoted to You*, Judy Harrow (2003)

*Brighid's Healing: Ireland's Celtic Medicine Traditions*, Gina McGarry (2005)

*Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*, Erynn Rowan Laurie (2007)

*Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint*, Brian Wright (2009)

*Brighid and Me: Experiences with the Goddess*, Hollee Swann, ed. (2010)

*Brigit: Sun of Womanhood*, ed. Patricia Monaghan and Michael McDermott (2013) (Mention only.)

## Nonfiction, Academic/Popular Academic:

By popular academic I mean books written in a scholarly style for a general audience. These I can only observe as a reader, not criticize as an expert.

*The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland*, Mary Condren (1989)

"Fire and the Arts" (etc) in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Kim McCone (1990)

*The Festival of Brigit*, Séamas Ó Catháin (1995)

*Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Miranda Green (1996)

"Imbolc: A New Interpretation", Phillip A. Bernhardt-House (pp 57-76) in *Cosmos 18* (2002)

*The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint*, Seán Ó Duinn (2005)

*Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*, Lisa M. Bitel (2009)

"Queering the Flame: Brigit, Flamekeeping, and Gender in Celtic Reconstructionist Pagan Communities", by Erynn Rowan Laurie in *The Well of Five Streams: Essays on Celtic Paganism* (Immanion Press, projected release 2015) 17 pp.



## The Reviews, At Last!

### A Grace On This Work

clear eye and thankful heart  
calm pen and loving speech  
bless this work Brigit  
make of it a gift  
self to self  
neighbour to neighbour  
friend to friend  
across each boundary  
of your fresh and speckled earth



## Introduction

I come at last to publish the first of my Brigit book reviews with a sense of gratitude and peace. There have been many obstacles along the path, yet I think that the work has benefited from, rather than been harmed by, these sometimes transformational delays. Today I am just returned from a week-long retreat for people living with cancer<sup>1</sup>, and I am deeply and joyfully aware of the blessings of this life. One of the greatest blessings for me has been the opportunity to know and draw close to Brigit and her stories and traditions, to find guidance in the wealth of meaning that arises from her, and to share my love of her with the many people who celebrate her in their many different ways. I have gained something from every one, even those I strongly disagreed with, even ones who are long drifted from my life.

I have certain standards I apply to works about Brigit which not everyone shares. I prefer those which rely on verifiable stories and traditions, and, where they branch off from these into new understandings and associations, are clear and up front about it. I'm not opposed to the evolution of her cult—this is a far different world from that which gave birth to her—but I am opposed to muddying the milk. As authors, teachers, or spiritual leaders I believe we owe it to others to be frank about what we simply believe about Brigit as opposed to what we know and can verify. If we offer no clue as to which is which, we rob others of the opportunity to find for themselves who Brigit is to them, the unique understanding that emerges out of her profound mix of old traditions and tales.

NeoPagans can be particularly guilty in this, but so can Christians. We want so much for her to be for everyone what she is for us, we do a little bending here and there—“surely if the facts were known they would prove that the saint was originally a priestess of the goddess Brigit, so I will just say that she was.” But there is no evidence at all for this, and personally I don't believe it. Or “surely she is a

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<sup>1</sup> See the Callanish Society of Vancouver, Canada for more information on these amazing retreats.  
<http://www.callanish.org/>



historical figure completely separate from Pagan goddesses and their goings on, and would never have, say, caused a foetus to disappear from a woman's womb. That would be abortion! That story can't be true." Well, whether it is true or not, it is a legitimate part of Brigidine lore, and we have to take an honest look at what that means.

Like the authors of the works being reviewed, I have my cherished beliefs, and my feathers get ruffled now and then. My endeavour has been to present each work as fairly as I can, whether I "approve" of it or not, to allow you to know whether this would be the right work for you or whether you might prefer to start with another one. I am not always entirely successful in smoothing my feathers. It is a delicate balance, though, between respecting and valuing—as I very much do—every author and her or his efforts to bring Brigit to the world, and blunting my perceptions of how this work fails its audience through, for instance, misleading or inadequate scholarship. And if my grumpiness shows through from time to time I do apologize and ask your forgiveness.

It struck me, as I read through these books, that they are all written by members of my Brigidine community. The authors are academics, NeoPagans, Christians; they are thinkers, artists, enthusiasts. They would not all get along, or approve of the interpretation or treatment of Brigit employed by another, but some common thing draws each of us to this ancient figure and touches us deeply. Whether our primary intention is to understand her role in the recent or distant past, to shape her modern visage (which is what we are doing, whether it is our intention or not), to draw meaning or comfort, or simply to remain *agape* in her presence, we are joined to each other through her and through our regard, even love, for her.

This, I think, would please the Brigit I have come to know. In honour of her I encourage us to recall always that essential elements of this complex goddess and saint are healing, reconciliation, creation, and hospitality. May we find ways to induce those elements in our perceptions of and communications with each other.

Besides filling many of the holes in my understanding of Brigit and Brigidines, there have been surprises. I've liked books I'd expected not to, and been disappointed by some I thought I'd enjoy. This latter has been difficult to come to terms with, which is one reason I moved slowly on the project.

I've delayed posting anything until all the works were read and reviews written. They can be read individually, but if you have the time and muscle for it, I suggest reading them collectively. Themes touched on lightly in one may be developed in another, and the group presents a vast picture of Brigit, past and present, all valuable in its own way.

The astute observer will notice that the review list has changed as new material has come to my attention and certain other works have been removed for various reasons. I have kept the names of a couple of items on the list that I have yet to review; I hope to get and review them later.

To quote **Lisa Bitel**, "To journey through the scholarly literature on the saint-goddess is as wild a pilgrimage as surfing the web for Brigit-sites."<sup>2</sup> The stories of Brigit, goddess and saint, are there to be discovered, and able students like **Lisa Bitel**, **Kim McCone**, and **Erynn Laurie**, among others, have

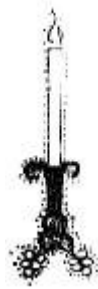
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<sup>2</sup> "St. Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess", Lisa Bitel. Presented at Fordham University, February, 2001

vast offerings of background material and interpretation that are of benefit to us as we attempt to gain a sense of who she has been over time, and in shaping who she can be to us today. Poets like **Ann Egan**, Christian and NeoPagan writers such as **Rita Minehan**, **Alexei Kondratiev**, and **Amber K** can begin to evoke a vision of her and nurture our relationship to her as the seeds of our understanding grow.

The Brigidine movement is growing, and it is diverse. May we honour the spirit and the essence of Brigit, goddess and saint, with diligence and in good faith, in our writings, our prayer, and our ritual.

Happy reading, and Brigit's blessings on you.



## Brigit Book Reviews (Picture books):

*St. Brigid's Cloak*, Reg Keating. (1997)

*Brigid's Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story*, Bryce Milligan. (2002)

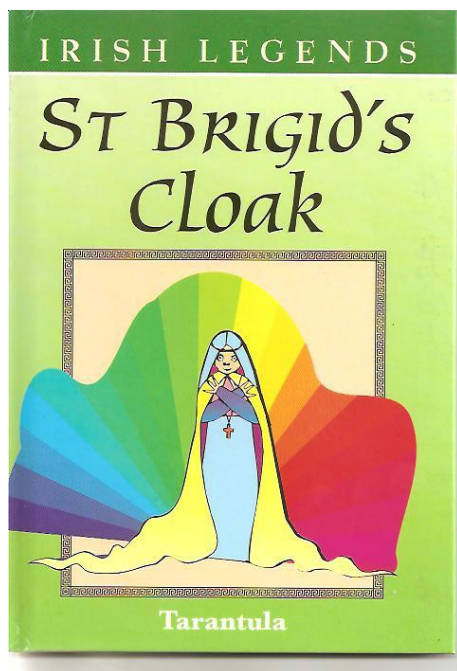
*The Life of Saint Brigid, Abbess of Kildare*, Jane Meyer. (2009)

First off: we have here three good, saint-oriented Brigidine picture books. Now we need some goddess-oriented ones.

It isn't surprising we have three saintly versions and none focussed on the goddess aspects of Brigit. Among other things, there is an abundance of saintly stories and the goddess lore for Brigit is thin on the ground. Nevertheless, without it we have only half the story. I would like to see a picture book that addresses the triple Brigit, maybe even one that tackles both sides, Pagan and Christian, in a positive and simple way. There's your gauntlet, writerly and painterly folk. (And when you do it, please send me a copy to review!)

The present books are quite different from each other in terms of both artwork and writing, but they do have a number of things in common. Interestingly, from among the many, many stories related to Brigit, stories of her cloak, in one form or another, figure in all three books. When you consider the pithiness necessary in a picture book, the brevity of the text which allows only a few aspects to be explored, it is perhaps surprising that the cloak figures in all three, though admittedly the cloak stories are among the most well known in her *vitae*. The cloak is a main focus in the first two, and more or less a footnote in the latest, by **Jane Meyer**.

### ***St. Brigid's Cloak*, Reg Keating. Illustrated by Heather McK. Tarantula Books, Dublin, Ireland (1997)**



The first, *St. Brigid's Cloak* by Reg Keating, is the smallest, shortest, and least elaborate in every way. Heather McK's illustrations have a humorous, energetic style with simple, bold lines and Adobe Illustrator-type colour-pattern infills. The style is well-suited to Keating's direct, simple, playful text and the underlying humour of the story.

The focus is narrow—after quickly giving us an idea of Brigit's early life and desire to serve God, Keating tells a medieval tale of Brigit's miraculous cloak. In this story, Brigit tricks a stingy king into giving her ample valuable land to build her monastery on by asking for merely as much as her cloak would cover, only to have the cloak grow enormously once on the ground.

This book is not written to entice children to holiness. It simply tells a fine and funny traditional story about someone who happens to be a saint and rather holy herself. It certainly doesn't try to persuade *against* living a

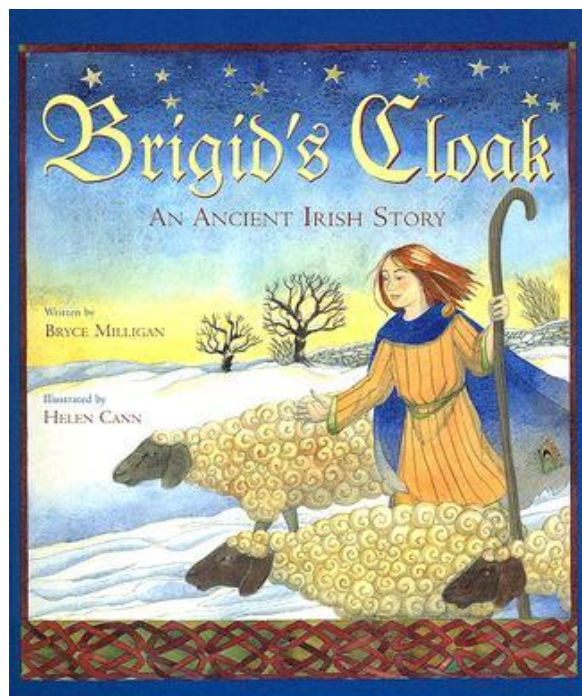
holy or moral life, and she is indeed presented as someone who works hard to do good, but that's not the point. If anything, Brigit's independence and cleverness are the important thing here.

By contrast, the two later books are more self-consciously Christian, and much more developed.

***Brigid's Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story*, Bryce Milligan. Illustrated by Helen Cann. Eerdmans Books For Young Readers, USA and UK (2002)**

*Brigid's Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story*, is a beautifully illustrated, textured book aimed at somewhat older children than Keating's audience. In it we go beyond the bare facts of Brigit's life to hear the wild winds of fifteen centuries ago, to huddle in a cold hut outside her father's hill fort, to hear the stars singing and see a Druid in the forest, come to prophesy about Brigit's life.

Brigit's magically noted birth is followed in time by her vision (as in Norah Kelly's play based on the Scottish folk tale<sup>3</sup>) of being in Palestine. There she plays the role of the daughter of the innkeeper who shelters Joseph and Mary, and helps Mary with Jesus's birth. The story of her cloak, in this case given by the Druid, is not the one where she tricks the King of Leinster into giving her lands, but the one where she lends her now shabby cloak to Mary, who is shivering as she lies in labour, and who returns it beautifully renewed. The story is centered on Christ's birth, though inspired by Brigit's devotion and generosity.



Milligan's writing is subtle and often beautiful, and his tale touches on many evocative details that inspire a sense of wonder. There is an attempt at verisimilitude in the drawings of ancient Irish and Palestinian dwellings and dress, and the book closes with a page devoted to historical information about Brigit and her cloak. Helen Cann's paintings are delicious, with subtle shades of colour that match the subtlety of the writing, and with energy, balance, and magic.

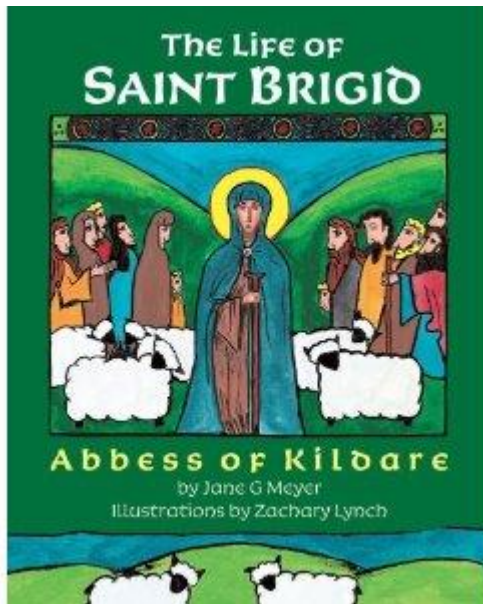
***The Life of Saint Brigid, Abbess of Kildare*, Jane Meyer. Illustrated by Zachary Lynch. Conciliar Press, Ben Lomond, California, USA (2009)**

*The Life of Saint Brigid, Abbess of Kildare*, is perhaps the most joyfully religious of the three books. Published by Conciliar Press Ministries and written and illustrated by members of the Orthodox Church, it is intended to share the story of Brigit's generosity and devotion to others and to God, and to

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<sup>3</sup> A version of this folk tale is found in the the *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of stories, prayers, etc collected by Alexander Carmichael in the Scottish Highlands between 1855 and 1910.

inspire similar love and compassion in the children who read it.

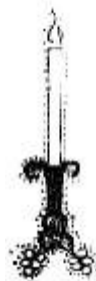


Meyer ranges farther in her treatment of Brigit than the previous two authors, telling more about her young life, including her penchant for miracles associated with milk and butter and including a prayer she uttered to God to bless her pantry, which led to such abundance. She then follows Brigit through her life, touching on a few brief, important moments, such as her father's attempt to sell her to the King who would one day inadvertently supply the land for her first monastery, her refusal to marry (somewhat dodging, though alluding to, the self-mutilation that convinced her family to let her off the matrimonial hook), her peripatetic ways and the resulting monasteries she founded across Ireland. She ends the book with an "Irish Rune of Hospitality", a brief prayer that we may follow Brigit's example, and the "Kontakion of Saint Brigid": a prayer about and to Saint Brigit.

Zachary Lynch's rough and ready iconographic illustrations are perfectly suited to the text. A playfully reimagined cow from a medieval Irish manuscript, Celtic knotwork gone mad with colour, Brigit with a hint of Theotokas in her face—there is much to delight the mind and eye in these pages.

My only complaint about this last book is the Celtic typeface used for the main text. If, as an adult who has been reading for many years, I have occasional difficulty making out a letter and therefore a word, I can only suppose that a young reader might find such a typeface one more obstacle on the rocky road to reading. But since with picture books of this complexity you generally have an adult reading to a child, perhaps it isn't that much of a problem.

OK now, Pagani. Get out your pens and paints and come up with some equally impressive Pagan counterparts to these three books. Ready, set—go!





## Brigit Book Reviews (Fiction):

*The Tomb of Reeds*, Sarah Baylis, (1987) (novel)

*Brigit of Kildare*, Ann Egan, (2001) (novel/poetry)

*Brigid of Kildare*, Cindy Thomson, (2006) (novel)

“The Brídeog” by Casey June Wolf. *Escape Clause: A Speculative Fiction Anthology*, edited by Clelie Rich (2009)

*Brigid of Kildare*, Heather Terrell (2010) (novel)

(People! You’ve got to start getting more imaginative in the Brigit book titles! It’s getting a bit hard to tell them apart.)

### Mention only:

*Confessions of a Pagan Nun*, Kate Horsley, (2001) (novel)

*Sister Fidelma* series (novels), Peter Tremayne/Peter Beresford Ellis (1994 onward)

Historical novels which are based on real people must be constrained by known facts. The fiction comes in where facts are unknown. An author’s note at the end of the book will point the interested reader to which elements are fact and which are fiction, thus satisfying both the love of imagination and the love of clear scholarship. In the case of St Brigit, much of the “fact” is hagiography, tales written long after the woman’s death, but they nevertheless form a body of understanding that can’t be tossed aside without cause.

At times authors feel free to dispense with, or are unaware of, important facts about the person or her times, and paint very misleading pictures as a result. Possibly this is unimportant to you if you’re looking for entertainment only and don’t also want to learn about the subject of the book. In our case, we do want to increase our understanding of Brigit, as goddess or saint or both; only one of the three novels included here is worth turning to for that purpose—*Brigit of Kildare* by Ann Egan.

Writing good historical fiction is a lot of work. If you don’t *want* to spend energy getting the details right, or if the details don’t suit your plot, there are lots of alternatives. Don’t present your story as historical fiction. Write fantasy, or alternate history; invent a similar situation and character and do whatever you like.

Acknowledgements provide clues as to what sort of novel you have in your hand. **Egan** thanks, among others, Kildare librarians and the Regional Archivist. **Thompson** thanks, among others, God and her prayer partners. This does not mean that the one is not prayerful, and the other did no research, but it does hint at how much weight is given to each in the shaping of the book. (**Terrell**, for the record, thanks her publisher and friends—among others.)

Although **Egan** and **Thompson** draw from the same source materials, and approach Saint Brigit as Christians, their interpretations are worlds apart. **Egan’s** Brocassa and her daughter Brigit live in a world where Paganism is the norm; they understand and are themselves a part of that world. There is no disdain or distance between themselves and those who haven’t adopted Christian beliefs – beliefs which were in their day rare and unimportant in Irish society. Pagans are their relatives and their friends. There is an assumption that it is a good thing that Brigit herself and people around her become

Christians, but it isn't made at the expense of those who do not.

**Thompson** reveals a very different attitude. Pagans, especially druids, are nearly all deluded or dangerous. To **Egan** Brigit's father is a good guy who cares about his land and his family, including Brigit and her mother, his slave Brocassa, whom he is in love with. His wife is greedy, but she is smart. For **Thompson** he is despicable, fat, and greedy. (Another stereotype I would love to see the back of: if you are greedy you are fat, and vice versa.) His wife is an evil druid. The Christian characters display a smug, knowing arrogance toward the Pagans which becomes more clear as the novel progresses.

**Egan** is herself an Irishwoman, living in the area where Brigit lived. Her dialogue is natural and readable, with no particular accent attempted. **Thompson**, who is American, uses a clunky "Irish" accent in the dialogue. This is in part a reflection of their writing skills. These are first novels for both of them, but **Egan** is an accomplished poet. She has won many literary awards, and **Thompson** is very much a beginning writer. There is talent here, but her skill is as yet unpolished.

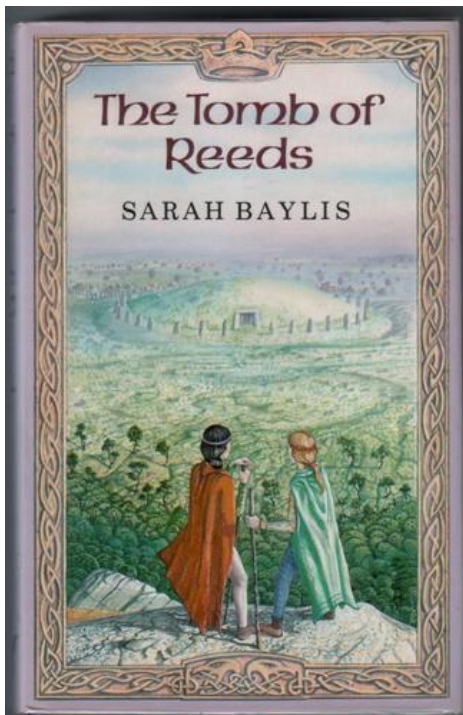
The single short story looks at a traditional visitation on St. Brigit's Eve by **Wolf**, a Canadian writer of speculative fiction.

**Terrell's** novel aims to be a rousing mystery story of the DaVinci Code ilk, with no particular religious sentiment beyond a dash of feminist revisionism. There is more polish in her writing than in **Thompson's**, but it never comes alive; between that and the mishandling of historical materials, this book, which I was so looking forward to, is very disappointing.

(I found **Baylis's** book after publishing this post, so rather than rewrite the introduction I will leave her out of it and simply include the review of her book here.)

**The Tomb of Reeds, Sarah Baylis. Julia MacRae Books, London. 1987. Hardcover, 174 pp (YA) (Also available in paperback from Swallow Books, 1988.)**

I was rummaging around in [Lawrence Books](#) the other day (my favourite "Old and Used" bookstore) and discovered to my complete surprise a young adult novel very much to do with Brigit. I had never heard of it, and I wonder how many other books there are out there about her that I haven't come across. Please, if you know of any not on these lists, let me know. I'll search a copy out if possible, and if not, will simply add it to the list.



As I noodled around the front and back of the novel, in order to learn who wrote it and when and who saw fit to publish it, I was sorry to read that the author had died in an accident shortly before the publication of the book.

[The Tomb of Reeds](#) was Sarah Baylis's third novel, though I thought while reading it that it had been her first.

Don't get me wrong. I am thrilled to have found this book



and it has a lot to offer. It is the only one of the four novels reviewed here that focusses on the goddess Brigit, rather than the saint. It immerses the reader into a small iron age community with all its labours and celebrations, stratifications and stresses. It tantalizes with hints of times more ancient still. Unlike the other Brigit novels, it suggests early on that there is magic afoot, and that we shall soon be caught up in it. The detail is rich and the prose is often smooth and beautiful, a pleasure to read. There is an energy to the work that is stimulating; unlike the others, which focus, one more successfully than the rest, on being thought-provoking and inspiring, *The Tomb of Reeds* endeavours also to be an adventure. To be *exciting*.

Both goddess and saint are in the past tense in this novel, though the saint is much closer in time than the great goddess. Her Leinster convent is small, with wooden sanctuary and stone beehive huts.

Bridey is a teenage girl whose family works with willow, making baskets, mending chairs, and providing for the many needs of the community with their skill. We follow her at the book's opening as she gathers and works with the willow, enjoying her round wicker boat and the privacy of working on the lakeside alone. I was quite drawn in by the opening chapters of the novel.

In short order Bridey has gained an ancient, rusted crown which seems connected to her growing discontent and a preoccupation with war horses and warriors. Soon she meets a young poet-in-training—the unfortunately named Canola. (I guess in London in the 1980s they were still calling the crop rapeseed, but here in Canada we began in 1978 to call it *canola*—from “Canadian oil, low acid”. It took some adjusting to call this young woman after a low acid oil.)

Canola looks a *lot* like Bridey, but with blonde hair to Bridey's dark locks; she enjoys class privilege and able speech to Bridey's poverty and uneducated stutter. Somehow the girls are linked with each other, and Bridey is linked to the goddess who is no more. The history stops and imagination takes over when Brigit is described as a goddess of two sides, the warrior and the poet, and the tension gathers around her lost crown and the subsequent warfare that spread over Ireland as a result. Though not portrayed as evil, Brigit is very tough and warlike.

The Brigit of tradition, of course, had three equally important sides<sup>4</sup>, and no story of her crown or hegemony over Ireland or the Tuatha De Danaan survives that I have heard. Where there is perhaps a connection to warfare through the obscure *Brig Ambue*<sup>5</sup>, and through Brigit's patronage of smiths (the makers not only of buckles and cauldrons, but of swords and shields) it is a leap to make her a warrior goddess and another leap to being the greatest deity over all Ireland. Leaps, but not absolutely insupportable. So let's enjoy the *what if*.

And there is much to enjoy here. Baylis' familiarity with and love of the countryside, lore, and Celtic traditions, bring her setting alive. The plot worked fine for me, and I enjoyed her protagonists and their loved ones.

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, was three sister goddesses, daughters of The Daghdha.

<sup>5</sup> For brief mentions of her see John Carey's *King of Mysteries*, Kim McCone's *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Irish Literature*, and Nerys Patterson's *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*. Celtic Reconstructionist Erynn Laurie says “Brig Ambue is “Brighid of the Cowless Warriors” -- a Goddess who integrates outsiders back into the tribe.” (<http://searchingforimbis.blogspot.ca/2008/01/imbolc.html>)

The difficulty that arises is her uncertainty in handling the subtler motivations and emotions that drive the characters. This is where I began to think it was her first novel, and to wish she had had a strong editor or writing group to help her find her feet in this important authorial duty. It of course substantially weakens the book as a whole.

Related to her clumsiness in writing the subtler emotions and motivations of her main characters is a tendency to make the antagonists one dimensional. Baylis is against war, which is a fine perspective to be coming from, but her analysis of war and those who make it is superficial and therefore further weakens the book. Although she is Pagan-positive—showing no favoritism between Christians and Pagans—her treatment of the Druids is as unsympathetic as her treatment of the King and warriors. In other words, her literary Achilles' heel is not her feelings about religion, but about class and outlook.

None of this would have bothered me forty years ago, though, if I had had the opportunity to read this book. Even today I'm not daunted. I can appreciate a book for what it is, despite its flaws, if there is enough good to hold me, and there is enough here, from a subject that is dear to my heart, to a time that intrigues me, to the sensibilities of the author, to the pleasing prose, to the promise of magic and adventure.

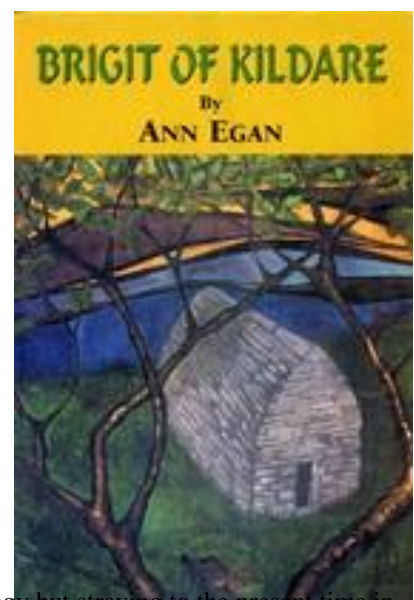
Enough, indeed, that I abandoned a very polished but somewhat lifeless collection by a much lauded writer<sup>6</sup> in favour of this rough-hewn but heartfelt adventure story, which managed to hold my interest till the end.

Thanks to you, Sarah Baylis, for your heartfelt Brigidine offering.

### **Brigit of Kildare, Ann Egan, (2001) Kildare County Council Library and Arts Service, Eire**

This novel was commissioned by the Kildare County Council Library and Arts Centre, Kildare, Ireland. Its author is intimately connected with the arts community in Kildare and with the annual festival of Saint Brigit, *Féile Bhríde*, presided over by the sisters of Solas Bhríde. Recipient of a number of awards for poetry, Ann Egan brings her poetic touch to her first novel, *Brigit of Kildare*. She has deeply observed the elements that make up her subject and her surroundings. Her eye for the details of country life, her reverence for her Celtic Pagan ancestors and their medieval Christian counterparts, and her own spiritual sensibility come through on every page.

In this gentle, detailed rendition of Brigit's life, we are offered major characters, both Pagan and Christian, whose motivations and views are understandable and respected by the author. Minor



<sup>6</sup> *Dream Angus*, by Alexander McCall Smith—based in large part on Irish mythology but straying to the present time in half of the stories.

characters suffer from a two-dimensionality that leaves them “good” or “bad” in contrast with the care Egan has taken with the others. The book doesn’t completely satisfy as a novel, due to this occasional two-dimensionality and some lack of tension in the latter part of the book as an accounting of Brigit’s achievements take the place of her earlier and more personal struggles. But in all it is a beautiful, informative, and enjoyable read.

Egan’s intent is to evoke Brigit and her times, to tell the saint’s and Ireland’s story as faithfully and beautifully as she is able. The richest moments in the book are those which show the relationships between Brigit, her mother, father, and her father’s wife, as well as characters like the druid Maithín and his sister Mongfind. Many scenes, such as of Brigit absorbed in contemplation of nature, are transcendent and delightful. A few, such as when the fire maidens decide to join her as Christian nuns, are lightweight and unconvincing.

Despite her broad knowledge of the material and spiritual culture of her forebears, in the absence of certain details Egan, like the rest of us, has to rely on her best guess. She envisions fire maidens tending a “holy fire” for the druid rather than organizing their own devotion around the goddess Brigit. These maidens become nuns when their beloved druid dies. Why Egan felt the need to put a man in charge is unclear, but I like that she has a different take on it, reminding us that there is no evidence regarding the origin of the perpetual fire, and that it could have begun in many different ways. (I discuss this at greater length in my review of Kondratiev’s chapter on Imbolc in the Nonfiction, Popular (NeoPagan) category. Watch for it!)

On the whole this book is one of wonder and of excellent writing. Brigit remains throughout a human being; the occasional miracle is mentioned without much emphasis. There is much drawn from history and tradition here, and much invented by Egan to create a story of a young woman with a remarkable life.

Absent are the more distressing miracles, such as her causing her brother’s eyes to burst in his head to stop him from marrying her off. Absent is an exploration of her connection to the goddess who preceded her—apart from a brief tantalizing reference early in the book. What would this young woman, drawn to the Christian life but immersed in a Pagan community, have thought of her namesake? Would she have worshipped her, before coming to Christianity? Would she have rejected her or absorbed her worship into her new religion? Indeed, how fully Christian would she have been when her entire worldview would have been shaped by the Celtic Paganism she was born into? These questions wait to be addressed by another author. (Certain parallel questions are addressed in the person of Gwynneve, a druid cum Brigidine nun in Kate Horsley’s book *Confessions of a Pagan Nun*, mentioned at the end of this posting.)

Egan has a surprisingly sympathetic feel for the Pagans in the story and the Pagan world view, but doesn’t explain why Brigit would leave her traditional religion for a new one, and why it is seen as good when others do. This would have been interesting to address.

Though *Brigit of Kildare* by Ann Egan is not the polished offering of a professional novelist, it is the work of a fine poet—an often beautiful, often absorbing, always interesting work of imagination and love.

## **Brigid of Kildare, Cindy Thomson, (2006) Monarch Book**

Another first novel, this one by American ex-kindergarten teacher and amateur historian Cindy Thompson.

I don't like to write negative reviews. I'm aware of the effort and passion that go into writing. Looking at the author's website and reading the intent behind the story in *Brigid of Kildare*, I see an amiable woman with potential as a writer. She seems kind, well intentioned, enthusiastic, and in love with her subject. I wish her well in her prayer life and her writing, and I sincerely apologize to Ms. Thompson if my comments offend.



The intent of this book is to proselytize and to tell an adventure story that will support the reader's belief in the superiority of the Christian religion. Like Ann Egan's *Brigit of Kildare*, Thompson's *Brigid of Kildare* is directed at a Christian audience, but with a very different sensibility.

To continue from my opening remarks in the introduction to this post: from a technical point of view, the book suffers from many beginner mistakes, such as characters with simplistic drives and responses, and phrases like "the chicken-hearted man bobbed his head" (pg 111) or "We must save Brigid from her clutches" (pg 80) (which weren't meant to be funny) .

Point of view is unconvincing. Thompson's Brigid reads like someone transported into a culture she little understands, fears, and despises. The arrogance and anti-Pagan prejudice of Brigid and her mother ring false for people whose world is nearly entirely Pagan.

She would have shared much of the world view of her contemporaries, would see druids and other Pagans simply as people. Indeed, druids play a positive role in a number of places in her medieval Lives. Thompson's Brigid has never even *seen* a druid, unlikely at best, especially as we are told in her *vitae*<sup>7</sup> that she was raised by a druid after leaving her father's house. Even Brigid's uncomprehending, sulky, and resentful attitude toward slavery evokes a person who is unused to the practice and the social order of the time. This isn't to suggest a slave in ancient Ireland would have been delighted with her lot, but her response to it would be subtler and more convincing than what is shown here.

Other technical blunders: Thompson's grasp of the history and setting of Ireland is shaky. She has masses of starving poor where they did not exist, purple-robed, sceptre-bearing kings in castles rather than ordinary looking chieftains in fairly ordinary wattle and daub huts, Christians hiding in terror for their lives at a time when they were too few to be much noticed and lived in apparent harmony with their more traditionally minded fellows. She has druids evoking evil spirits—something dreamed up in a Christian's nightmare rather than a reflection of Celtic beliefs—and kings powerless to stop them. Odd, when the druids were a class of person closely attached to and supportive of the chieftains of old

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<sup>7</sup> *Vitae* are Lives: stories of saints written by clerics of Medieval times, often long after the death of the saint, and on which much of our understanding of them is now based.



Irish society. In a plot line that reads more like a cartoon than historical fiction, the leader of all the druids vies for ultimate power but needs others to do his evil bidding.

The book has strengths, of course. There is warmth, often a pleasant feel, some good detail, and a few moments of inspired writing. Her writing is clear and the story moves along.

It isn't just that this book isn't to my tastes, or offends me because of its intolerance, where the morally superior teach the ignorant (or evil) Pagans a thing or two about God and life. It is poorly written and extremely misleading in its depiction of history and the conclusions we can draw from it. Reading this, I learn that druids were basically evil and murdered Christians; it's a lucky thing we got rid of them. Not only a distortion of the facts, but an appeal, however unintentional, to bigotry and hate.

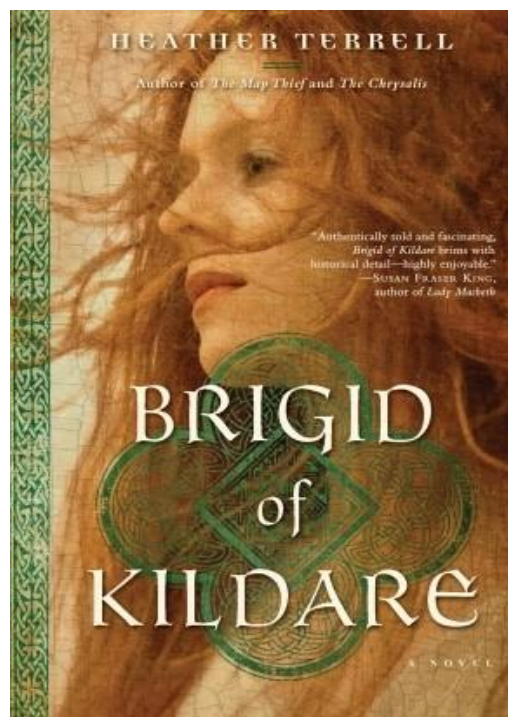
### **“The Brídeog” by Casey June Wolf. *Escape Clause: A Speculative Fiction Anthology*, edited by Clelie Rich (2009)**

This story is found in a collection of fiction that has nothing to do with Brigit, some of it horror, some fantasy, and so on. “The Brídeog” itself could be described as magical realism, and describes a situation where a traditional-minded mother is anxious to please the saint when she is brought around in effigy, where her daughter thinks the whole thing is a daft idea. The story can be read on the blog *Brigit's Sparkling Flame*: <http://brigitssparklingflame.blogspot.com/p/thebrideog-theend-of-february-rolling.html>

### ***Brigid of Kildare*, Heather Terrell, (2010) Ballantine Books**

I awaited the publication of Heather Terrell's *Brigid of Kildare* with hopeful anticipation. The cover art suggested something of the quality of Kate Horsley's *Confessions of a Pagan Nun*. Unfortunately, it was a disappointment. Despite obvious good intentions of its author (and I respect both them and her) it is neither real historical fiction nor honest fantasy.

The intent of Terrell's book is to tell a rousing mystery, to critique the church and its attitude toward women and power, and to hint at possible greater roles for women in church history than have come down to us through patriarchal hands<sup>8</sup>. Marring this effort is the novel's spurious claim to historical validity. While speculating on theological and hagiographical matters in the context of mystery—is this newly revealed group of manuscripts and religious items genuine, and do they challenge our understanding of the Bible and the role of women like Mary Magdalene and Saint Brigid in religious



<sup>8</sup> For a book that actually shows this in vivid and scholarly style, read Lisa Bitel's *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigid of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*

history? —Terrell places fast and loose with both historical fact and hagiography. While flagging the speculative element in the area of the manuscripts, she treats the foundation on which they rest as fact, even where she has diverged wildly from facts she had to have known.

Her understanding of the times and culture she is writing about is spotty, and her conclusions and representations of figures within that culture are therefore misleading. In *Brigid of Kildare* Terrell gives enough accurate information to disguise the abundant misinformation, thus creating the antithesis of a good historical novel. Instead of learning while being entertained, we are led into utter confusion. The unwary reader is left believing she is learning something real about a time gone by. If you enjoy this sort of story, by all means read it, but don't take Terrell's word for anything about Ireland. Go elsewhere for your facts.

Terrell assumes, as many authors do, a time of feminist freedom for women in pre-Christian Ireland. This is a modern fiction, based on our awareness that medieval Irish women did at times fill roles that in other societies were strictly in the domain of men. But women's slightly better role in Celtic society, in certain classes and at certain times, does not mean that women were equal to or, as some believe, greater in status and power than men. Lisa Bitel, in her *Landscape with Two Saints*, discusses Saint Brigid's independence and power as starkly in contrast to those of the women of her time.

“Gender had been built into the Irish landscape long before Christians arrived. Land belonged to men, but much of the landscape belonged to women—at least, to female entities ... Aspiring monarchs mated with these divinities to prove their virile right to rule historical territories.”

(pg 132)

In Terrell's story, Saint Brigid and her stories are irrelevant and can be altered at their core. No longer a slave as in her *vitae*, Brigid is a sword-wielding princess who vies for her father's favour. Broicsech, her mother, who is also a slave in the *vitae*, is portrayed as an arrogant, cruel, and glamorous queen. Terrell refers in the book to Cogitosus' *Life* of Saint Brigid, but changes its contents for the story. Brigid's life is an envelope emptied of its contents and refilled with Terrell's ideas about Mary Magdelene and church politics. Nothing wrong with those as subject matter, but they are uneasy bedfellows with Brigid's story, which I suppose is why it has been completely rewritten for this book. Unfortunate for readers who are fond of Brigid and want to see her in action.

It would have been a far stronger novel if she had left Brigid out of it entirely and created a new, fictional saint to suit her needs. I'm baffled. Why use the names but completely change the characters? I get that she wants to use Brigid in order to work in the lost Book of Kildare, and link it and Brigid to Mary Magdelene, but why change the details of Brigid's life? Why not have a lost Book of a made-up saint, and be consistent and fair? The overwhelming amount of misleading and just plain wrong detail serves no purpose that I can see in furthering the story.

The publishers, I suspect, hoped the allure of the premise, so popular in the *DaVinci Code*, would result in the sale of some books. I say this because the novel itself, for all its good intentions, is inexpertly written. A few insertions of unwieldy modern language in the ancient scenes stand out

among generally capable prose. In outline and plotting, there is more technical skill than in Thompson's *Brigid of Kildare*, but the story never comes to life. Characters are stilted and predictable, never really motivated from within—Brigid, for instance, supposedly acts out of a connection to God and prayer. But there is no sense of either in the portrayal of her. She remains superficial and contrived throughout.

The writing lacks vigour, and there is a sense of being herded toward inevitable conclusions dictated by the author's personal beliefs rather than a feeling of discovery and immersion in the times and story, and the lives of the characters. Although the book is about Brigid, the only character who begins to be interesting is the Roman cleric who is sent to spy on her. It's easier for me to suspend disbelief with him, too, as I know nothing about Rome, so if it is inaccurately rendered, I'm oblivious. I dearly wish I could trust Terrell's facts because the idea of a papal spy in Kildare is intriguing, but I suspect it is far too early in church history for such a thing. Anyone out there who can cite chapter and verse on this?

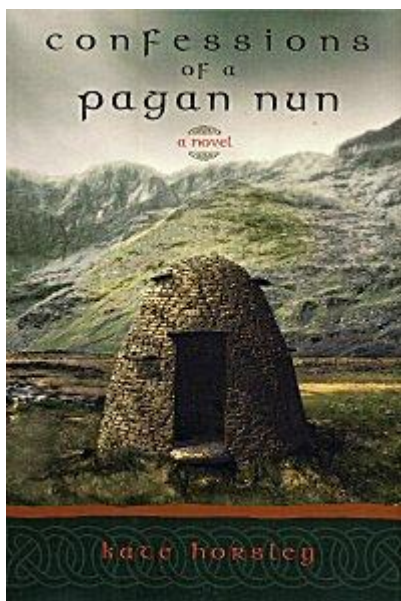
It does have its moments. Terrell's description of the unwrapping of the ancient manuscript is contagious in its excitement. The description of the scriptorium had me wishing for a time machine. (Again.) And I would have loved to walk the curragh by Brigid's side.

The long and the short of it, though, is that despite potentially interesting plot ideas and careful outlining, the book is flat and dull. The characters, language, and story never wake up and come to life.

I wanted to like this book, and I do like what I sense of the author through her book. It is simply too riddled with problems for me to recommend either as teaching material or as entertainment.

### **Brief Mentions:**

#### ***Confessions of a Pagan Nun*, Kate Horsley, (2001) Shambala, Boston and London**



I first read this novel over a decade ago, and was blown away. I haven't reread it recently and as my tastes and knowledge base have evolved, my critique of it might be different now. Even on first reading I doubted the historical accuracy of some of the parameters she set for the novel, such as the presumed persecution of druids in Ireland. Nevertheless it is a well-written and compelling story, bleak in some ways but beautifully drawn.

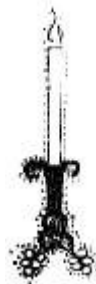
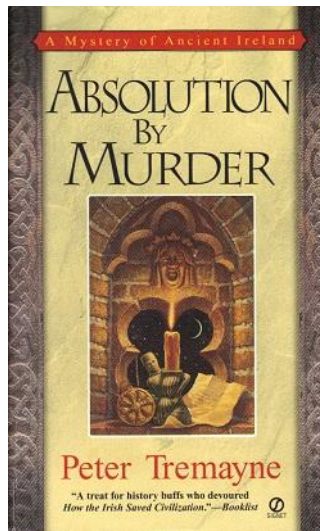
Horsley gets around the difficulties of writing about a historical personage by inventing a woman druid who becomes a nun in Saint Brigit's monastery some years after the saint's death. There is a startling feeling of authenticity in this novel, whether all its details are accurate or not. I do question whether the pressures of the time were as she portrayed them. My understanding is that the Celtic church was by far more tolerant than the Roman and more attuned to the surrounding culture, that there was no great conflict between druids



and Christians, and I suspect that the more oppressive and horrible elements of the story she tells—such as the persecution of druids—are more appropriate to the treatment of so-called witches in later times. However since I am only *mentioning* and not really *reviewing* this book (because it is only peripherally related to Brigit) I am not going to search out the details. Please comment if you know them; citations are great if you have any.

***Absolution by Murder*, Peter Tremayne/Peter Beresford Ellis (1994) Headline Book Publishing, London *Sister Fidelma* mysteries; first in series.**

Sister Fidelma is a Brigidine nun, living after the death of the saint herself, and an expert in Irish law. Her Saxon monk sidekick is no slouch in the laws of his own land, and they entertain themselves and more bookish reader with debates over fine points of law while they go about solving murders in 7<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. I read a couple years ago and liked but was not blown away by them. For the historical-mystery buff who is also a fan of Brigit, they do have an obvious appeal. As of 2011 there are 22 books in the series.



## Brigit Book Reviews (Plays and Poetry):

*The Story Brought by Brigit* by Lady Gregory (1924) (play)

*St Brigit of the Mantle*, Norah Kelly (1924) (play)

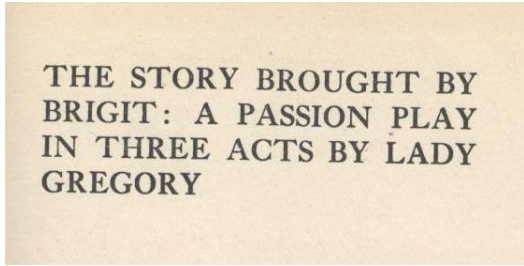
*Brigit of Kildare*, Ann Egan, (2001) (novel/poetry) (SEE ALSO the review in the NOVELS posting)

*Brighid's Runes*, ed. (2008) (poetry)

### Introduction:

I'll be brief here as the reviews are not long, themselves. Each of the four books brings something of interest and value. Two are Christian, tinged with the rosy blush of the Celtic Twilight, one is Christian, but embraces to some degree the saint's pagan roots, and bases the story on diligent research, and the last is NeoPagan poetry that has little to do with Brigit herself.

### *The Story Brought By Brigit*, Lady Gregory (1924) G. P. Putnam's Sons (play)



THE STORY BROUGHT BY  
BRIGIT: A PASSION PLAY  
IN THREE ACTS BY LADY  
GREGORY

T. R. Henn, in his introduction to Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, wrote that "Lady Gregory herself could achieve a comedy as refined as her gay and gracious nature, and a tragedy, pathetic or patriotic, fitted to her vision and gifts" (pg 37). This is evident in her Passion Play, *The Story Brought By Brigit*. The story is tightly scripted and effective, with poems sparsely interspersed in the dialogue. The characters speak in a homey Irish manner, which at first is

surprising but which becomes comfortable and pleasant, to my ear, anyway. When a minor character speaks of oppression and rebellion we can easily read *English* where he says *Roman*. But if we are hoping to get more than a glimpse of the great lady herself (Brigit, not Lady Gregory) we are to be disappointed.

The play's conceit is that if Brigit could be present at Christ's birth (as in Irish and Scottish folk tales), why not at his death? St Brigit arrives in Jerusalem shortly before Passover in order to see Christ for herself, but she is very seldom on stage and has few, brief lines and no role in the action. Where she does surface is in the notes at the end of the play, where the author discusses Brigit's connection to Mary and Jesus in Irish and Scottish folklore, pointing out that whereas in Scotland Brigit is thought to have gone to Palestine to Jesus's birth, in Irish tales Mary and her son come to Brigit. Although the play itself has nothing to say about Brigit, the notes do share some lovely images.

"Our tradition, and that of Gaelic Scotland, speak (sic) of St. Brigit as 'the foster-mother of Christ', and I have been told by poor women of Slieve Echtge that she succoured both the Blessed Mother and Child when they were brought here by a Heavenly Messenger for safety in Herod's time, and that she 'kept an account of every drop of blood He lost through His lifetime.'"

pg vi

“The two names are constantly put together, ‘calm, generous Brigit,’ ‘mild, loving Mary.’ And in the dedication, the binding, of the young hunter ‘not to kill a bird sitting, or a beast lying down,’ he was bade remember ‘the fairy swan of Brigit of the flocks; the fairy duck of Mary of Peace.’

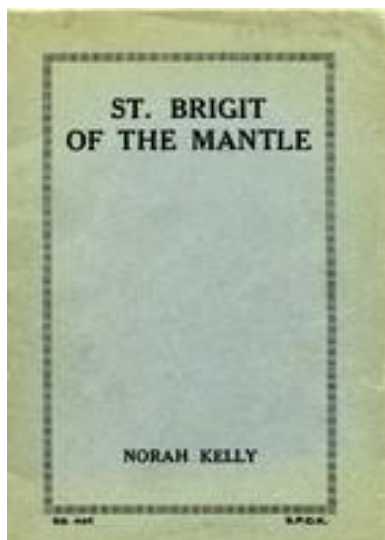
pg 92

For a fine rendering of the hymn Lady Gregory includes in the book, follow this link:

[Iarla Ó Lionáird - Caoineadh na dTrí Mhuire](#)

Those interested in a play that actually concerns Saint Brigit, Norah Kelly’s *St Brigit of the Mantle*, also published in 1924, is the one for you.

***St Brigit of the Mantle, Norah Kelly (1924) Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London. (Religious Drama) 32 pp***



First produced in Gloucester Cathedral in 1923, this play is a lovely blend of Celtic Twilight Paganism and unpretentious Christian evangelism. Kelly acknowledges her debt to “‘Fiona MacLeod’ (William Sharp)” for her version of the legend of Brigit.

William Sharp was, with WB Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others, a Celtic Revivalist. This movement drew on traditional Celtic literature and art but did not reproduce them exactly, using them as the loam on which to seed a new self-image for Celtic people. As was Yeats, Sharp was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an occult group famous now for the membership of Aleister Crowley.

How Sharp’s occultism influenced his writing would make an interesting study, but regardless, with this acknowledgement we know that we can’t assume the story “MacLeod” has written, and Kelly bases her play on, is traditional. Had she used a story collected by some diligent folklorist, or an old Life of St Brigit, a vision she’d had at prayer one night, a tale handed down by her grandmother, we would watch out for different elements, trust the material in different ways.

The legend as given is a unique take on the life of St Brigit, bearing elements that likely stem from Scottish legend but which have been liberally embellished.

A herdsman named Dughall and his daughter Brigit, ordinary peasants, live on the Scottish island of Iona in the Hebrides in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Only the local Arch-Druid knows that Dughall was a prince of Ireland, exiled for having allegedly made pregnant a Princess Mora. Both she and he protest his innocence—the child, she says, is an immortal, a daughter of the Tuatha De Danann<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> In the statement that Brigit is a daughter of Pagan deities we find a nontraditional element undoubtedly introduced by either Sharp or Kelly.

A storm washes their boat ashore on Iona, killing all but the father and child. Brigit proclaims that one day she will hold “the King of the Elements Himself” in her arms. They are welcomed by the Arch-Druid of Iona who links this statement to a prophecy that “a child of the immortals” would one day “hold eternity in her arms”, neatly combining Pagan and Christian symbols and marking Brigit as an Otherworld being.

Brigit grows up in Iona. Inspired by the Druids’ offerings to a “Most High God”, she time travels “in search of a deathless love” through a gate of quicken trees (either the mountain ash or the service-tree, both in the genus *Aucuparia*), trees with Otherworld associations. She arrives in Palestine, in the role of the inn-keeper’s daughter<sup>10</sup> at the “Rest and Be Thankful”, in time to offer lodging to Mary and Joseph and attend the birth of Jesus. In keeping with the traditions of Celtic Otherworld adventures, she is gone for a year and a day.

The prose is delightfully “old fashioned” and well put together. In a wonderful aside, Brigit worries about the cattle of Palestine, caught in drought, and says “scarce a drop of milk will they give, and that only after the milking lassies have sung tune after tune to them...” I don’t know about the milking lassies of ancient Palestine, but this is exactly how the Irish dairymaids approached such a problem.

It is intriguing that the heavy Pagan symbolism, given in a positive light, is accepted and absorbed into the Christian story, rather than being rejected outright as at other times and places. But be not confused, this is purely Christian in its intent.

The story of Jesus’s birth is of course is a familiar one to those raised in Christian tradition, but the infusion of Brigit—disobedient, sincere, and generous to a fault—and the melding of her medieval *vitae* with the biblical tale is delightful. Introducing Celtic saints into biblical stories (and vice versa) is not uncommon and gives a wonderfully accessible and neighbourly feel to both the saints and the stories themselves. No longer a tale of a remote time and place, it is an incident fresh and real as today’s new churned butter. Mary chastises the storm for threatening to wake her baby. Brigit offers refreshment that grows no less for the drinking. She swaddles Jesus in her blue cloak to keep him warm, and Mary responds that henceforth she will be known as Brigit of the Mantle.

In the closing scene, Brigit has returned to Iona, now blessed with the knowledge of deathless love, to bring Christianity to her “own sea-girt isle...that never more may Druid-worship sway the people’s mind.” Ah, well.

Nicely done, all told, and with the various hymns prescribed for scene openings, I can see that a very pleasant afternoon could come of the staging of this play.

***Brigit of Kildare, Ann Egan, (2001) (novel) Kildare County Council Library and Arts Service, Eire.***

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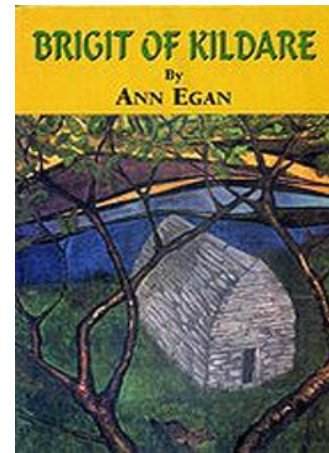
<sup>10</sup> See [Bryce Milligan’s Brigid’s Cloak: An Ancient Irish Story](#) (picture book) for another instance of Brigit’s assuming this role in fiction.

This novel is reviewed in the previous post—[Brigit Book Reviews \(Series Two\)](#) but I want to mention it here because Egan, an award-winning Irish poet, has included a number of excellent Brigidine poems.

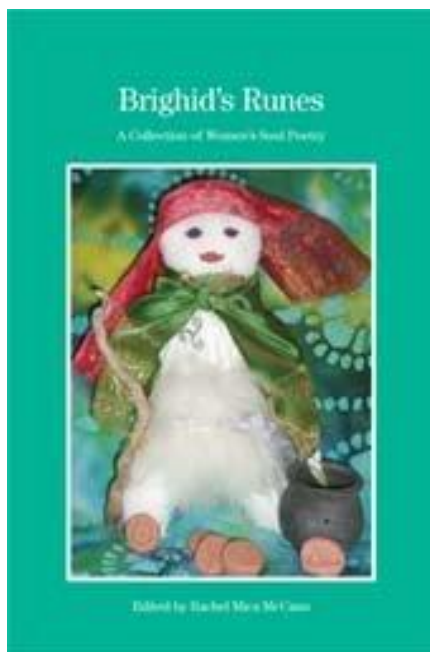
From “Dufach’s Daughter”:

the touch of her small hand  
cool as a breeze-kissed petal  
on my hard warrior’s palm,  
the woodbine tendrils on her brow

have me within her spell, I am  
bondman to my druid daughter.  
To her I bequeath my sword,  
its hilt aglow with rubies.



***Brigid’s Runes: A Collection of Women’s Soul Poetry, Rachel Mica McCann, editor, Mica Arts, England, 2008***



When I heard about this book I imagined that the poems would have something to do with Brigit, but almost without exception, they do not. Instead, they are dedicated in a more generalized way to Goddess, sometimes to specific goddesses, such as the Cailleach, or to the process of ritual and awakening, from a woman’s perspective.

There are some very nice pieces in here. All of the poets are connected in some way to Scotland, England, Wales, or Ireland. They range in poetic experience from relative newcomer to adept, but the sensibility throughout is one of celebration, connection, growth, and joy. The youngest author is in her teens; another has gone on to the Land of the Dead. A very pleasant collection under the aegis of Brigit, patron of poetry.

*Samples from the poems:*

I have a Venus urge  
for slow love making  
soft kisses, smooth caresses  
Autumn cooking,  
pickles, stewed apples and spices.  
I feel my body soften

as the gentle waning sun beckons me outside,  
to pick up hazlenuts from the warm afternoon track,  
so that I can bake wisdom cake.  
My love for you.

*Debra Hall*

It was in the wreckage of kelp limbs I found you  
The long crescent of your thigh,  
a shade quicker than sand,  
woven in the tidal reach, the tangle of sea

dried into cloth or food,  
dried salt around your lips  
your sea fingers  
open and  
close about drifted wood...

*Sophia Dale*





## Brigit Book Reviews: Nonfiction, Popular (Saint):

“Brigit, the Mary of the Gael”, from *A Book of Saints and Wonders* by Lady Gregory (1907)  
(Mention only.)

*Saint Brigid of Ireland*, Alice Curtayne (1954)

*Saint Bride*, Iain MacDonald (1992)

*Power of Raven, Wisdom of Serpent*, Noragh Jones (1994)

*Rekindling the Flame: a Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Brigid of Kildare*, Rita Minehan CSB  
(1999) (Pilgrimage Guidebook; Guided Meditation)

*The Life of Saint Brigid*, Anna Egan Smucker (2007)

### Introduction:

This is a surprisingly small sampling, but I like all of these books. If you could read only one I would recommend **Curtayne**. Unless of course your purpose was to hurriedly prepare for a pilgrimage to Kildare, in which case go with *Rekindling the Flame*. Oh, heck. They all have different aims, so any could be the one for you, depending on your needs.

Curtayne’s book, written in the early 1950s, is a detailed and broad-ranging introduction to the saint which has no time for the goddess, yet which deepens our understanding of Brigit on many levels. It is told from the perspective of a believing Catholic—ironically, a rare view in the current Brigidine literature, and therefore doubly valuable for the insight it provides. It is the first full book I read about Brigit and remains a favourite.

**MacDonald’s** highly portable text contains translations of a late (15<sup>th</sup> century) Life of Saint Brigit from the Book of Lismore and an unusual prayer sometimes credited to Saint Columba (among others): the 9<sup>th</sup> century “Hail Brigit”. Perfect for a quiet walk in the countryside, reflecting on the saint.

**Jones** looks at length and in an accessible style at the traditional roles and rituals of the Scottish countrywoman, and Brigit appears throughout.

**Minehan**, herself a Brigidine nun, has written a moving and informative pilgrims’ guide to the Brigidine sites of Kildare town and its environs.

**Smucker** has pieced together a small and lively (and beautifully illustrated) primer on Saint Brigit as told through the late (15<sup>th</sup> century) Life of Brigit from the *Leabhar Breac* and customs and prayers related to her.

I had hoped to include “Brigit, the Mary of the Gael”, from *A Book of Saints and Wonders* by **Lady Gregory** (1907). Unfortunately, the copy I borrowed from the Vancouver Public Library in the ‘80s appears to have been withdrawn from the collection, and I don’t have another copy near to hand. Hence only a brief mention below.

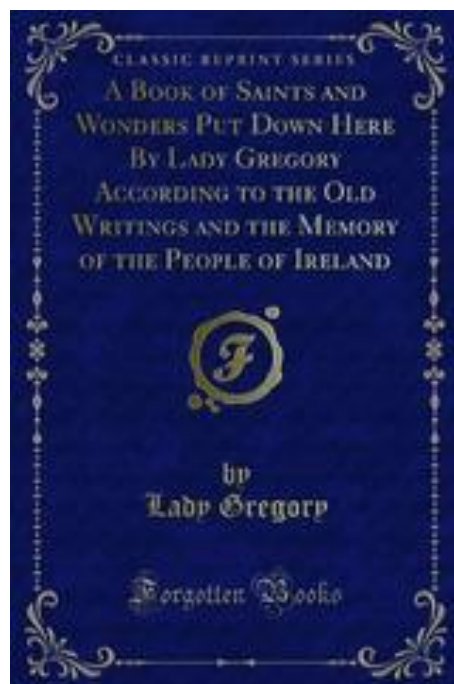


**“Brigit, the Mary of the Gael”, from *A Book of Saints and Wonders* by Lady Gregory (1907) John Murray, London**

Lady Gregory was an able and talented writer of the Celtic Twilight movement and the Abbey Theatre of Dublin, friend to such lights as W.B. Yeats and John Synge. I have reviewed her play *The Story Brought by Brigid* in the section on novels, poetry, and plays.

If you have a copy (or a pdf of your copy) you would like to contribute I'd enjoy reading it again, seeing what I missed before, and would be happy to include a review here, but it's a bit late to ask for a review copy from the publisher.

It was of limited usefulness at a time when I was focussed only on the goddess, and looked at the saint from that restricted viewpoint. As I recall it was a collection of miracle stories gleaned from one or more of her Lives. I read it around the time I read Curtayne's book, which I have reviewed here and which I preferred even then.



***S<sup>t</sup>. Brigid of Ireland*, Alice Curtayne, 1954, Sheed and Ward, New York. 162 pp**

*“Already in her girlhood the lines of an exceptionally strong character are emerging. Her freedom won, the first use she made of it was to succour her mother, whose health was poor, but who was still engaged in the heavy labours of quern and churn.”*

pg 28

Unfortunately long out of print and therefore pricey, you can try [bookfinder.com](http://bookfinder.com) for a second hand copy. Beware of mould. The one I ordered from Ireland was horrific to breathe next to. Try to get it from the library if you can, perhaps on interlibrary loan.

This passionate and beautifully written book took me by surprise. I read it over twenty-five years ago, at a time when I was interested in Brigit the saint only as a lens through which to glimpse the goddess, and the book had little to offer me then. It altered in my mind into a quaint and archaic piece of Catholic introspection, confused with Lady Gregory's “Brigit, the Mary of the Gael”<sup>11</sup>. I'm happy to have returned to it at a time when I can appreciate it.

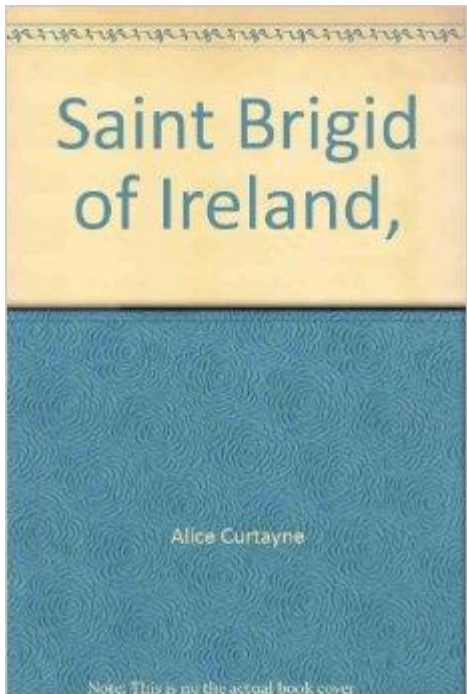
Curtayne, a native of Brigit's Kildare, writes from the perspective of a devoted Irish Catholic. Grounded in Church and Irish history and the stories of Celtic saints, she is aware of the significant role

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<sup>11</sup> From *The Book of Saints and Wonders* (1906). This was the only other substantial piece of writing about Brigit available to me at that time.

Brigit plays in Ireland: “She stands in the first shaft of light that illuminates our history, literature, topography, art and architecture ... Her contemporaries re-named the landmarks, recast the whole topography of the island, in order that she should be remembered (pg 4-5).”

She touches on the limits and privileges of free women, then settles into the dark burden of the bond slave<sup>12</sup>, ending with a dramatic ushering in of St Brigit: “She stood isolated, without prototype, without peer (pg 9).” This reads at first like faith-driven hyperbole, and certainly faith plays a large part in her view of Brigit, but as the book unfolds she argues her case from a variety of materials, and the picture she paints is intriguing, filled with nuance and unexpected detail.



Curtayne clearly and extensively locates Brigit on the historical stage of her time. She explores the political climate of turbulence tempered with unity that then existed, particularly in the region of Ireland where she lived, outlining the struggle for territorial dominance between Leinster and the southern Ui Neill, the contention over the position of High King, and the backlash against a punitive tax levied on Leinster. “In striving to evoke the atmosphere of the fifth century, the reader must hear the clash of arms as the perpetual undertone to all other sounds (pg 16).” Some of her details may be arguable in light of modern research; nevertheless, situating her so clearly in her environment makes this an excellent introduction to and contemplation of Brigit and the world she emerged from.

She offers a glimpse of the lives of early Irish nuns, and knits together Patrick’s picture of Irish religious women with Brigit’s Lives as well as historical and mythic texts. She discusses how Brigit’s community might have looked, how building might have proceeded, what her chariot would have been like and how it would be to travel in it. She examines the Lives to learn of the character of the woman they depict, and finds much that I miss when reading the tales—her physical strength, for instance, as one who works hard in the dairy. The image of robust health and physical power that Curtayne envisions, so different from the assumption of beauty as slim elegance, gives us a homespun Irishwoman with acuity of mind and the confidence of an aristocrat. There is of course a taste of the good Catholic girl so familiar from Saints’ tales. But she is so much more than that here.

When she tells a tale from the Lives, Curtayne couches it in the background of the age: in discussing the ale references tittered at by moderns, she describes the role of ale, made fresh and weak and used as a common daily beverage, not a special drink to make men wobbly. In telling of her refusal of marriage, she lets us know clearly the privileged life—to a poet, that nobleman of the Celtic world—that Brigit was passing up. She ties together disparate bits of information—Brigit born a slave, daughter of a tribal leader: in attempting to wed her to a poet, he has in fact offered her the highest

<sup>12</sup> Whether her description of the traumas experienced by Irish slaves was based on Irish evidence or on African accounts isn’t clear, but it offers a moment of vivid contemplation. Brigit and her mother were slaves. What *would* their lives have been like?

possible social position, and throughout her life she behaves as a woman who retains the power and self-assurance of her father's class.

In telling Brigit's stories this way, introducing ideas from ancient Ireland, such as regarding class or attitudes toward lepers, contrasting them with attitudes current in Biblical or modern times (the 1950s), and then personalizing the story, she gives often told and sometimes stilted stories new life. She reconnects them to a world and time other than our own and then imagines a human within them—how Brigit might have felt and why she reacted as she did. Finally, she will hint at, or carefully unfold, the symbolism or spiritual lesson she perceives there.

In approaching the material as if Brigit was a real and historical figure, and in dramatizing to great effect, she expands our understanding not only of the story and symbol of Brigit, but her place in the story of Ireland. Unique in my reading about Brigit is the revelation of her here as a source of pride and unity for a country whose people had for centuries been oppressed and despised. This message, which comes scattered in various forms throughout the book, is an important reminder. Brigit may be internationally loved and venerated now, but this is a new version of her, added to and subtracted from without our necessarily noticing. Placing her back into this setting is important both for our understanding of Brigit and for our honouring of her origins and the people who introduced us to her.

Curtayne's belief in God doesn't lead her to swallow everything that "pious hagiographers (pg 19)" have written. She seeks rational understanding while at the same time turning over the spiritual lessons found in Brigit's Lives. But she does accept that miracles happen. "The stories (of her generosity) ring true, because for the most part they are at once extraordinary and trivial. If a later biographer were minded to invent miracles for Brigid, he would use rather more imagination and tell of something more impressive than a little food conveyed furtively to a dog (pg 21)."

At times she struggles to make peace between her rigorous intellect and her faith. She says Patrick, having lived earlier than St Brigit, could not have known her. But in the Book of Armagh it is claimed otherwise. She accommodates this by saying that because of Brigit's friendship with intimates of Patrick, it "may be taken as essentially true (pg 45)."

A little stretch of the truth is permitted elsewhere, too. "Not the faintest breath of scandal ever touched the double monastery founded by Brigid and Conlaeth (pg 63)." Now, it states clearly in the Liber Hymnorum that "She blessed the pregnant nun, she was whole without poison, without illness". Perhaps this was some neighbouring nun, not of Kildare ...<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps this was not a scandal in Brigit's day—it certainly doesn't read like one in the tale.

Curtayne grounds Brigit to some extent in the mythology of her people. In telling the tale where Brigit gives away her father's sword, she refers to the heroic sword given by a fairy queen which grew so long it touched the heavens like the curve of a rainbow. And she links Brigit directly to those heroes of old. "This strange creature, in whose veins flowed the blood of Conn of the Hundred Battles ... (pg 26)" This Brigit, though unapologetically Christian, becomes more truly Celtic and Pagan than many versions of the modern, reimagined goddess.

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<sup>13</sup> Whitley Stokes, *Goidelica: Old and Early-middle-Irish Glosses, Prose and Verse* (1872), 142-6.

But she stops short of linking St Brigit directly to the goddess whose name she shares. While not denying the connection, she brushes it aside, refering in passing to “fearfully dull books” that suggest St Brigit was not a real woman, but only a product of the goddess (pg 109).

In so many ways, the Brigit in Curtayne’s book takes on life and character, and in doing so, allows the reader to connect more fully with her meaning in his or her life. To Curtayne, Brigit is not merely a symbol. Her miracles, some though not all, are real. Her envisioning of Brigit’s life surpasses even Kondratiev’s<sup>14</sup> imaginings, and is founded on a broad knowledge of the Lives, her times, the Celts, the Bible, and the history of the Church.

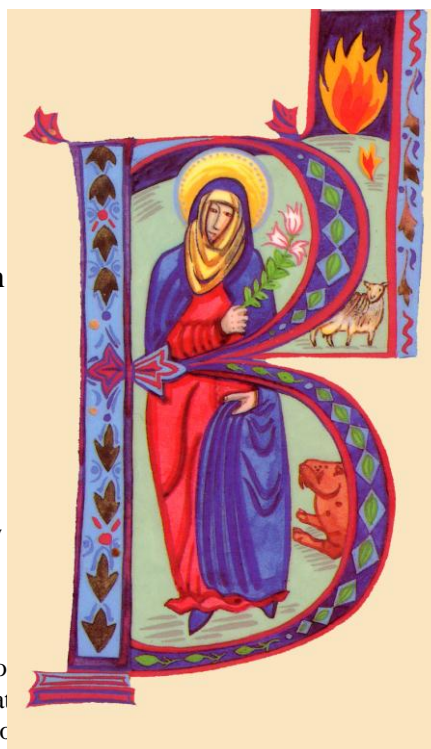
We are given Brigit’s presence in Ireland and her effect on it, the building of communities, the hosting of intellectual circles surpassing anything in England or on the Continent of that time. A careful comparison between Celtic Christianity and the Christianity of St Francis<sup>15</sup>, insight into St Brigit’s reaction to the violence around her, with its parallels to the Troubles yet to come in Ireland, her examination of difficult spiritual truths<sup>16</sup>—Curtayne approaches her topic from a dizzying multitude of angles. In a rare moment of she writes: “But not to incur a charge of bathos, it would be better, perhaps, not to mention in the same breath with the Brigidine circle Madame Récamier’s salon, or the “intellectual afternoons” of Hannah More and George Eliot (pg 69).”

A rich offering indeed.

### ***Saint Bride, Iain MacDonald (1992), Floris Books, Edinburgh, 64 pp***

This is a delightful little book with narrow and very precise aims. Being a Scottish publication, there is a little info in the short introduction on Brigit’s role outside of Ireland, and of course it uses Bride—the Scottish form of her name. The author suggests that the spread of her cult into Scotland and England may have been eased by the “parallel conversion and adoption” of the northern English goddess Brigantia. He attempts briefly to tease apart the elements of her myths which may have Pagan versus Christian origins, and to place her significance in early and modern times.

But the bulk of the book is committed to translations from medieval Irish manuscripts. The first and longest is a Life of Brigit from the Book of Lismore, which was apparently copied in turn during the 15<sup>th</sup> century from the now lost Book of Monasterboice and other manuscripts.



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<sup>14</sup> See my review of Kondratiev’s chapter on Imbolc in the next review post.

<sup>15</sup> She goes so far as to suggest that St Francis may have gotten his inspiration from Italy (pg 100). Interestingly, she notes that Italy is devoted to St Brigit in the south (pg 114).

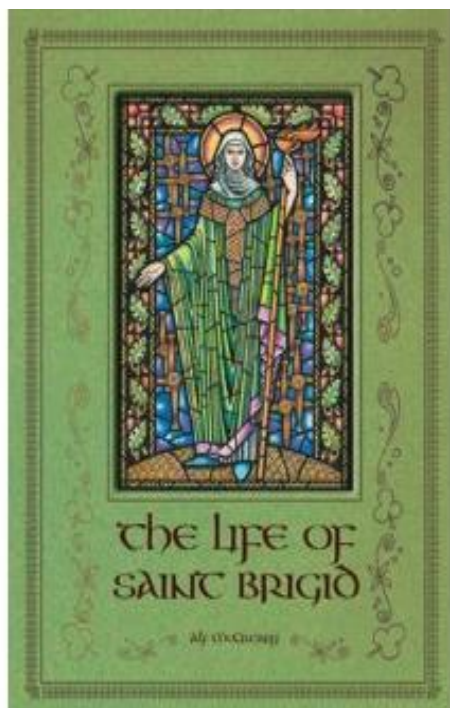
<sup>16</sup> For example, she uses the story of Brigit’s confusing the brothers who meant to do battle with each other to illustrate “this hardest lesson of Christianity: that the greatest renunciation is the renunciation of revenge ... (pg 97)”



MacDonald's rendition is based on the translation by Whitely Stokes published in 1890. The second offering is a substantial 9<sup>th</sup> century prayer, "Hail Brigid", found in the Book of Leinster. MacDonald's version is modified from Kuno Meyer's 1912 translation.

Lightweight, small enough to fit in a shirt pocket, this is a wonderful introduction to the ecclesiastical Saint Brigit of latter days.

***The Life of Saint Brigid, Anna Egan Smucker (2007), Appletree Press, Belfast, 71 pp***



When I first read of this book, I thought it was intended for children, a youth-level introduction to Saint Brigid. In fact, it's aimed at adults, though it's quite accessibly written and would be fine for interested tweens or young adults.

Smucker tells the story of the saint, not the goddess, but she doesn't shy from Brigid's goddess connection. While not going so far as to say the two are one, she says, "It is not surprising that underlying, and often mixing with the legends of the saint, is another story, the story of a goddess... The recounting of signs and wonders in the story of Saint Brigid has its own kind of truth, deeper than the literal. Perhaps it is not too great a stretch to imagine that the goddess would be pleased with her namesake..."

Unfortunately, this crumbles somewhat as the story of Brigid is introduced. I was sorry to read of an uncertain and worrying Pagan time into which the light of Christianity was carried, with its message of "love, forgiveness, and hope" (implying I guess that the new Christians were unworried and that Pagans didn't love, forgive, or hope). This is disappointing to find in an era of increasing inter-faith understanding. It was a framework given to Brigid's story centuries ago in order to promote Christianity over the native Irish Paganism; the battle is long since won, but the framework unfortunately remains, and not only in Smucker's work. Apart from this I like the book, which is well intended and beautiful, a brief, balanced, and well written introduction to Saint Brigid's story and traditions.

The main substance of the text is a retelling of the story of Brigid, drawn mainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Leabhar Breac*, or Speckled Book, of Ballymacegan, Tipperary, where the author's family hails from. The story is reduced in volume and streamlined into a pleasant fictional account. She has a light touch and clear, relaxed style. The characters have been rounded out; we can appreciate their feelings and motivations as we follow Brigid's adventures from childhood to old age.

One quibble: she says that researchers have dated the "fire temple" at Kildare to pre-Christian times, and asserts that priestesses probably tended the flame there. This is not my understanding. Rather, the date of the so-called fire temple is much later and it isn't certain it was actually used as a fire temple at all. (Recall that the first actual mention of a perpetual flame in Kildare comes with

Giraldus Cambrensis in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.) It seems unlikely to me that it was ever used as such by the pre-Christian people of the era. I will be discussing this more fully in my review of Kondratiev's chapter on Imbolc in the next review posting: *Nonfiction, Popular, NeoPagan*. I trust that if you have evidence to the contrary—perhaps the research on the fire temple date the Smucker refers to—you'll fill me in. I'd love to be proven wrong.

Smucker emphasizes Brigit's interest in freeing slaves, her piety, her generosity, and her compassionate, healing miracles. Episodes presented include Brigit turning well water to ale for a sick travelling companion; her consecration as a bishop and transformation of a dry altar beam to fresh green wood with her touch; several examples of her intervention on the part of prisoners and the condemned; the distress of Brigit's nuns at her constant giving away of the community's wealth. "To trust as she did that God would provide must have been one of the great challenges of Brigit's community (pg 27)."

As I read Smucker's retelling of Brigit's story, I sense that she shares Brigit's very Celtic affection not only for God and people, but for the creatures of land, sea, and sky.

Like the *vita* her story is based on, Smucker's retelling is an evocation, not to be taken as history. At one point she has a scribe jot down a verse which Smucker then quotes. But of course the earliest of Brigit's stories were written down a century or more after her death; it is poetic license to have the verse appear here. Such license is used sparingly and to good effect, but it should be noted.

The story is followed by a sampling of folk traditions, customs, and prayers. These are carefully selected from a number of sources and are thoughtfully presented. Illustrated instructions for making a Brigit's cross round out what is a very nice little introduction to Saint Brigit.

The book benefits greatly from the art of Ann McDuff. Yet there is no artist's statement or bio, and her name is found only by searching the tiny print on the CIP page. Tsk, tsk, Appletree Press! (Though also, congratulations for finding and including her wonderful art in such profusion.) It's strange to me that even today artists may receive slight recognition for their contributions to books – especially in a book that relies heavily on that contribution.

McDuff's paintings set the tone here – stunning flyleaves, nine full colour, full page illustrations, out of the book's total of seventy-one pages, and a number of smaller colour pieces embedded in the text. They are intricate and lush with expression, hue, and meaning, icons in the style of stained glass that lend great life to the book and tempt one to read the text. Oddly, though, McDuff's painting of "the Celtic Goddess Brigid" looks like three Christian angels, winged, robed, with eyes downcast. There's nothing Pagan, divine, or even Celtic about it.

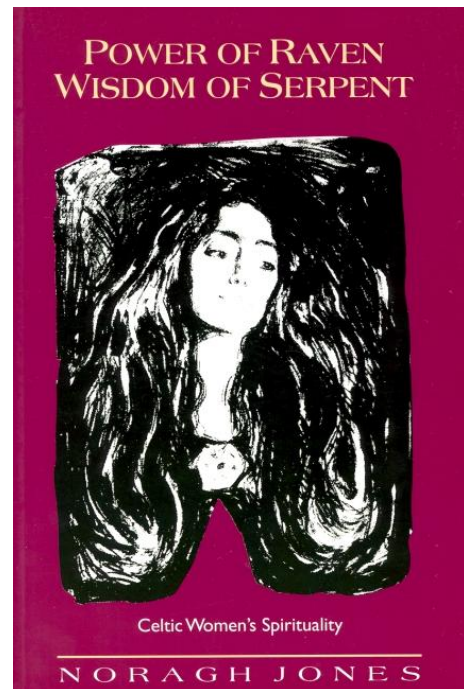
Of necessity a short and focussed work, there is room for only a small part of the whole story of Brigit; Smucker and McDuff have done a fine job of creating an attractive, informative, and appealing primer on the saint.

***Power of Raven, Wisdom of Serpent: Celtic Women's Spirituality, Noragh Jones (1994) Floris Books, Edinburgh. 238 pp***

Although Brigit is not the focus of this book, it is a celebration of the traditional life of Celtic women and as such touches generously on the role of Brigit in work and blessings. Lending a deeper understanding of her from the standpoint of a Christianity that rests firmly on Pagan precedent, it is an illuminating and inspiring book, with its sensibility of Celtic ways, and its store of traditional blessings, many of which are drawn from Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*.

A brief quote may whet your appetite. From the chapter "Woman of the house":

"In the usual way of things the ordinary household would have only one or two cows, and they would be taken out to pasture in the morning and brought back in again for the evening milking. But however few or many, the herd would be put under the daily safeguarding of St Brigid, for she was regarded as a kind of divine milkmaid among her many other attributes. She was the one to give them protection and to bless them with fertility, if her aid was summoned (pg 33)."



***Rekindling the Flame: a Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Brigid of Kildare, Rita Minehan CSB. Solas Bhríde Community, 1999. 64 pp (Pilgrimage Guidebook; Guided Meditation)***

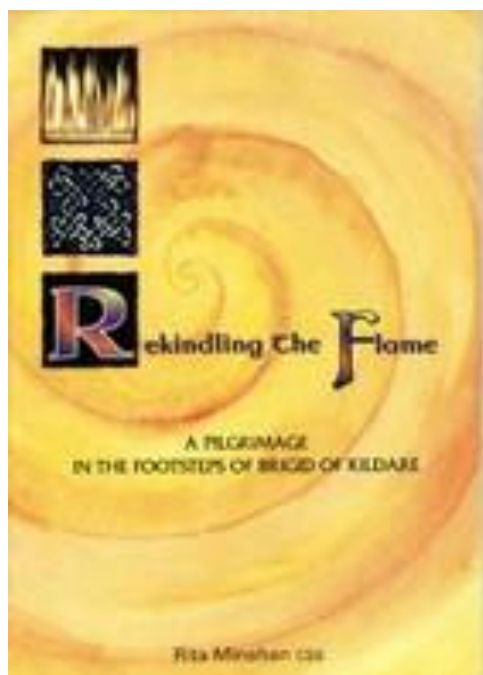
*"The stones of this cathedral hold the memories of prayer and worship by people for centuries. Allow time to connect with those who worshipped in this sacred place."*  
pg 23

*"To watch water gently springing from the earth is to witness creation in an act of unconditional generosity. This holy well can be a symbol of the source of life within, from which spring hopes and dreams."*  
pg35

This is a lovely book. Written by the Irish Brigidine nun Rita Minehan it is a guidebook to the sites sacred to Brigit in the immediate area of Kildare, where the saint built her greatest community. She leads you from cathedral to high cross, to round tower, fire temple, church, wells, and prayer stones. She goes on to discuss a fascinating variety of other features the unprepared visitor or uninformed resident could easily miss. Giving descriptions and historical information, maps, directions, and walking distances, she brings also a sense of reverence and contemplation, and the pages are dotted with photos and prayers. If you are planning a trip to Kildare, this book is a very



worthwhile companion. Although there is no index—not really a surprise in a book this small—she uses clear and frequent footnotes.



I have heard a number of tales of who first relit the flame of Brigit in Kildare in 1993. Rita Minehan settles the question in her acknowledgement of then leader of the Brigidine nuns, Mary Teresa Cullen, for relighting the flame and Srs Mary Minehan and Phil O'Shea for "being the creative women they are, for forging new pathways and awakening us to our ancient Celtic heritage in Kildare."

The first paragraph of the book proper sets the scene. We are invited onto a pilgrimage—to feel and experience and be transformed. Though facts are provided, they are merely the handrails we grasp on our journey into a spiritual realm. Her emphasis is not only on personal enlightenment, but also on learning compassion and generosity—capacities featured throughout the Lives of Saint Brigit—and reminds us in quoting AFRI<sup>17</sup> that we "belong to one family under God, our Father and our Mother (pg 29)."

Regarding pilgrimage, she explains:

"It is said that all pilgrimages spring from a deep yearning for an encounter with the divine. This yearning draws people to special places associated with the divine—whatever their faith—and is also associated with the needs and the prayers of the individual pilgrim making the journey.

"Pilgrimage is so much different from the journey undertaken by the tourist or the ordinary traveller, it also involves risk, possibility and invitation. It invites change. The risk is partly the possibility that the pilgrim will not return as the same person who set out ...

"In order to be true pilgrims we need to be sure that things which are not really so important don't get in the way ... To grow into the new millenium as pilgrims is undoubteldy one of the most exciting challenges facing us. What would it mean to truly see this journey as a pilgrimage (pg 32-33)?"

Where Alice Curtayne has little patience for exploring the goddess roots of Saint Brigit, like Seán Ó Duinn<sup>18</sup>, Minehan embraces both while remaining clearly Christian: "St Brigit stands at the meeting of two worlds. Neither the boundaries of Christianity nor the older beliefs can contain her exclusively (pg 12)." She does not reject the suggestion that priestesses tended the flame before nuns. (I will be

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<sup>17</sup> AFRI: Action From Ireland

<sup>18</sup> See my review of his book *The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint*, in the upcoming posting: [Nonfiction, Popular, NeoPagan](http://brigitssparklingflame.blogspot.com)

discussing this more fully in my review of Kondratiev's chapter on Imbolc in the next review posting: [Nonfiction, Popular, NeoPagan.](#))

Minehan mentions that the name of the Brigidine sisters' Kildare community house, *Solas Bhride*, means Brigit's Light (pg 14). It's interesting that it is her illuminative capacity, not her connection to fire or dairy or rush crosses, for instance, that is chosen as the focus of the order's home. For Brigit's stories and traditions do indeed have a great capacity to shine a light on our understanding of ourselves and each other.

She includes a ritual for St Brigid's Well and Prayer Stones which leads us to meditations on Brigit as Woman of the Land, Peacemaker, Friend of the Poor, Hearthwoman, Woman of Contemplation.

Brigit, Minehan tells us, is "emerging once again at a time of transition in the universe (pg 54). This book is one of the valuable guides to tapping in to her emergence here, and allowing it to inform our own lives and goals.

### **Solas Bhride Prayer**

*Kildare, Ireland, 1997*

Brigid, you were a woman of peace,  
you brought harmony where there was conflict.  
You brought light into the darkness.  
You brought hope to the downcast.  
May the mantle of your peace  
cover those who are troubled and anxious,  
and may peace be firmly rooted in the world.  
Inspire us to act justly and reverence all God has made.  
Brigid, you were a voice for the wounded and the weary.  
Strengthen what is weak within us.  
Calm us into a quietness that heals and listens.  
May we grow each day into greater  
wholeness in mind, body and spirit.

Amen.



## Brigit Reviews: Nonfiction, Popular (Neo-Pagan)

*Candlemas: Feast of Flames*, Amber K and Azrael Aryn K (2001) Llewellyn Publications  
“The Well of Her Memory” in *Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, Patricia Monaghan (2003) New World Library  
“Imbolc—Brigit”, Alexei Kondratiev, in *Devoted to You*, Judy Harrow (2003) Citadel Press  
*Brigid’s Healing: Ireland’s Celtic Medicine Traditions*, Gina McGarry (2005) Green Magic  
*Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*, Erynn Rowan Laurie (2007) Megalithica Books  
*Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint*, Brian Wright (2009) The History Press  
*Brigid and Me: Experiences with the Goddess*, Hollee Swann, ed. (2010) copyright Helen Roberts  
Hollie Swann  
*Brigit: Sun of Womanhood*, ed. Patricia Monaghan and Michael McDermott (2013) (Mention only.)

### Introduction

We have a mixed bag in this category, some excellent, some I don’t recommend at all, and some I recommend with certain reservations. A few of these reservations crop up repeatedly, in particular the failure of authors to cite their sources and the mixing of fact with guesswork—their own or that gleaned from other writers.

A useful guideline for dealing with one sub-category of the latter problem can be found in the concept of **UPG**. (See **below**. ) It is a variation on a basic principle of nonfiction writing: only present as fact what can be established as such. Represent your own ideas and those of “the popular mind” as what they are. This does *not* make them less important. Insight and innovation nourish our growing appreciation of and connection to Brigit in the modern world. Delineating between our own ideas and defensible traditions simply allows each individual to draw their own conclusions, in possession of as much clear, and clearly sourced, information as possible.

The **Ks’** book, *Candlemas*, suffers from a lack of citations—there are some but not many and they aren’t all useful—making it frequently impossible to check their statements. It also suffers in offering unproven assumptions as fact, particularly annoying when they are in doubt or disproven elsewhere. Despite this it is a lovely jumping off point for thinking about Brigit and the festival, with lots of warmth, imagination, and ideas for celebration, Neo-Pagan-style.

**Monaghan’s** essay, “The Well of Her Memory”, offers a well written and interesting personal perspective on Brigit and her modern celebration in Kildare. A couple of her statements, again not cited, are dubious, however, and I would verify elsewhere any new ideas you find here that you want to embrace.

**Kondratiev**, too, at times presents imagination as fact in “Imbolc—Brigit”. Yet he does have a good background in Celtic studies and it is a pleasure to imagine along with him. He offers numerous ways to celebrate a Neo-Pagan Imbolc, as well. Worth the read.

I can't speak to **McGarry's** herbal information, which may be solid, but, despite her obvious goodwill, as a book about Brigit or Celtic tradition *Brighid's Healing: Ireland's Celtic Medicine Traditions* is very unreliable. Nor does it have much obvious to offer around actual Irish herbal traditions. Not recommended.

**Laurie** has done an excellent job in *Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*. This book is not specifically about Brigit, but she appears frequently in its pages, placed to an unusual degree in the context of the Celtic mindset from which she emerged, and the Neo-Pagan landscape in which she now finds herself. It is well-footnoted and carefully distinguishes Laurie's own ideas from tradition, offering modern innovations and explaining how they adhere to or differ from what is known of the beliefs and values of the Celts.

Despite some interesting photos and tidbits, I can't recommend **Wright's** *Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint*. Instead of distinguishing his hypotheses from known facts, he puts forward his own imagined history, unsupported by evidence, quite forcibly as reality, thereby giving a very misleading picture of things.

**Swann** has put together a nice little pamphlet of personal essays by various Neo-Pagans on their relationship to Brigit in *Brighid and Me: Experiences with the Goddess*. I like it, and was pleased to be asked to write an essay for it, so I leave it to you to decide if I am biased.

I'm going to cheat and not actually review **Monaghan** and **McDermott's** *Brigit: Sun of Womanhood*. It was published after the writing of the other reviews here, which have been long delayed in publication due to health issues in my life. Rather than delay yet longer as I read and review *Sun of Womanhood* I will say only that it exists, and that it is a collection of largely Neo-Pagan writings, though there are offerings from Christians as well.

## Useful Terms:

When discussing books written by authors of a spiritual bent, the terms UPG, SPG, and CG can come in very handy.

*UPG (Unsubstantiated Personal Gnosis): Information gained through meditation, intuition, visions, etc., which cannot be substantiated by lore or research but is usable in the individual's practice. Labelling as UPG helps prevent misunderstandings about verifiable sources and preserves intellectual honesty. "UPG" specifically indicates beliefs arrived at via mystical means, not ideas or intellectual conclusions reached from academic research.*

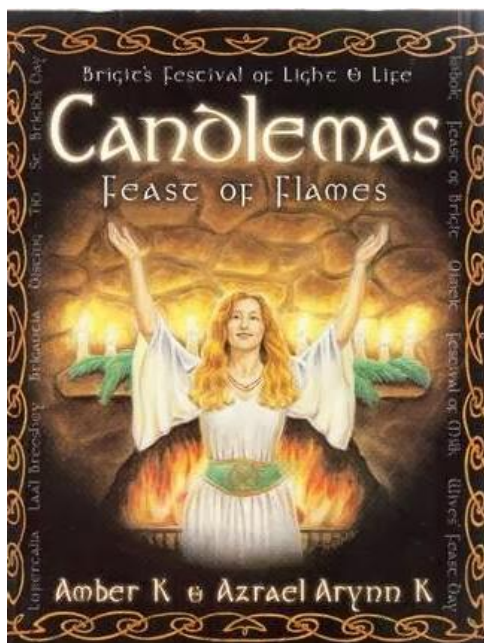
*SPG (Shared Personal Gnosis) — A mystical vision and belief shared by a number of people.*

*CG (Confirmed Gnosis) — Substantiating evidence for UPG or SPG may later be found in the lore, rendering it CPG (Confirmed Personal Gnosis). These instances are highly valued, and have served to bolster individual and community faith in the Deities, spirits or ancestors from whom the information was received. Instances of CG are also very important in that over time they help us learn to*

distinguish true imbas from imagination. (Imbas is the Old Irish word for “inspiration.” In Modern Irish it is spelled iomas. )

Distilled from the CR FAQ (available [online](#) or in book form.)

## **Candlemas: Feast of Flames, Amber K and Azrael Aryn K (2001) Llewellyn Publications**



This book is the first one that many Neo-Pagans read about Brigit, being far more readily available than, say, Ó Duinn’s *The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint*, and more accessible than Ó Catháin’s *The Festival of Brigid* or Bitel’s *Landscape with Two Saints*. Presenting a blend of cultural, divinatory, and magical traditions, *Candlemas* may appeal more to those whose traditions are not drawn from a single culture than to, say, Celtic Reconstructionists.

Overall, I like the book. The text is weakened by a reliance, in the historical notes, on authors who have no background in Celtic studies and who draw their information from yet other authors who do not obviously have direct experience studying the old texts and lore. This tendency allows inaccuracies to creep in and become part of the common view of a subject, thereby distorting an already obscure picture. Nevertheless, and despite a lack of clarity at times between cultural sources, *Candlemas* has much to spark the interest of a variety of readers.

*Candlemas* was written with a general Neo-Pagan (or Neo-Pagan-friendly) audience in mind. It’s focus is largely on Brigit, but it encompasses other deities and festivals and makes some interesting parallels between them. The second author, Azrael K, who focusses on the Imbolc feast, includes a wealth of recipes, indicating which ingredients would have been available to the Celtic people at various points in history—a nice touch, I thought. (Brand new recipes are included, as well.)

The tone is friendly and welcoming, lacking an ardent attachment to a single interpretation of Brigit and encouraging exploration. Amber K has a lovely, multifaith, all-people-are-one approach, and a great delight in deity and celebration. Reading *Candlemas* is much like being invited in to sit by the hearth to talk, make crafts, and share ritual.

Although some care is taken to cite sources and trace evidence, this is inconsistent, and *Candlemas* is therefore not a reliable source of factual information, nor is it easy to follow up items of interest. Hypotheses that are contested among experts are presented as accepted truths—for example the definition of Imbolc:



“Imbolg means ‘in the belly’ and refers specifically to the pregnancy of the sheep, and more broadly to Mother Earth quickening with new life.”

pg 7

No source is given. And Mother Earth is a Slavic, not a Celtic, deity, and so we know there is something wrong with this definition right off.

Scholars give much more tentative definitions of Imbolc:

“The exact meaning of ‘Imbolc’ or ‘Oimele’ presents considerable difficulty, and Pamela Berger suggests gently that cleansing of the fields after the winter and preparing them for sowing the grain in spring may be fundamental in the idea underlying the term. She refers to the theory which separates the term ‘Imbolc/Imbolg’ into two words: *im* and *bolg*, *im* meaning ‘around’ and *bolg* ‘belly’—the belly of that goddess—that is the land, the farm...”

*The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint*, Séan Ó Duinn, pg 19-20.

Ó Catháin reads things differently.

“*Imbolc/óimele* the ancient name for the festival of Brigit is defined thus in the ninth-century *Cormac’s Glossary*:...‘that is the time when the sheep’s milk comes’...Though condemned as ‘a fanciful etymological explanation’ this statement has, nevertheless, inspired oft-repeated assertions that the pagan name of our feast, as *imbolc/óimele* is said to be, has something to do with the period of the coming into lactation of sheep. Eric Hamp...has shown that the word simply means ‘milking’...”

*The Festival of Brigit*, Séamas Ó Catháin, pg 7.

Ó Catháin goes on at length to examine the philological evidence and theorize about what the name—if it even IS the true name of the feast—means and what it may tell us about the festival. All of which simply shows that the details, roundabout though they may be, are infinitely more textured and fascinating than the boiled down versions we often receive, and that there are many more possibilities out there than the Mother Earth story above hints at. (For an unorthodox and intriguing interpretation of the word Imbolc, see my upcoming review of Phillip A. Bernhardt-House’s paper “Imbolc: A New Interpretation” in the [Nonfiction Academic/Popular Academic](http://brigitssparklingflame.blogspot.com) section.)

I would have appreciated a *lot* more footnotes, with a strong bibliography to back them up. (The citation “From the files of Amber K, source unknown”, found on page 20, doesn’t cut it.) No matter how general an audience you are seeking or how blended a spirituality you want to offer, you are doing your readers a real disservice by stating something as a fact and not giving them any way to learn more about it. For instance, how do we know the time of year was once called Wolfmonth? Was this an Irish term? Scottish? German?

“The Scots celebrate the growing light not only with Imbolg but also with *Up-Kelly-Aa*, a fire festival on January 28 that honors the sun goddess.”

pg 7



This surprising revelation was not footnoted, and a quick internet search, plus a brief consultation of the indexes of a few books on my own shelves, shed no light. I have no idea where *Up-Kelly-Aa* came from, who has called it a fire festival or why, and I am sure there are a few Scots who will be surprised to learn that they honour the sun goddess on that or any other day. I want to know more about this interesting festival, a feeling I often had when reading the wondrous collection of unsourced details the author has amassed. There truly is an impressive amount of research here; my frustration at not being able to easily verify it, and therefore to rely on it, only increases because of that.

In addition to letting the trail go cold on so many details, the author at times accepts the oversimplifications of other authors, or blends together Neo-Pagan perspectives with traditional Brigidine lore. For instance, in adopting the use of the term “Imbolc Sabbat” (pg 7). Sabbats were not observed by the Celts. Though Hebrew at its root, the term is modern in its use and is more correctly applied to Wicca and witchcraft.

This is admittedly, for some, a blurry line. If modern witchcraft adopts Celtic and Germanic festivals into its Wheel of the Year, then it makes sense *in that context* that the term “sabbat” be applied to them. But if we are presenting a purported *history* of the festival, the term is completely out of place.

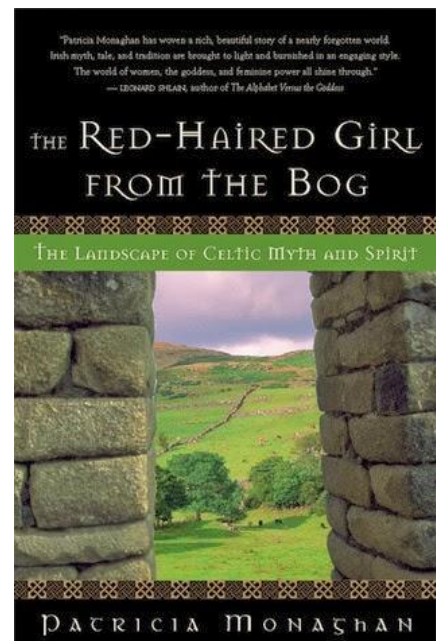
Nevertheless, at other times things are laid out very clearly, and the author will point out areas of uncertainty, such as in her examination of Brigit’s origins. An attempt is made, too, to get into the skin of the ancients, to claim the festival and goddess/saint as our own, and bring into our lives all the poignant symbolism and positive energy that these interpretations can yield. One of the pleasures of *Candlemas* is the inclusion of poetic imaginings of how things once were. (“...the solstice is past, the days are dreary, the memory of warmth seems like a fading dream...”) This embodying and enlivening of spiritual ideas invites the participant closer to nature, to divinity, to community, and to the ideals of creativity and sharing.

*Candlemas* is a wide-ranging offering of ideas and lore, much of which comes straight from Brigit’s medieval Lives or folk custom, much more of which is drawn from a variety of streams from gemology and astrology to western ceremonial magical traditions, all woven together with the heartfelt contributions of modern celebrants.

Despite its weaknesses, it is a fun and warming read. A good introduction to a Neo-Pagan interpretation of Brigit and all that she encompasses.

### **“The Well of Her Memory” in *Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, Patricia Monaghan (2003) New World Library**

There is some very nice writing in Monaghan’s chapter on Brigit. She gives a version of Brigit’s history, as well as interesting notes on, for instance, the face of paganism in modern



Ireland. I have some quibbles, as well as one more serious concern, but I appreciate that, unlike most writings on the topic, the chapter gives a personal face to Kildare and the Irish Brigidine movement. It includes a moving description, though second-hand, of the relighting of Brigit's flame in Kildare hundreds of years after its extinguishing, and an intriguing account of the celebration of Brigit in Ireland, particularly in Kildare, today.

Monaghan doesn't live in Kildare, nor is she Irish, so the story is from an outsider's point of view, and focusses naturally on the period around Imbolc, when La Fheile Bhride is celebrated, in tandem with a peace conference, by both native Irish and hundreds of people who do not live day to day with Brigit in Ireland. As an Irish North American, though, Monaghan feels a strong connection with these traditions, and the story she tells is as individual as it is commonplace—that of a modern woman of the diaspora seeking her place in the culture of her ancestors. In addition, she relates some Brigidine lore, describes the use of holy wells, and so on.

*Red-Haired Girl* has, I am happy to report, an index, and this is greatly appreciated. Not so footnotes. In writing such as this, which is a blend of travelogue, personal essay, poetry, and history, it's understandable that the writer might balk at having the page bristle with footnotes. Nevertheless, there are places where I really wish she had used them.

For example she asserts, without stating by whom, that Brigit is credited with creating the ogam—a medieval Irish cipher system. Yet it is clear in the literature that ogam's origins are attributed to the god Oghma. (“Oghma...is credited with the invention of the *Ogham* letters...” Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (1968) pg 35.) If there is a Celtic scholar who has suggested that Brigit, in fact, is responsible for the invention of the *ogam*, I would like to read what she or he has to say about it. Without a citation here, I'm not able to do that.

I was startled to read her etymology of the word “bridge” in Irish placenames. It is a rendering I've never encountered before, and it sounded very dubious to me. She claims: “...*bridge* is a Brigit word. The Celtic word Brigit...was anglicized into Bridget; in turn, across Ireland and England, towns near ancient shrines to the goddess were called by names including ‘bridge’, as in Bridgeport...”

First of all, to be clear, and Monaghan is not saying otherwise, the soft “g” pronunciation in Brigit is relatively recent, the original Irish hard “g” sound having given way to the Swedish “dg” found in the name of the Scandinavian Saint named Bridget.

That aside, since holy places are everywhere in Ireland, it would not be hard to argue that anywhere with “bridge” in the name was near one. But there are many waterways, small and large, as well. Wouldn't it be much more likely that there was also a *bridge* nearby at sometime, if not today? It strikes me that a far simpler explanation is that these places are named after bridges. I tried to verify Monaghan's assertion, but found nothing to support it. I took the question to a number of persons with a stronger background in the subject than I; none had ever heard this etymology before, and none were convinced by it. The mildest reaction was from the [Northern Ireland Place-Name Project](http://www.northernirelandplace-name-project.org/)<sup>19</sup>, which called it “Possible but highly unlikely.”

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofModernLanguages/Research/ResearchProjects/NorthernIrelandPlace-NameProject/>

Looking further, P W Joyce's *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1870), sports a 53 page index of place-names. Few if any have "bridge" in them, although a number have forms of *droichead*, Irish for "bridge". A very few have some form of *bri[II]*, translated as "a high or rising ground". It strikes me that less than one hundred and fifty years ago there seem to have been almost no names with "bridge" in them. My guess is that those that now exist are modern anglicizations rather than ancient derivations.

This may seem like nit-picking, but such assertions, unsubstantiated and unequivocal, are very misleading. This is not the only such leap made in the book, and as in much writing on the subject, there are places where she presents one version of the story of Brigit without mentioning conflicting ones. I would therefore say that, since such points are not backed up or always clearly stated, it would be best to read the historical parts of this piece as "maybe", and focus on the much stronger personal aspects of the book.

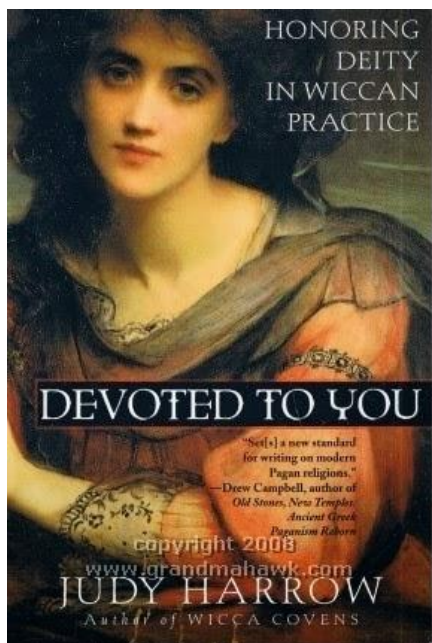
Another nitpick: the misspelling of the names of two Brigidine sisters—*Mary Minihan* for Mary Minehan and *Mary Theresa Collins* for Mary Teresa Cullen[2]. Such obvious and easily corrected mistakes suggest an underlying weakness in her scholarship elsewhere. Nevertheless, the sincerity, depth of feeling, and beauty of Monaghan's writing compensate to a great extent for the flaws.

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[1] Including *bree* or *bray*.

[2] The latter spelling is given in the Irish Brigidine nun Rita Minehan's book *Rekindling the Flame*, Solas Bhride (1999).

### **"Imbolc—Brigit", Alexei Kondratiev, in *Devoted to You*, Judy Harrow (2003) Citadel Press**



Good writing. That is the first thing that strikes me about Kondratiev's essay on Brigit. He has pulled me in by the end of the first sentence.

"In a glen in the east of Ireland, protected from the toil and battle of the world outside, a group of chosen women came together within a round enclosure to tend a fire lit before any of them were born" (p 89).

I do not know at this point if he is referring to the saint's nuns or some presumed group of pagan Celts tending a goddess' flame, but the image as he relates it is enticing, and somehow I am included in that group, just by hearing about them in this way, and I am swayed.

Ultimately, though, I'm cautious about assuming that there ever was a group of pre-Christian flame-tenders at Kildare, much as

I would like to believe it, and I am uncomfortable with Kondratiev's assertion of it as though it is fact. Allow me a major digression here.

Our first word on the subject of Brigit's perpetual flame comes from Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) in 1188 CE. It isn't mentioned in her several early *Lives*. Indeed, a good 700 years passed after her death before the practice was noted down. This seems a dramatic oversight, especially considering the great detail Cogitosus goes into in describing her church and reliquary, and the intimate stories of her life that abound in all extant *vitae*.

Three other perpetual flames are known to have been tended by medieval Irish clerics (in each other case, by men), these being extinguished and relit each Easter with the rebirth of Christ. It seems well possible that the perpetual fire at Kildare was a Christian invention, and that it was lit for the first time long after the death of Saint Brigit. Fire is an important symbol in Christianity, and no link between perpetual fires and the goddess Brigit appears in the sparse references to her found in medieval texts (W. G. Wood-Martin, pg 278-279).

The author Miranda Green warns "There is a danger of creating a picture of her pagan role from information we have of Brigit as a saint, because certain elements of her life as a Christian holy woman appear to be pre-Christian in origin. An example of this is the saint's magical association with fire, which has given rise to the deity being identified as a fire-goddess" (pg 198).

Looked at from another angle, Séan Ó Duinn, while not directly questioning the pagan origins of Brigit's perpetual fire, speculates that Giraldus Cambrensis might have been influenced by classical literature in his recounting of what he found in Kildare; this would account for the similarities between his description of Brigit's flame cult and that of the Vestal Virgins. He further remarks that it is odd that, like the Vestals, Brigit is said to have had 20 virgins tending the flame. "In Ireland, one would expect the number 9 to predominate...9 hazels of wisdom...9 damsels of the sea... (and so on)" (pg 64).

Clearly Brigit, as goddess of the smith, has a connection to fire. And great fires were lit at times of cultural importance in pagan Ireland. But if I recall correctly—and I'm having trouble remembering where I read it, so if you have a citation, please let me know—Brigit's festival, Imbolc, is the only one of the Irish quarter days that does not have a bonfire associated with it. I don't mean to imply that there is no pre-Christian importance among the Celts to fire in general or Brigit's fire in particular, or indeed to argue the point one way or the other, only to call attention to the fact that the assumption that her fire was tended perpetually in pre-Christian times is just that, an *assumption*, unproven and in some doubt. What if, a possibility which Bitel suggests, the attributes of a goddess, and not necessarily the goddess Brigit, were added to the saint's stories by later writers to lend weight to the saint's cult, or rather, to lend importance to the ecclesiastics in various parts of the country whose power was tied to their association with Saint Brigit (pg 192)?

Kondratiev himself, when examining the goddess as distinct from the saint, asks, "What stories do we have about the goddess that clearly predate the stories about the saint?" and then refers to material which "Irish scholars compiled between the eighth and the twelfth century". These stories of the goddess were written down at least a hundred years *after* the first saintly tales, written down by clerics who would have been well aware of *Saint* Brigit, who lived in a now Christian land, and who

might well have had reasons of their own for presenting the stories in the way and with the characters they did.

Indeed, later Lives of Saint Brigit are far more imbued with miracles and “pagan” sensibility than Cogitosus’s Life, which many scholars believe to be the oldest of her *vitae*. Quite possibly she began as a simple human and grew more fantastic as time went on, rather than the opposite—a woman who slipped into the role of a goddess in her lifetime and whose goddess-like associations were there from the start, or even, as Kondratiev suggests, that “a high priestess of Brigit (who was herself Brigit) converted to Christianity” and refused to renounce her goddess. Any of these stories is possible; we need to be careful not to rewrite the past to match our idea of what *should* have been. We have future and present enough for that. (This concludes the digression on Brigit’s Pagan fire.)

Nevertheless! Kondratiev is not alone in accepting that the perpetual fire at Kildare is pre-Christian in origin, and he builds on that assumption throughout the text. He reaches out in imagination to the humble yet vital role of tending fire, to the role of fire in fending off danger and killing frosts, in guiding the wanderer home and transforming food. He draws us into his world—our world, perhaps, of long ago. He even (Bless him! Praise him!) provides a (brief) annotated resource list. This alternative to the more rigorous (and useful) option of footnotes and bibliography allows a smoother, more fiction-like text, but still points us generally toward more evidence.

He also cites some of his sources in the text itself, although not as often as I’d like. And his imaginings are supported by a familiarity with Celtic writings and folklore that allows him to make informed guesses and to supply enlightening tidbits. For instance, that fire is in Celtic and Indo-European thinking the “archetypal ‘element that rises’”, and that water is the archetypal “‘element that descends’ down to a cold, dark, chaotic underworld” (pg 98). In exploring these two archetypes, he is able to show how Brigit embodies both—most interestingly in the integration of rising and descending in the element of water as it rises from the earth as a sacred healing spring.

Although Kondratiev emphasises the importance of woman’s role in her connection to the (presumed) goddess of fire—or at least to the hearth—he doesn’t forget that the Celts had a patriarchal society with limits on kinship and sharing. He extrapolates from here that it was the need for cooperation and mutual protection that gave rise to a non-family based flame-tending group—one that would secure the safety of the whole tribe and knit families together. At another point, he slips into speaking of Brigit’s choice to join a religious community as though the stories in her *Lives* and his imaginings about her are factual accounts of a real woman’s life, which is again questionable.

The true story isn’t likely to be exactly as he has imagined it. If it is like most things speculated on, once new evidence is unearthed and a fuller picture gained, they are not much like we have imagined them. Although he clearly is largely convinced of his story, and thus leans in the direction of misleading the reader into an assumption of Truth, he occasionally does allow that there is no substantiation for the picture he offers.

It doesn’t even entirely make sense. “It was comforting for people to feel that they didn’t have to give up the goddess who had always looked after their welfare and given them the energy they needed to do their daily work. She could remain at the heart of the official religion their nations had chosen to follow” (pg 100). At the time of Saint Brigit, Christianity was a minority religion in Ireland. According

to Bitel, “Christianity was only slowly becoming a native manufacture” ( pg 137). There was no sudden switch to Christianity that would require such comforting; indeed, there was no *nation* at the time.

Kondratiev assumes that Boann is the goddess Brigit’s mother and that Boann is the cow that fed the infant saint (pg 108). I like the image but it is another unsubstantiated leap; in addition he says she fed her “when no one else would”, whereas the tale actually says she couldn’t keep anything else down. I can’t help being amused by his blithe statement that “The White Cow”, the river Boyne, is Brigit’s mother. Wright equally blithely assures us that the Morrigan is Brigit’s mother, and McGarry that Dana has that role. None of these writers bothers to say where they got this information. More careful authors give her father’s name only—the Daghdha—as this is the only parental name reported in the ancient texts, *Cormac’s Glossary* and *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Second Battle of Mag Tuired).

I point these inconsistencies out not to disprove Kondratiev’s contentions, but to bring home that the smallest assumptions can lead to hugely different interpretations of history. We may so easily mislead ourselves and others by representing our guesses and dearly wished-for versions of that history as truth. Either way, the story of Brigit is a fascinating tale, rich with imagery and symbolism with which to feed our imaginations, and the goddess/saint who is now inextricably combined is a wonder and a gift. Regardless of the medieval state of affairs, the story has changed many times throughout the millenia. Was Brigit the daughter of the Daghdha? Was she the mother of all the Tuatha de Danaan, the Irish deities, including the Daghdha, as suggested by those who see Dana and Brigit as one? Was she one of these at one time in history, and the other at another time, or was she both at once? Were Bríg Ambue and Bríg Briugu and Brigit the triple goddess all one, and was the saint a single Brigit or a variety of similarly named women?

Brigit is, after all, a liminal figure, neither of this world nor the Otherworld, but of both, as shown most clearly by her birth on a doorstep, neither in nor out of the house. She can be both goddess and saint, the Daghdha’s daughter and his mother, deeply pagan and unimpeachably Christian. We do not have to simplify her, to create a grand unified Brigit, or to ask the evidence to bear too much weight.

There will always be points of disagreement in interpreting evidence and presenting arguments. Despite my criticisms, Kondratiev’s lengthy chapter on Imbolc and Brigit satisfies both intellect and spirit. Whatever she has been, Brigit is *now* a goddess and a saint with both the power of healing waters and ever-burning fire, and Kondratiev is able to offer a moving picture of how things *may* have been, and from there, to guide how we might participate in those mysteries now. He offers a comparison with the Vestal Virgins (for a more thorough comparison see Ó Duinn, *The Rites of Brigid*), an interesting look at the goddess references in the old texts, a nicely developed introduction to Brigidine associations (the ox, the oystercatcher), and an examination of Breton and French folktales in order to gain a greater understanding of themes of mutilation in stories about Saint Brigit. He provides prayers, meditations and notes for Brigidine retreats, and points out that Brigit is at home in all three of the Celtic Realms—Land, Sea, and Sky—thus assisting us in grounding our relationship to her in the greater context of the Celtic worldview. In the end, his fiction-like approach yields more good than ill as long as one bears in mind that it is speculative and not a reiteration of a true life story.

I want to give two thumbs up to this wonderful essay, which is so rich in detail and design, but too often Kondratiev blurs the line between guesswork and research, and blends unrelated lines of evidence without indicating that he is doing so, then basing conclusions on that blended evidence. I



can't accept that the goddess and saint are so seamlessly linked. Nevertheless, his interpretations arising from these stories fill out missing details and allow a deeper understanding of the myths, leading to powerful magical and metaphorical leaps in our own minds.

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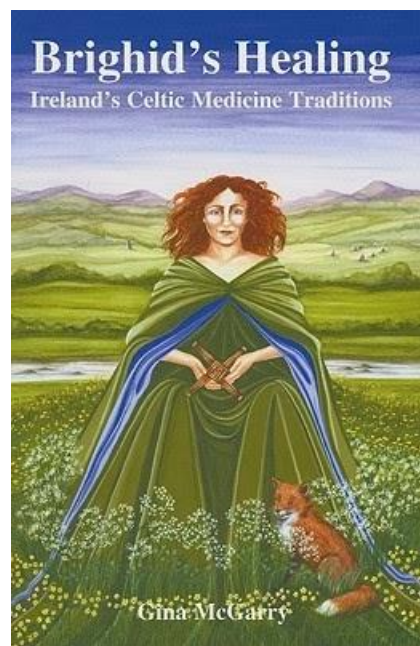
W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland* (1902), pp 278-279 (Thanks to Erynn Rowan Laurie for this reference.)

### **Brigid's Healing: Ireland's Celtic Medicine Traditions, by Gina McGarry (2005) Green Magic (England)**

I won't comment here (nor do I have the knowledge to do so) on the value of the many herbal remedies included in *Brigid's Healing*, but only on McGarry's handling of the Brigit-related material.

Despite the friendly and well-meaning attitude of the author, I can't recommend this book. I could have been content if it had been presented differently—as a synthesis of learning from many sources and the inspiration of the author, rather than as a book based on Irish tradition.

The trouble for me begins with her author photo, where McGarry dresses as an Irish peasant of an earlier century. I have no problem with people playing dressup, but I am uncomfortable with it in this context. It lends, for me, a feel of play-acting, or worse, pretense, in a book that claims to be a serious treatment of an important topic. I am further troubled by a misleading cover blurb: "Gina...is the director of...Brigid's Academy of Healing in Westmeath, Ireland...(Her work) has seen her reputation spread far beyond her native land." Her native land, it fails to mention, is not Ireland, as seems to be implied here.



As a textbook, there are obvious omissions. There is no index, bibliography, or footnotes. She claims deep tradition, but makes claims throughout with no substantiation. No attempt is made to differentiate between traditional Irish uses of herbs and modern ones drawn from a much broader

tradition, from non-Celtic astrology to the herbal theories of Susun Weed, and a blend of Neo-Pagan beliefs—both [UPG and SPG](#)[1]<sup>20</sup>.

McGarry states that she wants Celtic herbalism, especially Irish herbalism, to “take its rightful place” alongside “Chinese, Ayurvedic and Native American herbalism” (pg vii). This idea entices me, but I learn little here about the Irish or Celtic use of herbs. It doesn’t read as if *anything* is actually Celtic, in terms of the herb-lore, and her herbal references to various Celtic deities are not obviously connected to an informed understanding of them. I seldom get the sense that I’m reading about actual traditional Irish recipes and uses—there is little drawn from interviews, folklore, medieval manuscripts, and so on, that point to elder uses of herbs—yet we know that information exists. The association of hawthorne with the Good People is mentioned, but two herbs very commonly used in dealing with fairies, foxglove and St. John's wort[2], are not even listed in the *Materia Medica*. (Though I search, I don't actually see a section on dealing with a wide variety of fairy interference, yet this was a key area of Irish herbalism.)

A better Neo-Pagan resource for such references is Erynn Laurie’s *Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*, which examines in detail the Irish and Scottish uses of plants connected to the ogam letters. A more exhaustive work would be, perhaps, *An Irish Herbal: The Botanologia Universalis Hibernica*, by John K'Eogh and George Harrison (1735)[3]. Other works McGarry might profitably have consulted and referred to in *Brighid’s Healing* are *Medicinal Plants in Folk Tradition: An Ethnobotany of Britain and Ireland*, by David E. Allen and Gabrielle Hatfield, Timber Press (Portland, 2004), or *Healing Threads: Traditional Medicines of the Highlands and Islands* by Mary Beith, Birlinn (Edinburgh, 2004), and William Milliken and Sam Bridgewater’s *Flora Celtica: Plants and People in Scotland*, Birlinn (Edinburgh, 2004)

Yet McGarry’s goodwill is apparent. She cares about people and tells a gratifying tale:

“For millenia, Brighid was the residing Spirit at an academy of learning at Her sacred site in Kildare. Young women from families rich and poor, near and far, came to receive Her teachings and become aid-women, serving in Her name. Their functions included the preservation of the traditional sciences, healing remedies, and the laws of the land. Village women brought them food and, in exchange, the Bride women taught them how to use herbs as medicine. The head of the academy was considered to be the physical incarnation of the Goddess and, when elected, took the name of Brighid.”

pg 31

If only the words “let’s imagine...” had preceded the tale! As a fable, it can have meaning—could encourage and inspire, perhaps. But presented as fact it strains credulity. How can she possibly know this? To my knowledge, there is absolutely no evidence of such a thing having existed, let alone a hint of all these details.

She speaks of “Brighid’s Aid-women” in the historical section on page one. These were, she says, her trainees, like Tibetan Buddhists, followers of a particular teacher and forming a spiritual tradition. As far as I can tell, she made them up. Yet she includes them in a list of things we “know” about Celtic physicians. (She may have based these constructions on Alexander Carmichael’s remarks

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<sup>20</sup> See page 40-41 this article for definitions.

in the *Carmina Gadelica* that in Scotland “She (Bride) was the aid-woman of the Mother of Nazareth in the lowly stable, and she is the aid-woman of the mothers of Uist in their humble homes.” This relationship is explored in the Scottish traditional prayer “Bride Ban-Chobhair” (“Bride the Aid-Woman”), collected by Carmichael. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/cg1/cg1076.htm> .)

According to McGarry, Brigit is the daughter of Dana and Dana is from Atlantis. In Celtic literature, Dana is an Irish goddess sometimes equated by modern scholars with Brigit. Atlantis is of Greek, not Celtic, construction. The goddess Brigit is described in the medieval Irish text Cormac’s Glossary (c. 900 CE) as being a daughter of the Daghdha, but not of Dana. (Brian Wright, in his own imagining of Brigit’s parentage, has her mother as the Morrigan. Kondratiev gives Boann—he doesn’t use that name, but calls her “The White Cow” and “the river Boyne”. None of these authors offer substantiation for their maternal genealogies.)

There are many examples of such [UPG](#) in the book, together with a mingling of unrelated magical systems which, though they may work well together, are *not* examples of traditional Celtic healing. This is a problem here, where it is not in *Candlemas*, because the claim is different. One book celebrates a mingling of traditions where the other claims a pure lineage that it doesn’t deliver on.

In her attempt to present a unified Brigit, McGarry blurs goddess and saint, sacrificing important differences and exaggerating desired aspects. This is acceptable in a personal devotional practice, and we all exercise our preferences more or less in how we represent her to ourselves, but to offer this as undiluted fact misleads the reader.

There is one example of reinterpretation presented as fact that I want to outline here not because it is outrageously unique but because it is one of a genre of creative reimagining and wishful thinking that might work well in fiction or in UPG-based ritual, but which mars writing that claims to be based in fact.

“Brighid carries a sword, the Blade of Truth and Justice. She abhors war and offers Her protection to soldiers who will lay down their weapons” (pg 57). This is a bold statement whose origins are unclear. Where in the literature does Brigit carry a sword, by this or any other name? Not as a goddess, although she is the patron of swordmakers (eg smiths). Nor, to my knowledge, as a saint: she handed over her father’s sword to a poor man. If she does wield a sword somewhere, I want to read the source, to add to my understanding of her. If McGarry is being metaphorical, fine, but this needs to be made plain.

And what is the comment about the soldiers based on? It’s true that Saint Brigit is shown to interfere in the process of war in some of the stories in her *vitae*, and she is today a powerful symbol for peace and reconciliation. But there is strong evidence that both she and the goddess were invoked in battle:

“Yet in time of war St Brighid was wont to intervene in favour of Leinstermen and more or less in the manner of the pagan war-goddess. But there is no essential inconsistency here, for Brighid was tutelary goddess of the land of Leinster and, as such, she was as much concerned with its political as with its economic well-being.”

*Celtic Mythology* Proinsias Mac Cana, pg 93

In the end, what is presented here is an earnest vision based as much on McGarry's laudable wishes for the world as on real research, and more on non-Celtic than Celtic principles and lore. Ditching the idea that what she presents is "traditional" and instead embracing the cultural fusion and the personal inspiration employed here would have been much appreciated steps toward a stronger and more realistic offering.

- [1] See "[Useful Terms](#)" in the introduction to this posting.
- [2] *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, Angela Bourke, (Random House, 2010) pp 30-31
- [3] A modernized version of this book is available, edited by Michael Scott.

### **Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom, Erynn Rowan Laurie (2007) Megalithica Books**



*O: WWW* is a thoroughly researched and well executed primer on the Irish medieval cipher system known as the *ogam* or *ogham* and its use in modern times. Although not devoted entirely to Brigit, I include it because of Brigit's great presence in the book, placed within the context of a wider Celtic worldview, and the text's usefulness to Brigidines who are interested in contemplation, divination, ritual, and so on.

Beginning with a strong grounding in the ancient uses and meanings of the *ogam* and adding her own insights as a practitioner of Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism (CR), Laurie guides us in learning and using the wisdom offered therein. She is careful to differentiate between medieval and folk sources and modern SPG and UPG. (See definitions of SPG and UPG in the introduction to this set of reviews.) References to Brigit appear frequently in the book in association with different symbols or *feda*, for instance *Lus* (flame—herb) and *Dair* (oak), as well as in ritual.

Laurie gives an overview of the *ogam* and its Celtic setting, and discusses the modern situation as well, from a CR point of view. She then delves in detail into each symbol—its meanings, associations, and

possible uses and interpretations in readings—and provides a question or two to contemplate in



association with each *fid*. Readings are enhanced by her examination of the Celtic elements of Land, Sea, and Sky, and of the three Cauldrons. The second half of the book is devoted to divination techniques, ritual, and meditations. Rather than simply saying, do this, do that, she details her own understanding of and aims in the creation of ritual.

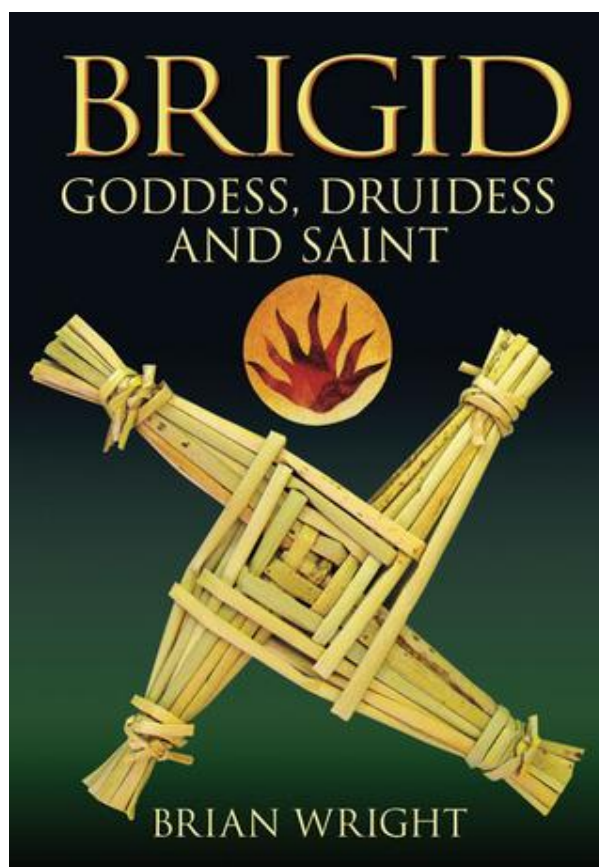
Brigit's healthy presence in *O:WWW* is not surprising. The *ogam* are tools of Celtic poetcraft and Brigit is the goddess of poets. If you are interested in doing ritual, divination, poetry, or healing work with a deeper awareness of ancient associations, this book is a truly valuable tool. And it has everything I search for in a reference book: lucid writing, verifiable research, clear distinctions between opinion and fact and between modern and traditional, and a useful bibliography, glossary, and index.

### **Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint, Brian Wright (2009) The History Press (Gloucestershire)**

Although neither the author nor the publisher presents this as a Neo-Pagan book, this is what it appears to be. I would prefer that bias be stated outright, as is done in Amber and Azrael K's *Candlemas* or Erynn Laurie's *Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*.

I want to write an honest survey of the available books on Brigit, but there are times like now when I am uncomfortable with that task. I don't doubt the sincerity of this author or the hard work he has put into researching, theorizing, and writing his book. I appreciate his interest in Brigit and consider him a fellow traveller. But much as I want to like it I can't in good conscience recommend this book.

*B:GDS* is presented as a scholarly work based on "original historical and archaeological research" but that is not how it reads. To better understand what sort of scholar Wright is, I wrote to his publisher, who had earlier been happy to supply a review copy. I asked for a list of some of his academic publications, intending to read articles by him which are more carefully sourced and argued than this book, and to check the responses of his peers to his work. This time, the publisher did not respond.



I wasn't able on my own to find articles by him in academic journals, but I did track down a review of *B:GDS* by McGill professor Dorothy Ann Bray in the journal *Folklore* (Vol. 121, Dec. 2010). Her conclusions were similar to my own. "Had he stuck with simply bringing together the modern folk customs and beliefs of Saint Brigit—and had he offered proper references—Wright might

have produced a book both interesting and useful. As it is, this book is seriously limited in value.” I have posted the full text of her criticism for those who are interested.

On to my reading of the book. An element of doubt was immediately introduced with the cover claim that the book “uncovers for the first time when and by whom the goddess was ‘conceived’, and evidence that Saint Brigid was a real person.” After many years’ exposure to the careful, evidence-based speculations of researchers in the field of Celtic and specifically Brigidine studies, none of whom make such definitive assertions, I am very leery of this grand claim.

In general, *B:GDS* gives a broad review of known Brigidine fact and lore glued together with a large dose of unproven assertion. Wright overlooks evidence that conflicts with his own ideas, fails to present his ideas as untested hypotheses, and frequently gives foundationless arguments as proofs.

On the plus side, he has gathered together some interesting items, for instance his chapter on relics, and lists of variations of Brigit’s name and of different saints named Brigit. There are many black and white images, including recreations of Celtic buildings and of how Brigit’s church may have looked at the time of Cogitosus (7<sup>th</sup> century). He has a generous index—“Crosses, Brigid’s” alone has 15 sub-listings. And he has an interesting take on the “serpent” connection which is suggested by the Scottish folk verse:

To-day is the Day of Bride,  
The serpent shall come from his hole,  
I will not molest the serpent,  
And the serpent will not molest me.[1]

Rejecting the idea promoted by Mary Condren that this tale originates in snakeless Ireland, or that it reflects vestigial snake worship, he says, “the beating of the ‘serpent’ does not look like veneration of the snake but rather its defeat, perhaps inspired by the biblical reference... ‘Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon shall thou trample under feet’” (pg 138).

I’m inclined to agree. Despite the presence of snakes in Celtic art in Ireland and elsewhere, there are no tales linking the goddess Brigit or, that I’m aware of, no manuscripts or folk traditions *in Ireland* that link Saint Brigit herself to snakes. On the other hand, Scotland has both snakes and superstitions concerning them, and it is Scotland which gives us the tradition linking the snake to Saint Bride. This suggests a later, not earlier, connection of the snake to Brigit.

Mostly, though, the going is much trickier in this work. Wright devotes an early chapter to the Brigantes, a subject not often covered in writings about Brigit, and the history is interesting. But his assumptions detract greatly from the story. He is careless in his interpretations, presenting as fact his imaginings about what the evidence says and where it leads. He writes as though he knows, for example, what the Druids of the 1<sup>st</sup> century thought and did, and when they did it. He often repeats but never substantiates that the Brigantian Druids had a “policy of uniting both the Irish Druids and the Irish Celts” (pg 25). *How* does he know this? No substantiating evidence is given.

Similarly, he constructs a vision of what Brigantia was like and what her role was in her society, as well as the way in which it was changed after Roman domination—speculations which are



unconvincing, but which, when presented as fact, seem inarguable. For example, he writes that after the Roman subjugation of the Brigantes “the perception of their goddess Brigantia began to change as her warrior aspects as a warrior goddess became less relevant” (pg 17).

This statement contains a number of assumptions, not least of which is the idea that we know what their perception of the goddess was in the first place. Returning to Wright’s original description of Brigantia I find that he has given *no* concrete evidence for her nature. He has given guesses based on scholarly work on Celtic goddesses in general, saying that the “Brigantes probably ‘saw’” her and “the evidence of her power in the landscape of their tribal territory...” (pg 13). How can he know how their perception changed when he doesn’t even know what it *was*? And subjugation of a people does not immediately translate into a loss of the fighting spirit. The experience of the Irish in historic times is evidence enough of that.

More worrying is his extrapolation, from the most slender threads of evidence, the solid assertion that it was escaping Brigantes coming to Ireland (Druids in the lead) who brought their own goddess and deliberately invented an Irish counterpart named Brigit in order to further their political ends. He says “...there is evidence that...Brigantian Druids...migrated to Ireland in the second half of the first century” (pg 23). But in fact he has given evidence only of *Brigantes* arriving in Ireland, and he has inferred that their Druids came with them. There is a big difference between the two when you then go on to infer a whole story about folk you have not actually shown were even there.

Another example. After describing the goddess Brigit’s father, the Daghdha, Wright goes on to describe Brigit’s mother, selecting the Morrigan for that role. (For other assertions of her mother’s identity, see the Kondratiev and McGarry reviews.) This is seamlessly done and follows what appears to be a quote describing the mating of those two deities which concludes “the result of this union was to be Brighid.” The “quote” is offset from the surrounding text. The next piece of offset text, which *is* a quote, is from the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Cormac’s Glossary*, telling of Brigit, the daughter of the Daghdha. (No mother mentioned.)

So, who, if anyone, is he quoting in the first passage? He doesn’t say. If it is his own text, why offset it like this? He gives no hint as to where he gleaned the fact that the Morrigan was her mother, and since the Daghdha was the father of three sons as well, if any issue did come of that mating (the actual tale doesn’t mention it), it could well have been one of them. I’ve seen no evidence that the Morrigan (or anyone else) is the mother of the goddess Brigit—if you know of any, please point me to it. Scanning the texts on Brigit by Ó Catháin, Ó Duinn, and so on, I find no mention of the Morrigan at all in connection to her, though there are many of the Daghdha. Thus for me great doubt is cast upon this blithely stated and unsubstantiated claim.

On this foundation of air Wright builds the house of Brigit—which of her traits can be traced to her father, which to her mother, and so on. Again without substantiation (for there is none to be had), he states categorically that Brigit the saint was “a senior Druidess before her conversion”, and that she inherited her smith aspect from the De Danann smith Goibniu after he died in a fight with her son Ruadhan. Ruadhan, he explains, couldn’t have inherited the role of smith because he died, too.

But if you read the original tale you see that Goibniu *didn't die*. He was dipped in the well *Slaine* in which the Tuatha De Danann placed their mortally wounded warriors and was made whole. He went on to help defeat their foes and died later with no help from Brigit or her son.

And so on. You see my frustration. I don't say Wright has deliberately ignored or twisted evidence, but in interpreting things as he has he is able to build up a story about Brigit that is completely unsupported by fact, and by omitting both citations and evidence which would make mud of his hypotheses he is able to pass them off as proven. A reader innocent of the background information could easily be persuaded that she was privy to The Truth About Brigit. *And this really annoys me.*

Yet it also saddens me. In presenting as truth what is only his best guess, a doubtless well-meaning author is adding to the already great confusion about Brigit instead of bringing much-needed clarity. Readers are smart enough to understand subtlety, to follow difficult or obscure evidence, accept uncertainties, decide for ourselves among well-reasoned arguments if the facts are written clearly and are supported. We don't require oversimplifications that mislead us into unwarranted certainty. Indeed we *want* to understand, which is why we read, even if understanding means we are left with some questions unanswered.

One of the great gifts of following Brigit over the years has been the gradual unfolding of knowledge about her. Unlearning oversimplifications and misconstructions has been painful at times, as I have been forced to shed cherished assumptions, but the resulting picture is much richer and has far more to teach about we humans and our relationship to the divine.

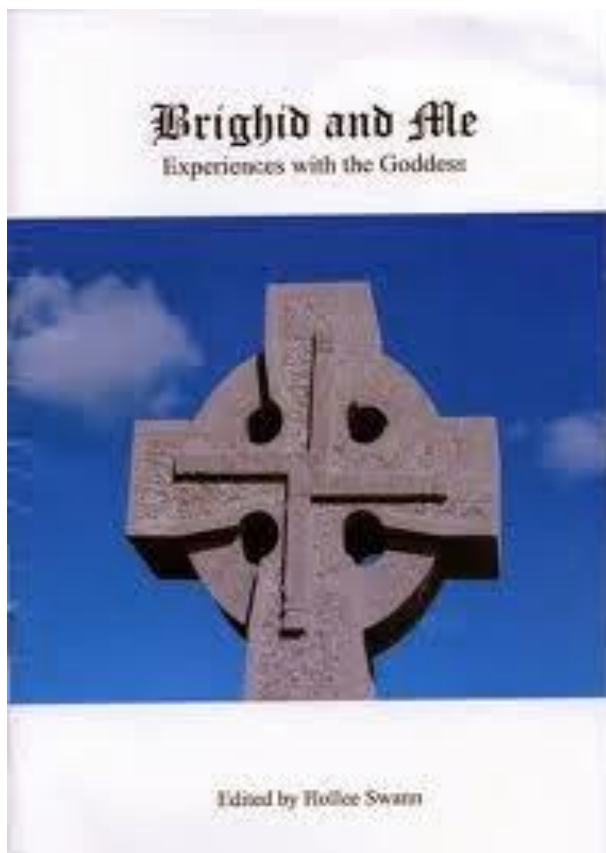
Please be clear, I don't object to creative thought. In shining facts through the prism of our imagination we can develop a rich spirituality and do much to heal our world. But keeping fact and fabrication separate is essential in that task. (See SPG and UPG above.) Wright fails badly in this regard.

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[1] *Wonder Tales from Scottish Myth and Legend* by Donald Alexander Mackenzie (1917)

### ***Brigid and Me: Experiences with the Goddess*, Hollee Swann, ed. (2010) copyright Helen Roberts (Pamphlet)**

Holley Swann of Gloucestershire, England, conceived of this pamphlet as a way to celebrate Brigit and raise funds for the Alzheimer's Society, in honour of Brigit's healing aspect. Unlike most Brigit-related books, *Brigid and Me* isn't about the goddess or the saint herself but about her devotees. Hollee asked, "How do they relate to her, communicate with her, honour her? How did they first discover Brigit—was it gradual or an epiphany? How do they manifest her qualities in their lives? Which of her many aspects do they connect with?"



Given these questions, the sixteen contributors set out in poetry and prose to reveal something of the nature of that very personal relationship. A couple of examples:

Brid Wyldearth writes of her rocky beginnings with and later pilgrimages to Glastonbury in “Reclaiming Brigit”. I tell of coming to know her and to create the Daughters of the Flame in “A Dream of Brigit”. Ceri Norman describes her transformations in “Brighid—My Guide”. Jill Smith offers her reminiscences and her paintings of “Brighde in the Western Isles”. Rose Flint graces us with her poetry, beginning with:

I saw her last week, coming down the sky  
with a white following  
billowing up in a furl of swansdown  
loud as the quickening wind

The essays in this small collection are heartfelt and enjoyable. Thanks to Hollee for her inspiration in bringing the booklet to us.

### ***Brigit: Sun of Womanhood*, ed. Patricia Monaghan and Michael McDermott (2013)**

As foreshadowed above, only a brief mention here of this latest Brigidine offering, to avoid further delays as I meander through it and with excruciating slowness write a review.

This book, edited with her husband Michael McDermott, is Monaghan’s swan song, coming into publication at the time of her death last year. In it are collected essays, poems, snippets of fiction. The publisher, Goddess Ink, writes of it: “Brigit: Sun of Womanhood offers a holistic picture of Brigit from her beginnings as a Celtic Goddess to her role as a Christian saint. The contributors to this anthology hail from all parts of the globe—including Ireland, Scotland, the United States and Canada—reflecting the widespread influence of Brigit.”

## **Dawn at Brigit's Well**

*by Patricia Monaghan*

In hope, in pain, in song we passed the night.  
We have kept watch—kept faith—each in our way.  
Our long dark vigil ends in spring's mild light.

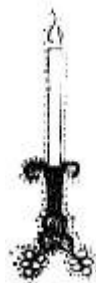
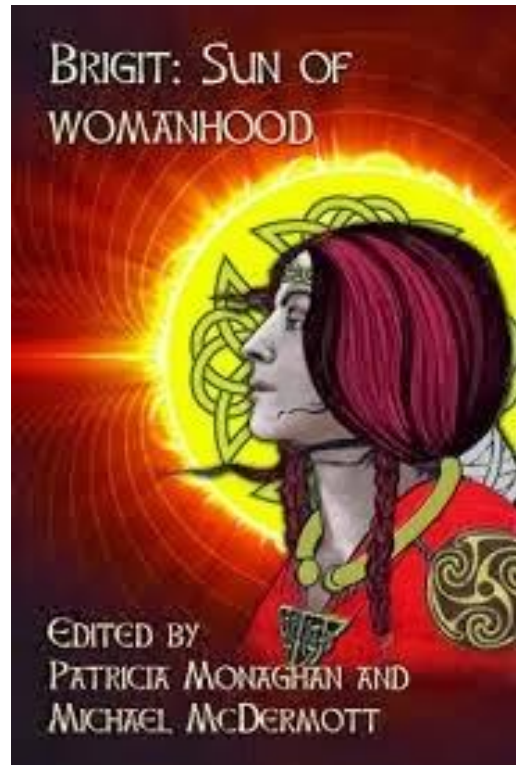
We ended winter with this ancient rite,  
Strangers until we joined our hands to pray.  
In hope, in pain, in song we passed the night.

Beside the guttering candles, a single white  
Snowdrop nods to greet St. Brigit's day.  
A long dark vigil ends in spring's mild light.

So much is wrong, across the world: we fight  
Each other, blight the land, betray  
Our hopes. In plaintive song we passed the night.

Yet we believe and pray, acolytes  
In service to a change too long delayed.  
Our long dark vigil ends in spring's mild light

And we rise, renewed. Such ritual ignites  
The fire in our souls. It's a new day.  
In hope, in pain, in song we passed the night.  
The long dark vigil ends in spring's mild light.



## Brigit Reviews: Nonfiction (Academic/Popular Academic)

Finally! The last installment of my promised book reviews. A pleasure it was to acquaint myself with the breadth of writing available on Brigit. I'll pin links to the reviews on the Pages tab (below the title banner of this blog) in order to make them more accessible to later readers, and will also make the whole lot available by request as a pdf.

By "academic/popular" I mean books written in a scholarly style but accessible (sometimes with a real effort) to a general audience. They are footnoted, backed up citations, and so on, and so the thinking in them can be more or less traced and verified. These I can only observe as a reader, not criticize as an expert.

*The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland*, Mary Condren (1989)

"Fire and the Arts" (etc) in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Kim McCone (1990)

*The Festival of Brigit*, Séamas Ó Catháin (1995)

*Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Miranda Green (1996)

"Imbolc: A New Interpretation", Phillip A. Bernhardt-House (pp 57-76) in *Cosmos 18* (2002)

*The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint*, Seán Ó Duinn (2005)

*Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*, Lisa M. Bitel (2009)

"Queering the Flame: Brigit, Flamekeeping, and Gender in Celtic Reconstructionist Pagan Communities", by Erynn Rowan Laurie in *The Well of Five Streams: Essays on Celtic Paganism* (Immanion Press, projected release 2015) 17 pp.

## Introduction

There are some delicious writings in here, with lots of obscure references and nimble interpretations; a cornucopia of ideas to mull over in building an understanding of Brigit. Two recommended sources which give abundant info on the world in which St Brigit lived are [\*Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200\*](#) by **Dáibhí Ó Crónín** (1995) (not reviewed here) and **Bitel's** *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*. Placing her in the context of her world allows for a much deeper look into her Lives and mythos, helping us to notice where our assumptions are modern and inappropriate, and allowing us to develop a more balanced perspective.

Though the earliest of these investigations, **Condren's** *The Serpent and the Goddess* is less about Brigit as it is the Christian church in Ireland and its treatment of women. I don't recommend it for developing an understanding of Brigit.



In *The Festival of Brigit*, **Ó Catháin** explores the festival of Imbolc and searches far afield for evidence linking Brigit to, for example, the bear cult and horned deities. Fascinating reading, carefully explored and documented.

**McCone's** *Pagan Past and Christian Present* contains important insights into sacred kingship, the sovereignty goddess, and the three major divisions of Celtic society and convincingly suggests their reflection in Brigit's various personae.

**Green** examines the place of women and female deities in Celtic society, and focusses on a number of female-related themes and specific goddesses in *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. Brigit is looked at in the chapter on the transition from paganism to Christianity.

**Bernhardt-House** offers a detailed and unique examination of the meaning of the word Imbolc and its possible links to the wolf in ancient times in "Imbolc: A New Interpretation".

In *The Rites of Brigid*, **Ó Duinn** examines a variety of Brigit-related folk customs. He compares in detail the perpetual fires of the Vestal Virgins and Brigit, and describes other sacred and perpetual flames in medieval Ireland. Very useful.

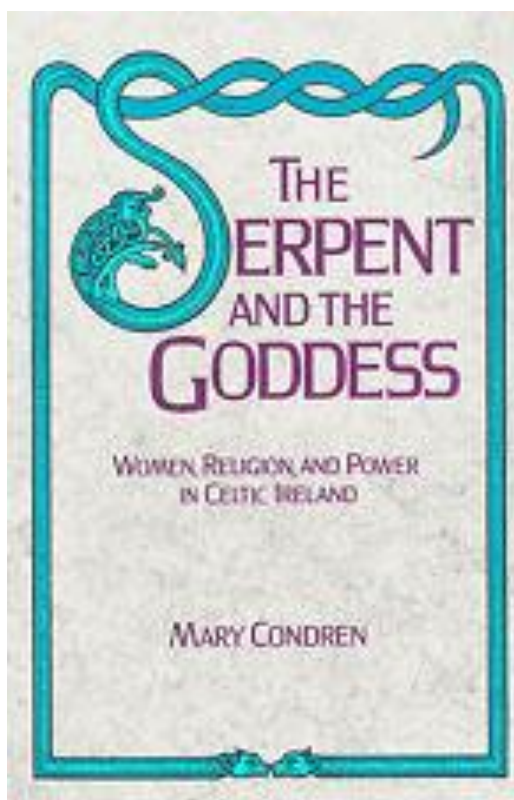
**Bitel** looks at some important Lives of St Brigit in *Landscape with Two Saints*, comparing that by Cogitosus of Kildare with those of later writers of Armagh, and putting them into the political context of their times. She examines the legacy of Brigit, and the changing role of women in Ireland.

A rather different perspective is offered in **Laurie's** "Queering the Flame: Brigit, Flamekeeping, and Gender in Celtic Reconstructionist Pagan Communities". This piece, which could have fit well into the Nonfiction, Popular (NeoPagan) section, I place here because of Laurie's exacting standards of research and presentation. (Footnotes and citations and quotes, oh my!)

### ***The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland*, Mary Condren (1989) Harper and Row, San Francisco**

*The Serpent and the Goddess* broke important ground in 1989, not least in gathering scattered Brigidine scholarship and presenting it to a larger audience. Feminists, goddess worshippers, Irish nationalists, and theologians were given ample food for thought. Rather than reviewing it as a whole I will highlight its treatment of Brigit.

*Serpent* isn't intended to teach us how to understand and celebrate Brigit, but to reflect on the changing role of women in religion and society. Still, many of us do pick it up to learn about her. There are now much better sources to turn to for that purpose—any of the other books in this review, Curtayne or Smucker for non academic books on the saint, or Kondratiev and K and Laurie for NeoPagan perspectives.



Alice Curtayne touched on Brigit's role as peacemaker in ancient and modern times in *Saint Brigit of Kildare* (1954). Thirty-five years later Mary Condren placed the shattering political situation in Northern Ireland, with its inextricably "religious" overtones, front and centre in her introduction to a book that examines Brigit in tandem with Eve and Mary in relation to gender, power, and religion. Her assessment of Brigit's role is not so benign as Curtayne's:

"...whereas Brigit once may have been a Mother Goddess defending the rights of women, as the Irish political structure moved toward a hierarchical and military form of organization and as the Irish church, in line with Roman ambitions, developed a centralized hierarchy, Brigit would lose whatever power she still had: a power that she had maintained so precariously, often at the expense of other women" (xii).

If this seems to throw Brigit out with the well-water, fear not. Condren has gone on to champion the reclamation of Brigit in our lives. She writes in the [Irish Times](#), "Like community activists and nurturers, Brigit wove the fragile

threads of life into webs of community...her bountiful nature ...ensured that the *neart* (life force) was kept moving for the benefit of all and was not stagnated by greed."<sup>21</sup>

Condren's critical eye, turned to the less admirable uses Brigit has been put to, reminds us of our own need to be careful of how we represent her. Yet her examination and interpretation of the evidence is itself skewed. Some of her basic assertions are unsupportable, such as that the vulture and the snake are two of Brigit's most common symbols. Condren is attempting to link Brigit to Isis through shared symbols, but the ones she has chosen are inappropriate. I haven't read a single reference in the Irish sources to vultures *or* snakes in connection with Brigit. There are rare references to snakes in Scottish lore, but this hardly justifies calling them Brigit's prime symbols. Miranda Green does link a handful of Celtic goddesses to snakes—Sirona, for example; Brigit she lists among goddesses associated not with snakes, but cattle.<sup>22</sup>

Nor are snakes in the Celtic imagination necessarily associated with goddesses. The continental god Cernunnos is depicted with snakes, as is an androgynous deity on the Gundestrup Cauldron. Condren herself is aware that the snake-pounding at Imbolc mentioned in the *Carmina Gadelica*, which she interprets as part of a serpentine regeneration rite, could be "a later Christian accretion"<sup>23</sup>. Her extrapolation from a single, secondary folk custom concerning a snake on Imbolc to regarding Brigit as a serpent goddess is therefore baffling. In North America the snake-in-the-hole tradition of weather-prediction was transformed into Groundhog Day. It is easily possible that the original creature used to

<sup>21</sup> Irish Times, 31 January 2011

<sup>22</sup> Green, *Celtic Goddess*, pg 169-171 and pg 182.

<sup>23</sup> pg 231, note 64.

predict the end of winter in Celtic times was some animal other than a snake *or* a groundhog; indeed, in parts of France and Belgium the appearance of a wolf at Candlemas portended the end of winter<sup>24</sup>, and Ó Catháin explores the possibility that that creature, connected to Brigit, might be the bear.

Far more obvious symbols for Brigit than vulture and snake are the cow, the rush, the poet or the smith. Condren reminds us evocatively of the importance of the cow association: “the milk of the Sacred Cow...was one of the earliest sacred foods throughout the world, equivalent to our present day communion... The Sacred Cow symbolises the sacredness of motherhood: through her milk the lifeforce itself was sustained and nourished (p 58).”

But her suggestion that Dumha na Bó (Mound of the Cow) at Tara was perhaps associated with Brigit’s sacred cow is a huge leap. The cow was of primary importance to the Irish Celts as an economic unit and was the focus of much cultural activity and lore. The goddess Boann is herself a sovereign goddess associated with cows. Miranda Green in *Celtic Goddesses* writes, “Boann is a ‘cow’ name, translated by (Anne) Ross as ‘She who has white cows’. The goddess of sovereignty was traditionally associated with cattle (pg 83).” Without further evidence there is no reason to suppose that anything ‘cowish’ suggests a connection to the goddess Brigit, particularly when remembering that the only cow links we are sure of pertain to the saint.

Condren portrays a Celtic warrior society eager to rid itself of its goddesses—“the religion of the Mother” (p 60), whose territorial nature interfered with the male impulse to invade and dominate. The picture doesn’t agree with my impression from wider reading, and the specific argument seems untenable: goddesses didn’t prevent the rapid spread of the Celts throughout Europe and Celtic goddesses, including Brigit<sup>25</sup>, often have warrior aspects themselves. As Green plainly states, “female spirits—goddesses—were central to Celtic perceptions of the divine world”<sup>26</sup> (pg 9).

Condren then claims that the goddess Brigit was promoted to “the status of central divinity in Irish cosmology” as a deliberate move toward monotheism (pg 60). Yet if this goddess was central we can only guess it: in the existing texts of medieval Ireland she is identified clearly only once, and never with a key role in any story, where other goddesses make repeated and important appearances throughout the literature.

In her analysis of *The Battle of Moytura* she says that the “original sin” of Brigit’s son Ruadhan in *Moytura* resulted in the Tuatha De Danaan being thrown out of power (pg 61), but in the tale they in fact succeed against their enemies and remain in power<sup>27</sup>. In a more recent paper dealing with *The Battle of Moytura*<sup>28</sup>, Condren paints a particularly baffling picture. Dian Cécht is clearly identified in

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<sup>24</sup> “Imbolc: A New Interpretation”, Phillip A. Bernhardt-House (60-61), citing Van Gennep (1934) and O’Neill and Davis (1999).

Considering the absence of snake associations in Brigit’s vitae and the dominance of anti-snake imagery associated with Patrick, as well as to the equation of the snake with the devil in Christian symbolism, the “later Christian accretion” interpretation seems inescapable.

<sup>25</sup> See “Fire and the Arts” re: *Bríg ambue* (pg 162-163) in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Kim McCone (1990)

<sup>26</sup> *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Miranda Green (1996)

<sup>27</sup> See *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* Translated by Elizabeth A. Gray. Available [online](#).

<sup>28</sup> “Brigit: Soulmith for the New Millennium,” *Concilium: In the Power of Wisdom* eds. María Pilar Aquino and Elisabeth

the literature as the chief physician of the Tuatha De Danaan<sup>29</sup>, yet she refers to him as their blacksmith, pitting him and his bad behaviour, along with the bad behaviour of smiths generally in Celtic literature<sup>30</sup>, against the good behaviour of healers. It is true that Dian Cécht fashioned a silver arm for Nuada when he lost his in battle<sup>31</sup>. But to misidentify the chief physician as a smith because of this is inexplicable. It over-simplifies the context, putting smiths on one side (with death and patriarchy) and healers on the other, whereas the reality is much more complex.

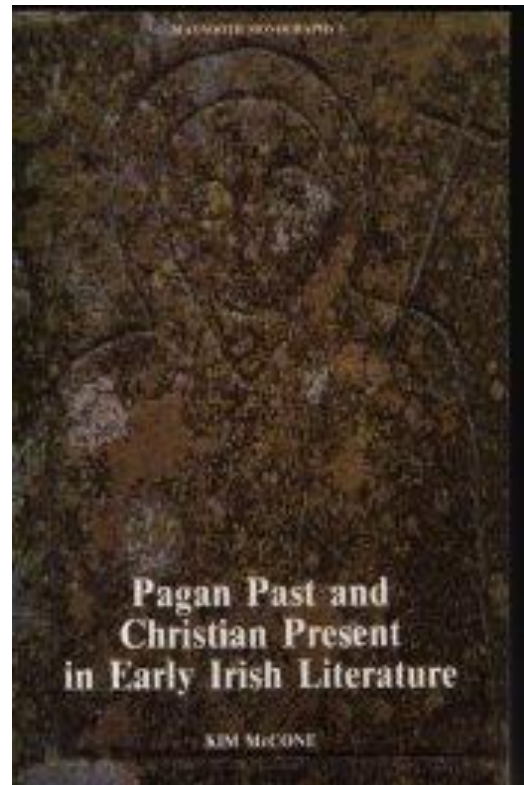
Again, this is not to argue with Condren's perception of the damage done by patriarchy, but with her methods in exploring the story of Brigit. Nor is it to say that all of her facts are wrong. It is just hard to winnow the oats from the chaff.

Although the text is peppered with interesting details, it is unreliable. Because she makes many unsupported and misleading statements regarding things I do know something about, dropping them into the text as if they were well established, I can't trust her interpretations of things about which I know nothing. The fact of women's diminution in social and religious realms, and the violence done to our psyche as a result, is broadly evident. In later writings, Condren points to its repair, and to an inclusive and affirming Christian spirituality, through the traditions of Brigit. This I think is where her greatest strength lies.

### **“Fire and the Arts” (etc) in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Kim McCone (1990) Maynooth Monographs 3**

This review touches on several chapters in this excellent book, of which “Fire and the Arts” most directly concerns Brigit. There is ample material also in the chapters “Heroes and Saints”, and “Politics and Propaganda”. The foundational material in “Kingship and Society” is important for understanding what follows in these chapters.

*PP & CP* aims to re-integrate the academic approach to the secular and ecclesiastical streams of medieval Irish literature, to draw together scattered researches into a lucid whole which can provide an internally consistent overview of the field. It examines precisely and in detail both the pre-Christian and Christian content of and influence on both. McCone's evidence is vivid and abundant, and he answers with care assertions he believes are false.



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Schüssler Fiorenza, vol. 5, (London: SCM Press, 2000), pp.107-119. Available [online](#).

<sup>29</sup>See for instance *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, edited by John T. Koch with John Carey (2003) pages 148, 253-5, 258-60.

<sup>30</sup>Condren is correct in noting the bad behaviour of smiths in Celtic tales, and other tales throughout old Europe. See “Celtic Smiths and Satirists: Partners Sorcery” by Mary Claire Randolph. *ELH*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Sep., 1941), pp. 184-197

<sup>31</sup>The work of a silversmith, not a blacksmith, who fashions iron. This ingenious adjunct to healing the wounded king permitted him to continue as leader of his people, where being one-armed would have prevented it..

Though clear, the book is not simple, and is probably unsuitable for casual readers, or those put off by a steady flow of Irish words and passages or wordy and intricate explorations.

McCone describes an early medieval Ireland that “had developed a dynamic political system dominated by ambitious overkings whose monastic propagandists and genealogists were ruthless reshapers of the past in the interests of the present” (pg ix). Foundational concepts such as sacred kingship and sovereign goddesses, with their ties to wisdom, prowess, and material abundance, are fully discussed. Misleading elements such as the un-Celtic mistiness of the Celtic Twilight movement, the Indo-European background, biblical influences, *etc* are laid out. The repeating motif of three divisions of society and social roles is examined and related to Brigit in fascinating ways.

The general categories are: *i*) material abundance and generosity, *ii*) heroism, physical prowess and perfect health, and *iii*) discernment and wise judgement. They reflect the three major citizen types— *i*) young, landless warriors, *ii*) landed soldier-farmers of more mature age, and *iii*) elders who play the role of judges and poets.

It “is hardly a coincidence that these should be precisely the three personal aspects...prone to transformation in literary representations of the goddess or woman of sovereignty (128).” The goddess is both the king’s spouse and his mother, and the ancestor of the royal line. She is the divine expression of the principals of which he is the human construct. The goddess, McCone demonstrates, may appear as an ugly hag made beautiful by her union with the king, a wild wanderer made sane again, or a woman of high caste raised by cowherds whose status is, in uniting with the king, restored (128).

Saint Brigit herself assumes more obvious links than Brigit the goddess (in the little mention we have of her in Cormac’s Glossary) to the three major social orders mentioned above—hospitaller, warrior, and “men of art”. There is a very interesting discussion of the collective evidence which touches on *Brig briugu* (hospitaller/provision), *Brig ambue*, (warfare) and *Brig/Brigit* (knowledge) and their goddess parallels.

McCone offers a detailed comparison of the Irish saints connected to fire and the three divisions of social order, and gives continental examples of fire cults, such as Sulis/Minerva, asserting that “pagan Brigit’s associations with sun and fire seems beyond reasonable doubt” (164)<sup>32</sup>. From here he examines the role of fire, especially in relation to cooking, in the mythic understanding of arts and culture in Irish, Greek, Indian, and Native American pre-Christian culture, and finds a place for them in the goddess Brigit’s attributes. Goddess of smiths: in smelting, the role of fire is obvious. Goddess of healing: in medicine, “the heating of brews”. Goddess of wisdom: knowledge, which, as is revealed in the Irish medieval poem “Caldron of Poesy”, is generated in three cauldrons in a man, must then be “cooked”, taking it from the wild state to one useable by society. (See also Erynn Rowan Laurie, *Ogam: Weaving Word Wisdom*, for a Celtic Reconstructionist Pagan exploration of these cauldrons.) “It then becomes easy enough to understand how this mediatory function of fire and cooking as interconnected modes of conversion from one state to another could lend itself to mythical treatments of poetic inspiration, learning and other social activities” (170).

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<sup>32</sup> Miranda Green disagrees (pg 198).



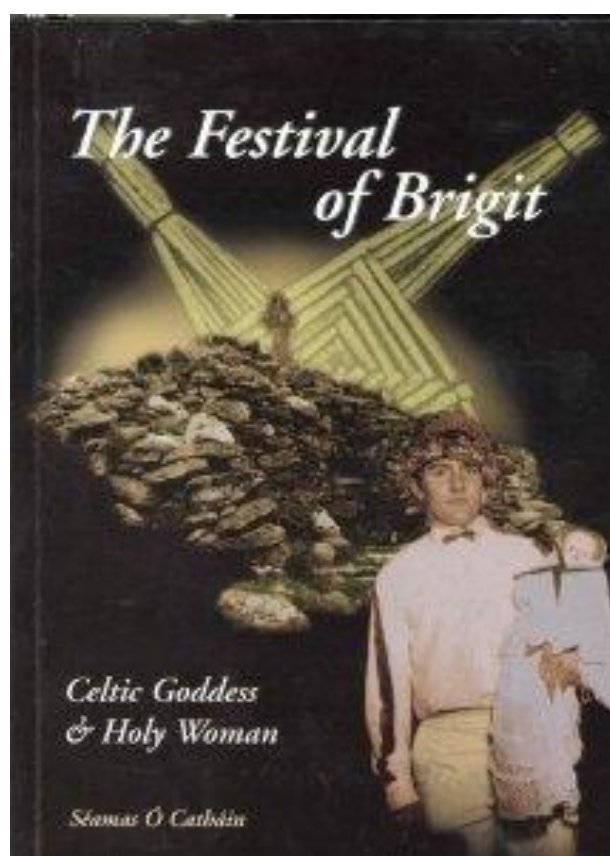
There is, of course, much more. This dense and thoroughly satisfying book lends a glimpse into the possibilities of Brigit by re-connecting her for modern readers to the cultures, both Pagan and Christian, from which she sprang. Highly recommended.

***The Festival of Brigit, Séamas Ó Catháin (1995) DBA Publications, Blackrock, Co. Dublin*** Received the 1995 *Ruth Michaelis-Jena Ratcliff Prize* in folklore and folklife.

I remember the excitement I felt when this book came to me in 1995, a gift from a fellow Brigidine. A whole book about Brigit (!) and one which reported in a careful and scholarly way on customs I knew little about. Ó Catháin sets Celtic materials next to Germanic and earlier European evidence, particularly Nordic, supplementing folk tradition with archaeology, classical writings, and Celtic literature to explore not only traditions unquestionably related to Brigit, but to dig into obscure potential connections with, for instance, the bear and horned deities.

Like Ó Duinn, Ó Catháin examines the festival of Imbolc, but where Ó Duinn collects brief anecdotes and interprets customs more generally, Ó Catháin delves in great detail into a few topics. Some of the documentary material offered is translated into English for the first time, and Ó Catháin's original research is—unlike that claimed by Brian Wright<sup>33</sup>— supported by verifiable research, and cautious in its conclusions.

For example, the chapter devoted to a rare form of folktale which may connect Brigit to the ancient continental bear goddess. The proposed connection to the circumpolar bear cult is tantalizing and well explored, beginning with the bear's emergence from hibernation at the time of Brigit's vernal awakening. The connection, if real, would be very old, from a time when the Celts had not yet reached bear-free Ireland. Ó Catháin discusses as well an implied link between Brigit and Lugh, and investigates legends such as the herdsman who alerts her people to her kidnapping.



Among the pleasures of this book are Ó Catháin's writing style, which is clear and evocative, his willingness to plough through the available evidence, and his careful, detailed, and well documented arguments. Sheer, unexpected delight.

There are a number of peculiarities in the way the book was produced that make it harder to use,

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<sup>33</sup> *Brigid: Goddess, Druidess and Saint*, Brian Wright (2009)

unfortunately. It has tiny print. The main text is unusually small; the quotes and voluminous (yes! yes!) footnotes are microscopic. Nevertheless, it's worth the squint. Worse, the table of contents is useless. Ideally in a reference book the chapters will have titles that tell you immediately what they are about, with perhaps a short summary of the chapter below the title, to make it easier to track down half-forgotten points. In *Festival* the chapters have no titles and the contents page gives no summaries; it is simply Chapter One, page 1, Notes to Chapter 1, page 18... They might have spared themselves the bother of putting it in at all.

One disappointment is the occasional quote in Latin or Irish which is not translated into English. This is fine for the Celtic scholar, who is expected to be fluent in these languages, but presents an impenetrable veil for most of us. Nevertheless, the discussion following such quotes roughly illuminates what has gone before, and it is only an occasional inconvenience.

More importantly, the footnotes are extensive and informative, and the index is good. Ó Catháin quotes liberally from original sources, allowing no confusion as to where his ideas come from and how solid they may be, and giving the reader the opportunity to form her own conclusions. A series of twenty-one black and white plates helps lend life and context to the ideas discussed in the book: young men with a Brigit effigy; Sámi drumheads; a Brigidine shrine inscribed with a swastika; a young woman wearing a crown of candles. We are immediately aware that intriguing parallels are being drawn here.

As Ó Catháin's reads it, "Christian devotion to the saint is imbued with the spirit of the goddess (pg x)", and he turns his eye in detail to the elements of deity to be found beneath the saint, reaching back to the goddess of the hearth and the bear goddess. The purpose of the book is to examine the available evidence in order to gain a hint of the pagan festival associated with Brigit, and he does a compelling job of it. It is important to bear in mind, though, that these are *ideas* he is exploring. Even the author does not swear to their historical truth. It is our responsibility to pass on that caution when sharing his ideas with others, rather than plunking the bare bones of hypotheses down as fact in our writings about Brigit and her cult.

For those who like a hearty stew and a scholarly style, this book has much to offer. In his own words, "Much...still lies awaiting discovery in the lap of the goddess. (xii)"

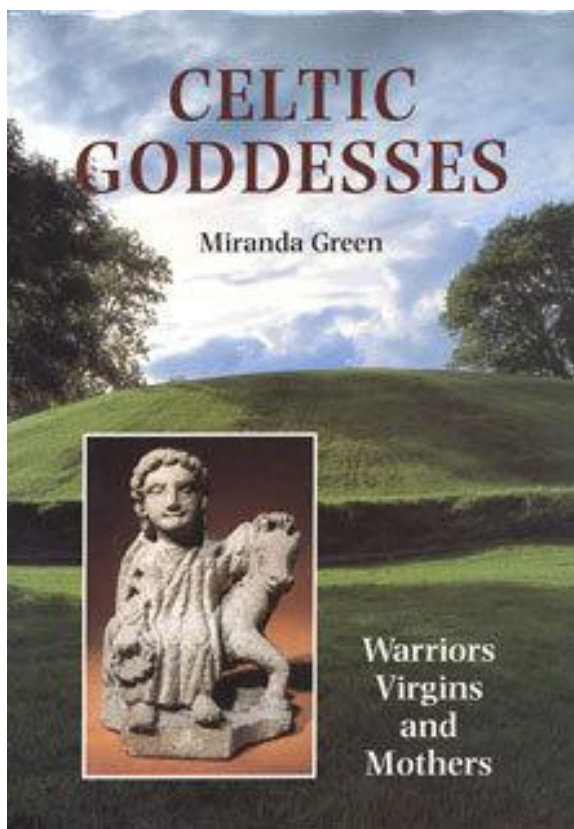
### ***Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers, Miranda Green (1996) George Braziller, New York***

I include this book, though it has only a few pages about Brigit (notably pg 195-202), because of the background it gives on women in Celtic society and Celtic goddesses generally and for Green's unusual perspective on the interpretation of Brigit as goddess and saint.

Green argues that by its "polytheistic perception of the Celtic supernatural world" (pg 203) Celtic religion permitted a vital role for female nature spirits and deities that is denied in monotheistic cultures where deity is by definition male. However, she reasons against the extrapolation that is often made

from this that Celtic women must therefore have had a high status in their society (pg 15)<sup>34</sup>. Her careful eye and thoughtful approach to the materials lend weight to the discussion of, for example, “The Divine Female in Welsh Myth”; “Sovereignty, Sexuality, and the Otherworld in Irish Myth”; “Water-Goddess, Healers and Mothers”; and “Priestess, Prophetess, and Witch”. The last chapter, “From Goddess to Saint”, offers an examination of Brigit as a representative of the “meeting and merging of paganism and Christianity” (pg 202).

The goddess Brigit is a daughter of the Daghdha (a Tuatha De Danaan—the deities of Celtic Ireland) and the wife of Bres (a Fomorian—among the Tuatha De Danaan’s greatest foes). According to Green, in this dual role she acted as a mediator between the two peoples. Her interest, despite being a tribal deity, was not the winning of wars for one side or the other<sup>35</sup> but, “as an ancestor-deity, a mother goddess whose main concern was the future well-being of Ireland,” (pg198) of finding peace between the two if possible.



Green refers to the paradox of St Brigit's sacrifice of her own sexuality (in order to maintain autonomy and be able to do her life's work) and her deep connection to fertility and birth, her ability even to “cure frigidity in women” (pg 200). “The strength of Brigit's fertility-imagery is suggested by the medieval carvings of Sheelana-gigs in Ireland, interpreted by some scholars as grotesque depictions of Brigit with the entrance to her womb wide-open, even though the saint was a virgin. As we saw with some of the Welsh goddesses... it may be that it was because Brigit was sexually-intact that her fertile power was so concentrated (pg 200).” Elsewhere she points out that an “apparent paradox—which is presented particularly in the early myths—is that both virginity and marriage generated special power in the female” (pg 204). (She is not specifically talking about Brigit here, but of Celtic goddesses generally.)

Her warning, though, is well heeded: “Little is known in detail about the goddess Brigit. There is a danger of creating a picture of her pagan role from information we have of Brigit as a saint, because certain elements of her life as a Christian holy woman appear to

be pre-Christian in origin. An example of the is the saint’s magical association with fire, which has given rise to the deity being identified as a fire-goddess” (pg 198).

An excellent foundational work for the understanding of Brigit in her role as goddess and Celtic woman.

<sup>34</sup> See also Lisa Bitel on the subject of women’s circumscribed role in early Irish society. *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*, Lisa M. Bitel (2009)

<sup>35</sup> This role began with her later sainthood. See my review here of Ó Duinn’s *Rites of Brigit*

## **“Imbolc: A New Interpretation”, Phillip A. Bernhardt-House (pp 57-76) in *Cosmos 18* (2002)**

This intriguing article looks at the meaning of Imbolc from a new perspective—that of a connection with wolf and warrior cults originating with the Indo-Europeans and presenting in Roman and Celtic civilizations. Bernhardt-House has a broad knowledge of the literature and he brings together disparate pieces into a tantalizing whole. Where he himself concludes that his new etymology may be proved unsound, it nevertheless serves to “refocus our attentions on certain smaller aspects” of Imbolc, particularly the wolf aspect, which is “now beyond doubt as having been important to the holiday as it would have been observed in pre-Christian times” (pg 65-66).<sup>36</sup>

In approaching the subject, Bernhardt-House first looks at both Neo-Pagan and scholarly etymologies of the Irish word for the festival, Imbolc. While accepting the consensus meanings of milking and purification, he suggests an additional—and surprising—one.

If *im* has as its basis “butter”, *olc* is generally derived as “evil, bad, wrong” in Irish, both Old and Modern. But Kim McCone<sup>37</sup> traces this word back to the Indo-European root meaning “wolf”. Joining these two, Bernhardt-House offers “Imbolc as the 'butter-wolf'”, hoping to “shed some light on further images in Irish sources, as well as connecting this to a further complex within Indo-European ritual” (pg 60).

These images in Irish sources range from calendrical evidence linking February to wolves, the association of Candlemas in France and Belgium with the wolf (where a wolf sighting predicts the ending of winter), of Brigit herself with the bear and wolf, and so on, along with an examination of the period of time between Samhain and Imbolc and its association with warring, as well as hospitality.

Perhaps most interesting is the parallel drawn between the rites of the Lupercalia in Rome and Imbolc in Ireland, and their potential links to Gaulish deities and to earlier rituals. The link with purification in both festivals is already established; the writer points to a possible further link in purification with the use of milk or, in the Irish case, butter.

The young Roman priests, the Luperci, sacrificed a dog and a goat at the cave where Romulus and Remus were said to have been nursed by a wolf. The blood of these two animals was mixed and the youngest priest's forehead anointed with the mixture; this was then cleaned away using a piece of milk-soaked wool,



<sup>36</sup> For a complete review of the wolf and werewolf in Celtic literature and an examination of that material, see Bernhardt-House, Phillip A., *Werewolves, magical hounds, and dog-headed men in Celtic literature: a typological study of shape-shifting*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> See my review above of his Brigit section, “Fire and the Arts” (etc) in *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Kim McCone (1990)

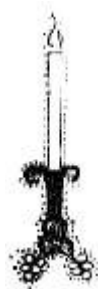


which ritual was followed eventually by striking the general populace with goat-skin thongs for luck and fertility.

In a medieval story St Brigit removes the signs worn by men which signify their engagement in activities of war; Bernhardt-House suggests that if “some form of Brigid was one of the presiding deities of Imbolc, Brigit who was bear-mother in origin but could easily have been a wolf-mother in Ireland, might have been the deity who removed these warrior-signs and reincorporated the youthful *fian*-warriors into regular society, perhaps by the means of the purifying medium of milk, or, given the etymology I have suggested with *imb*-, perhaps even butter” (pg 64).

The details examined by the writer are greater in number and scope than suggested by this brief review, and it is worth tracking down the article through your local or university library.<sup>38</sup>

This is just the sort of thing that gets the creative mind churning along nicely. A very enjoyable article.



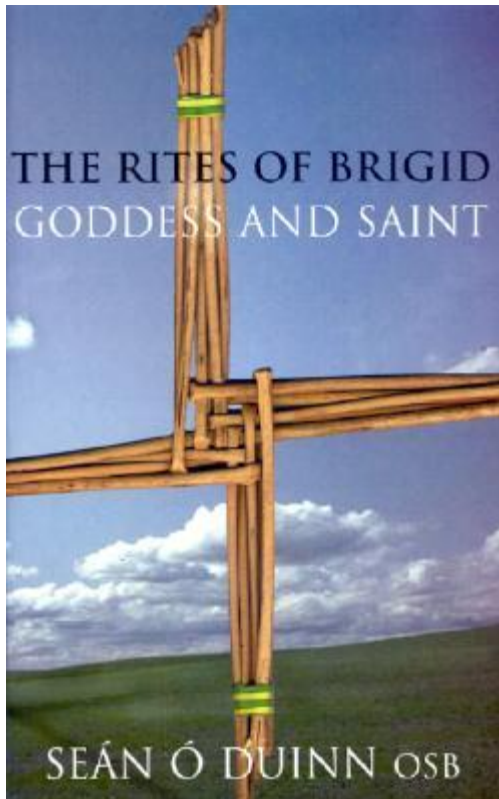
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<sup>38</sup> For a posting in the NeoPagan blogosphere see <http://www.patheos.com/community/paganportal/2011/02/01/the-hidden-imbolc/>. For a discussion in a Celtic Reconstructionist forum of both the blog post and this peer-reviewed article, see [http://community.livejournal.com/cr\\_r/351977.html](http://community.livejournal.com/cr_r/351977.html). In particular see the comment from [wire mother](#): “I’ve read the original article from which PSVL derives this thesis (Bernhardt-House, Phillip A., “Imbolc: A New Interpretation”, *Cosmos* 18 (2002), 57-76), and I buy the argument on the basis that OIr. *olc* very plausibly derives from PIE *\*wlkʷo-* “wolf” (which gives us English “wolf”!, and which through simple metathesis gives us *\*lukʷo-*, from which we derive e.g. English “lupine” from Latin) and also very plausibly shows semantic drift into its current meaning of “bad, evil” given the Christian experience of the youthful warrior/lycanthropic bands in Ireland; that it shows a definite relationship to Lupercalia, which seems to be a Latin reflex of the same ritual impulse; and the relationship of St. Brighid to the outlaw bands (all of which elements are discussed in that article by PSVL). For disclosure, I know both Prof. Bernhardt-House, the author of that article, and PSVL in person, and have discussed the issue with them many times, but even so, the three points I list here are more solid than even the assumption that we can derive pagan practices from e.g. folklore. That is, we have solid linguistic grounds (any linguist can easily derive that using tested rules of language change - one would have to dismiss nearly the entire field of linguistics to dismiss that point), solid comparative grounds (in the same region, even, and from a tradition which is linguistically closely related - one would have to dismiss the concept that religious ideas refer to the past in any way to dismiss that point, which would require one to dismiss the concept of any continuity of pagan religion at all), and solid hostile testimonial grounds (and the evidence for those youthful warrior-bands being also self-consciously, as well as community-consciously, considered to be “lycanthropic” is extensively documented across Europe, in the Celtic countries, and specifically in Ireland).”



***The Rites of Brigid, Goddess and Saint, Seán Ó Duinn (2005) The Columba Press, Dublin***

Seán Ó Duinn is a Benedictine monk at Glenstal Abbey, Éire. His *Rites of Brigid* is both thorough and blissfully readable; a welcome addition to the Brigidine collection.



In illustrating Brigid's life, Ó Duinn elects to use Whiteley Stokes's 1877 translation<sup>39</sup> of the 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> century *Leabhar Breac* (Speckled Book), stating that "its ethos is close to that of the folk-cult of the people who revered Brigid" (pg 8).<sup>40</sup> This choice is important, as St Brigid's various Lives (*vitae*) follow sometimes rather different storylines, yielding different impressions of who she was depending on the needs of their authors. (See Lisa Bitel's *Landscape with Two Saints* for an illuminating comparison of Brigid's Lives<sup>41</sup>. Bitel focusses largely on the *vita* written by Kildare monastic Cogitosus, *Vita Sanctae Brigitae*. Her interest is not in the folk cult but in the saint's actual life, times, and legacy.)

In *Leabhar Breac* we find Brigid, besides affecting cures and performing deeds of generosity as she does in Cogitosus' work, granting victory in battles, helping prisoners escape, and robbing a man of the posts she wants to build her city. (She does this by gluing his horses' feet to the ground so he can't move on till he gives her what she wants (pg 12-13).) This Brigid was clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Ó Duinn observes an "unevenness" between the Brigid of her *vitae* and the Brigid of "the people's rituals" (pg 15). Unlike the written saint, who is centered in Leinster (although Cogitosus ascribes countrywide ecclesiastical power to her, especially over women religious<sup>42</sup>), and unlike other Irish saints, whose cult is confined to a certain locale, Brigid's cult belongs to the whole country. He attributes this to the political importance of her region, and the religious import of Kildare as a cult centre for the goddess.

Unlike another believing Catholic, Alice Curtayne, who wrote of St. Brigid in the 1950s, Ó Duinn is not afraid to argue that the Lives give little evidence of an historic person but, in accordance with Professor Kim McCone, yield a "wealth of evidence regarding a pagan goddess...whose name was Brigid...and that her cult is influenced by paganism" (pg 17)<sup>43</sup>. He happily accepts the goddess who

<sup>39</sup>See *Three Middle Irish Homilies*, Whiteley Stokes (1877), available online [here](#).

<sup>40</sup>This rather late Life is the same one chosen by Anna Egan Smucker for her pocket introduction to the saint, though for different reasons. See my review of her book.

<sup>41</sup>See also, Petra Kerkhove's "[Lawrence of Durham's Vita S. Brigidae: An analysis and comparison with other Vitae Brigidae](#)".

<sup>42</sup>See Bitel *Landscape with Two Saints*, pg 176.

<sup>43</sup>See Bitel and Green (*Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins, and Mothers*) for another perspective, that perhaps the saint preceded the goddess in this case.

was patron of “Ironwork, Medicine, and Poetry” and concludes that the historic Brigit “lived within an area that was steeped in history, prehistory, politics, and mythology and that a lively way of life was going on around her...” (pg 18).

The book is divided into chapters focussing on different aspects of her rituals. “Brigid and Springtime”, “Foretelling the Future”, and so on. Drawing on colourful oral reports collected by the Irish Folklore Commission, giving them in Irish with English translations, Ó Duinn pulls together both Pagan (Celtic and otherwise) and Christian materials to shed light on each aspect of Brigit’s cult. In this way he does something similar to, though more scholarly than, what Amber K attempts in *Candlemas*.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, Ó Duinn observes the number of occasions in which Brigit is connected to the number eight: “It is difficult to know if Giraldus Cambrensis was influenced by the Classics when describing St Brigid’s perpetual fire, but it is strange that he mentions the number 20 as the number of nuns—the same number from which the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome were chosen. In Ireland, one would expect the number 9 to predominate (pg 64).”

He compares the two cults, in greater detail than did Kondratiev and with citations, and describes, along with other sacred flames in Ireland, the two other perpetual flames reported there in medieval times, both of which were tended by monks and neither of which was dedicated to St. Brigit (pg 66-67).

Related saints’ days and their meaning, fire and the sun, agricultural and fishing connections, the nature of the Tuatha De Danaan, of which the goddess Brigit is one, Brigit’s return from the Otherworld<sup>45</sup>—there is much here, from reports of countless customs to thoughtful attempts to trace their origins, and guideposts to understanding the true meaning of each ritual. What is especially valuable is Ó Duinn’s diligence in comparing the various sources, from Church custom to a wide range of folk practice to Pagan lore.

For all his strengths, Ó Duinn is not infallible. His discussion of the elements overlooks the older, Celtic system of three realms—land, sea, and sky—which is important in understanding ancient Celtic perceptions of their world and no doubt has implications in the cult of Brigit, as well. Some of his ideas seem to come from modern thought, including Wicca, rather than Celtic sources—which is fine if stated but it is not. For instance the prayer of Cu Chulainn which Ó Duinn quotes is shown by MacMathuna to be *not* representative of ancient Celtic thought but transitional in the sense of adjusting older perceptions to Christian sensibilities where the sea is subordinate to the earth.<sup>46</sup>

For all that, for general readers I would say that if you could own only one Brigit book, this is the one I would suggest.

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<sup>44</sup> What the Ks deliver in addition to their review of customs is an exuberant Wiccan approach to ritual and feasting.

<sup>45</sup> Described by Ó Duinn as unusual for a Christian saint, but not uncommon among Celtic deities, such as Aine’s annual return every St John’s Night (Summer Solstice)

<sup>46</sup> See Liam MacMathuna’s “Irish Perceptions of the Cosmos” *Celtica* 23 (174-187). Available [online](#).

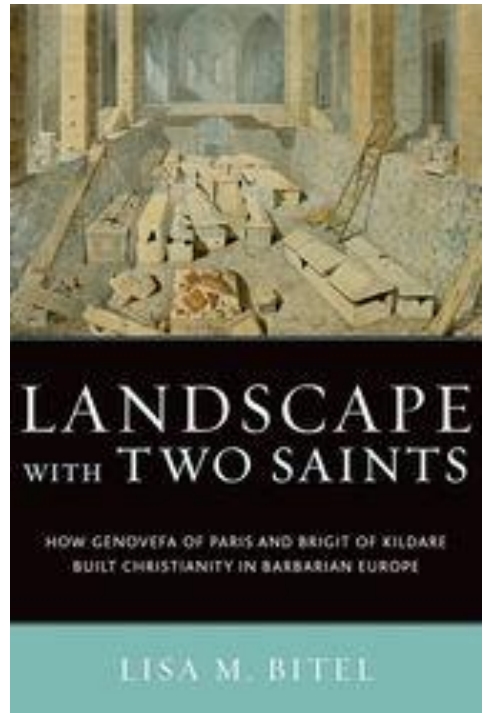
***Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, Lisa M. Bitel (2009) Oxford University Press***

I will deal here only with the second half of *Landscape*, which is devoted to Brigit of Ireland. Bitel carefully examines the social, religious, and economic background to Brigit's cult in Ireland and her role in the development of Christianity. She looks in depth at the texts concerning Brigit; *Landscape* is unparalleled in its clarification of selected Brigidine sources and the unfolding of her cult over time. It is also rich in details of life as it might have been experienced by Brigit and her followers.

Far from the liberated Irish women suggested by many writers, Bitel depicts a pre-Christian society that circumscribed the role of women, a pattern that was later reinforced by Christian tradition.

Confusion around this point for the average reader stems from the richness and power of goddess imagery in Celtic mythology, and from the fact that we have been told<sup>47</sup> that Celtic women had greater rights and freedom than their non-Celtic European contemporaries. This has come to mean to many of us that women were powerful members of Celtic society, perhaps even equal to men, but according to Bitel and others<sup>48</sup> this was not so. That some women were or may have been warriors, poets, chieftains, and healers did not mean that these were usual roles, nor that women enjoyed the same privileges within them as their male counterparts.

Bitel says of medieval Irish women that they “could dwell upon land and manage it, but only inherited the usufruct or occupation of property, or kept bits of property that had accrued to their mothers through gift or purchase. They lived in the households of men...” (pg 130). Bluntly, she states, “Gender had been built into the Irish landscape long before Christians arrived. Land belonged to men, but much of the landscape belonged to women—or, at least, to female entities... While royal forts such as Dún Ailinne reminded Leinster folk of ancient kings and symbolized contemporary kingdoms... specific natural features also evoked the folklore of goddesses” (pg 132). This pre-existing situation “offered builders and writers a comprehensible sacral geography ripe for conversion” (pg 133). Far from a gender situation that would inhibit Christianization, in many ways the way was paved by the status of women in early Ireland. A very interesting discussion of the gendering of landscape versus boundaries, and how this affected the development of Christianity in the area, occupies a portion of the Brigidine section of *Landscape*.



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<sup>47</sup> See for example *Women of the Celts*, Jean Markale (1986).

<sup>48</sup> See for example *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, Miranda Green (1996).

One of the most useful aspects of *Landscape* is the orderly analysis of the earliest extant Life of Saint Brigit (Cogitosus, 650 CE) and its comparison with the Lives that followed—the *Prima Vita* (750 CE) and *Bethu Brigitte* (900 CE).

Cogitosus was most likely a monk at Kildare. He was asked to write his Life of St Brigit nearly two hundred years after she had “laid down the burden of the flesh.” On the contrary, the anonymous authors of the later works were clerics loyal to Armagh, the seat of power of St Patrick. Bitel navigates the murky waters of politics and regionalism in her examination of Kildare’s, and therefore the posthumous Brigit’s, competition with Armagh and Patrick for ecclesiastical control of Ireland and the influence this had over the way in which her Lives were written. This discussion grounds the reader firmly in the context of Brigit’s Ireland and illuminates the conflicting Lives on which our inconsistent (and thus broadly flexible) understanding of her now is based.

“From the start...Brigit’s hagiographers elaborated the natural claims to all Ireland of her abbatial and episcopal successors. Cogitosus...announced the islandwide authority of the abbess of Kildare over all communities of religious women in Ireland and all churches and religious settlements in the province of Leinster...(and) described a holy patroness whose powers clearly outshone those of any other Christian leader, male or female, and whose travels and miracles in *imitatio Christi* linked her historically to the savior himself. Finally, he located Brigit’s body in Kildare and thus centralized custody of her influence.

“Cogitosus’s eighth-century successors shifted emphasis, however...They too identified Brigit with Jesus. In their tales she also multiplied provisions and healed lepers as the savior did. However, although these later writers mentioned settlements founded by Brigit, they did not discuss architecture. They recalled secondary relics but not the saint’s body or tomb. In their stories of Brigit’s travels, Brigit outshone but submitted to male religious officials, never competing directly for territory or space. She still demonstrated her superior holiness before crowds of Christians, but usually on the road, in the open, or in domestic settings of kitchens and farmyards. Instead of directing pilgrims to her church, these hagiographers argued for Brigit’s control of landscapes outside of Leinster, her mastery of nature and its creatures, and her marvelous protection of fellow travelers” (pg 176).

The changing fortunes of her main centre in Kildare are discussed, along with conditions of Brigit’s other monasteries. *eg*: “Kildare was a wealthy place; even if its founder had disdained material possessions, her colleagues and heirs did not” (pg 169). “In the eighth and ninth centuries, leaders of Brigit’s other communities had to manage the same daily contest for space as did the abbesses of Kildare, but without the unique advantages conferred by Brigit’s main place. These women and men of other monasteries did not dwell in the shadow of Dún Ailinne, nor were they governed by princesses from Leinster’s ancient dynasties...” (pg 175).

In a section entitled “How Saint Brigit Became a Goddess”, Bitel makes the unorthodox suggestion that, far from beginning as a goddess and growing into a saint, as is frequently assumed, Brigit began as a saint and, as hagiographers’ needs changed, acquired characteristics familiar from secular Irish tales and in time gave her name to a goddess (pg 192), rather than the other way around. (She does say there may have been earlier goddesses named Brig.) It is an intriguing and well argued idea, although she doesn’t spend a great deal of time on it and it is far from the central theme of the text.

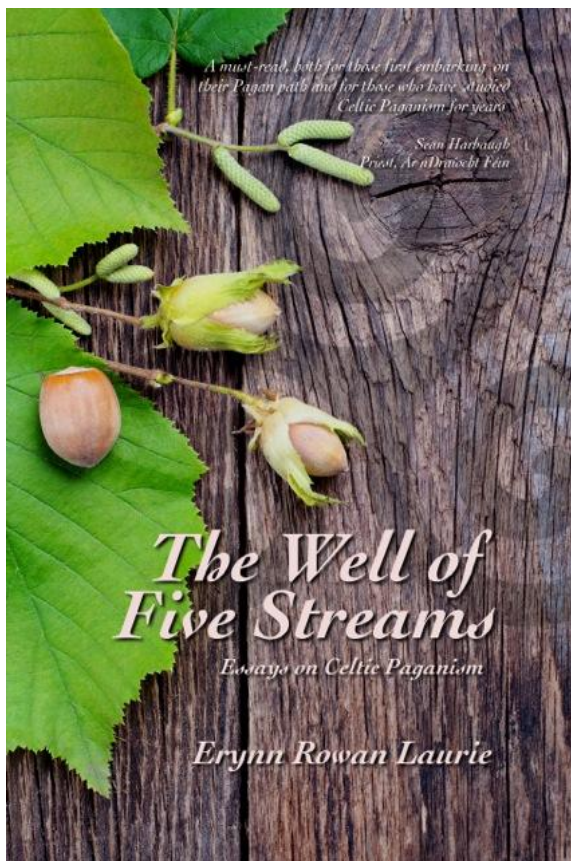


“The story of Brigit evolved as her cult spread and accumulated a history, and as Christian communities matured...Her story compounded when other holy women called Brigit or Brig populated these same texts...Suddenly, after Cogitosus spread the saint’s reputation, Brigits were multiplying like loaves and fishes” (pg 187).

But the change in Brigit’s *vitae* signalled something more sobering, too. “It is ironic but not coincidental that, as later hagiographers sought new ways to express Brigit’s authority around Christendom, religious women in Ireland were becoming less mobile and less visible...Brigit’s new persona as patroness of fields and farms made her a timeless symbol of feminine nature, but made her useless as a historical model for other vowed women” (pg 194).

An exceptional book filled with valuable insights into not only the stories surrounding Brigit, but the world she and her spiritual heirs inhabited.

**“Queering the Flame: Brigit, Flamekeeping, and Gender in Celtic Reconstructionist Pagan Communities”, by Erynn Rowan Laurie in *The Well of Five Streams: Essays on Celtic Paganism* (Immanion Press, projected release 2015) 17 pp.**



“Queering the Flame” is an as yet unpublished essay that will be released in 2015 in Laurie’s collection of essays, interviews, and reviews.

Herself a keeper of Brigit’s flame, Laurie is an amateur scholar whose work rests on diligent research and thorough citation, combined with a carefully thought out, ethical, and personal Polytheist sensibility. She carefully distinguishes between her own ideas and what can be discerned from the literature (hooray!), allowing the reader to reach informed conclusions of her own.

The impetus for writing this piece was a debate that arose within the Celtic Reconstructionist (NeoPagan) community when a mixed gender Brigidine flame-keeping group was proposed. Laurie asks, “What would make the act of tending a perpetual flame in the name of a particular Goddess problematic or contentious? What are the theological assumptions at work, and why is gender such a central issue within some of those assumptions? More importantly for this essay, what does queerness have to do with it? To address these issues, we need to look at the person and



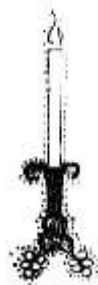
place of Brigit as Goddess and saint, the practice of flamekeeping generally, and the ritual traditions that surround this act. ”

Accordingly, in “Queering the Flame” Laurie examines the ethical and ideological issues as she sees them, and looks at perpetual sacred flames in historical Pagan religions and in medieval Christian Ireland.

“These sacred fires, both in [Pagan] Rome and in Ireland, were considered community hearthfires, regardless of the gender of the flamekeepers. Regional ritual fires were lit from the Irish flames, as were household flames on particular holy days, and if a household’s flame were accidentally extinguished, it also would be relit from the sacred flame. The hearthstone at Inishmurray is specifically cited as a source for the relighting of household flames, even after the church itself was long-deserted and the physical flame extinguished”.

Having shown that in Ireland both men and women tended perpetual sacred flames, and that Irish flame-tending practices may well not have had Pagan origins, she argues that in Celtic Reconstructionist practice the tending of Brigit’s flame ought to be open to both men and women, with women-only groups coexisting with those of mixed genders. “Queering” of gender roles is examined as well, including, for instance, cross-dressing among biddy boys and Bitel’s consideration of nuns as “masculinized” women in the context of their time.

What separates Laurie’s examination of flame-tending from other works in the Academic category is her stated relationship to Brigit and her concern for the NeoPagan and Polytheist communities: welcome additions, in my opinion. She states, “Flametending has been a rhythmic, almost tidal support to my spiritual and creative life. The regular presence of the flame on the altar near my writing desk is a tangible reminder of Brigit and of her patronage of poets, of the accessibility of inspiration, and of the dedication necessary to nurture a life as a poet and writer. Each time I light the flame, I renew my devotion to creativity as a deep and necessary part of my spiritual path.”



## Brigit Book Reviews: Conclusion

These reviews touch on a few of the issues related to the investigation into and celebration of Brigit. Many other works are available with their own perspectives, their own strengths and weaknesses. Each contributes to the growing and changing cult of Brigit in the world today. To all who participate in this journey, whether as friends of Brigit, academics, artists, or curiosity seekers, I wish you the greatest blessings.

### Saint Brigit's Night Procession

No sign of Faughart on the roadmap. Our dark  
island kept itself to itself, each high-hedged bóthar  
headlit, the same as another. Then, out of nowhere,  
it came to us as a long-acre of parked cars  
we added to. Nothing for it now but to go  
with the cattle-press of the procession, its shuffle  
a low-voiced, slow, inevitable river uphill.

Nobody minded us, disbelievers suspended in the flow  
of candles and wobbly torch-beams. Our wariness lapsed,  
shrinking as the night-eye opened. Through an unhedged gap,  
a softly trumpeted, familiar tune doodled  
across clouded moonfields. Forgotten, remembered:  
Faith of Our Fathers. As if it wasn't "if" but "when".  
And your whisper in my ear: "Were going to Heaven."

*Mark Granier*



*Quercus robur* by Pria Graves