

Brigit: Soulsmith for the New Millennium

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The nuns went to Mass. The circle-dancers danced. A yoga group was in full session in the corner. A tree-hugging group swayed around the trees. Chanters wafted Indian music in the distance. Some just went to breakfast.

The amorphous group and the texture of that morning in the West of Ireland testified to the far-reaching changes in the landscape of Irish religion and spirituality. These women--Catholic, post-Catholic, Protestant, pagan--met to *celebrate, excavate, and liberate* the traditions and legends surrounding the spirit of Brigit.

For the past 150 years, clerical and religious abuse, the betrayal of innocence, a dead hand of colonising clericalism, and wars fought ostensibly over *religion*, have paralysed the Irish religious imagination. But against this backdrop, the figure of Brigit--metaphor, muse, goddess, saint and keeper of the flame--emerges today to re-ignite Irishwomen's spirit.

For the past seven years, we in the Institute for Feminism and Religion have taken various aspects of the traditions surrounding Brigit and woven them into a festival celebrating her feast-day: February 1st, the first day of spring in the Celtic calendar¹. The journey has just begun; our questions have barely been asked.

This year the quest took us to Belfast. One hundred and thirty women from all traditions and none gathered to explore the spirit of Brigit through music, crafts, poetry, artwork, dance, and reflection: peace workers, community activists, artists, poets, psychotherapists, teachers, full time parents, musicians, and theologians. All returned at the end of the weekend to their homes in Ireland and abroad: renewed, refreshed, energised.

The darkness of winter was over: a new spring had arrived. Hope had triumphed over despair; life over death. Brigit's daughters, Keepers of the Flame, committed themselves to nurturing the seeds of her fire for the coming year.

But one might be entitled to ask: Why Brigit? Why does her spirit still inspire today's Irish poets, artists, musicians, and soul seekers? What might the traditions of Brigit have to offer to contemporary women's search? In this article I will attempt to sketch out some of the possibilities and point toward some of the implications.

Although in the Roman tradition Brigit is known primarily as a fourth or fifth century saint, and foundress of a monastery at Kildare, the spirit of Brigit reaches back much further than that. By taking over shrines, churches, and mythological sites, the figure of Brigit has effectively incorporated many aspects of the wisdom literature of ancient Ireland².

Today, we draw on her pre-Christian roots, the archaeo-mythology of her sites, her Christian Lives, and the rites to be found even in contemporary folklore, to bring women together in search of new cauldrons to hold, ferment, and nourish our hungry spirits. Against the backdrop of marching bands, violent oppositions, and the patriarchal mythologies crucifying Irish cultural and political life for the past thirty years, Brigit's spirit is fresh, untainted, and multivalent.

Lighting candles, we explain --tongue-in-cheek--that these are pre-Reformation candles. The old dichotomies collapse under the weight of laughter; the old orthodoxies strain to the sounds of music; the old dogmas sway in the dancing of freed spirits.

But this is not to say that the spirit of Brigit is ungrounded. The female spirit of Old Europe personified, her healing shrines are found in the most remote places. In European history, her sons, Brigantia, fought off the colonising efforts of the Romans--the last

defenders of old Europe.

Given her European background, the newly emerging Christian church needed to negotiate with her. Brigit is said to have acted as Mary's midwife in giving birth to Jesus. Moreover, according to popular culture, she saved their lives. When Herod's men sought to slaughter the Innocents, Brigit (drawing on ancient Lupericalia imagery) ran through the streets to distract them, allowing Mary to escape.

In Irish folklore, when Mary was too embarrassed to submit to the rite of churching Brigit again came to her rescue. She took a rake, inverted its prongs, stuck candles in each one and placed it on her head. Preceding Mary into the church, she drew the congregation's attention away from her friend, allowing Mary to enter without shame or embarrassment.

In return for such great friendship, Mary is said to have granted Brigit a feast day ahead of her own Feast of the Purification, February 2nd. In reality, February 1st was too deeply rooted in popular rite and tradition to be amenable to the Gelasian policy of converting ancient pagan festivals to those of the church³.

Brigit's ambivalent status, her rootedness in the rites, artefacts, and rituals of the Celtic soil ensured that her stories and legends have been passed down from generation to generation; her relegation to folk-culture, that her rites have remained relatively free of clerical intervention; her female gender (she can't be taken seriously), that she escaped the efforts to colonise the female spirit. Her multivalency now ensures that meditating, reflecting and theorising on her images, symbols, stories, and rites can once again inspire, encourage, and nurture the emerging struggle toward integrity of women today.

In the Lives of Brigit, mythological and saga themes constantly emerge and are indistinguishable from her legends. At her birth, her mother had one foot inside the door and the other outside, bridging the world of pagan and christian. Her mother was a slave; her father, a free and rich man. She forms a perfect bridge or threshold between the worlds of pagan and christian, rich and poor, women and men. Brigit in her saintly aspect constantly eludes the attempts of hagiographers to tame, colonise, or neutralise her.

Among her many characteristics, Brigit was patronness of healing, poetry and smithwork. For the millennium year in Belfast, our theme was Brigit as Soulsmith. In the words of poet, Anne Kelly, we invoked her:

You who turned back the streams of war
whose name invoked stilled monsters in the seas
whose cross remains a resplendent, golden sparking flame
come again from the dark bog
and forge us anew⁴.

Patronness of smithwork

The blacksmith, the traditional figure of alchemy, magic, and culture, was a feared and revered figure in most traditional societies and Indo-european mythology⁵. He transformed nature to culture, forged the instruments of agriculture, shod the animals and often maintained the village fire.

As we will see when we turn to the sources, there is much more to Brigit and the blacksmith than originally meets the eye: Brigit's smithwork proves to be quite unique.

Old Irish mythology

In old Irish mythology, in The Book of Invasions, we find evidence that the figure of the blacksmith was distinctly problematic.⁶ The king of the Tuatha Dé Danaan (People of the Goddess Danu), King Nuadu, lost his arm in battle. Because he was now physically blemished, Nuadu had to resign from the kingship.

His resignation made way for Bres, of the Fomorian race, (one of the invaders) who was granted the kingship provided he treated the people well. However, Bres began to levy heavy taxes on the people and they groaned under the weight of the oppression.

In the meantime, Dian Cecht, blacksmith of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, had made Nuadu an arm of silver, but he was still technically blemished and the arm had begun to fester. But Dian Cecht, had a son, Miach and a daughter, Airmid, both doctors. Going to Nuadu, they actually grew another arm for Nuadu, using the words, *sinew to sinew, and nerve to nerve be joined*. Nuadu was able to resume the kingship and dethrone the oppressive powers.

But they had reckoned without Dian Cecht. Profoundly jealousy of his son's achievement, Dian Cecht attempted to kill Miach. Three times he wounded him seriously, but on each occasion, Miach was able to heal himself. On the fourth and final attempt, Dian Cecht succeeded.

Airmid was grievously distressed at what had happened and went to her brother's grave. On Miach's grave, three hundred and sixty five types of herb were growing: one for every day of the year, for every nerve in the body, and every human ailment. She began to gather the herbs, arranging them carefully on her cloak, systemising their properties. Dian Cecht, incensed at the powers of his son and daughter, irretrievably scattered the herbs.

The legend ends that had it not been for the jealousy of Dian Cecht, the blacksmith, we might have lived forever with medicines to cure all ills.

The story clearly reverses some mythological themes. Death enters the world, not through Eve's sin or Pandora's chaos, but through the jealousy of the blacksmith father. Like Antigone, Airmid attempted to honour her brother's memory, but was caught up in patriarchal jealousy and rivalry.

Already, therefore, the figure of the blacksmith is problematic. Miach and his sister, Airmid, drew, not on the transformative power of metal, but the transformative powers of life to bring about their healing. The culturally constructed silver arm cannot compete with the power of life itself. The rejection of their arts would have far-reaching consequences.

The ambivalence of the blacksmith recurs in another tale, *The Battle of Moytura*⁷. Irish legend tells of many *invasions*, but the *invaders* were always made welcome, provided they respected the ways of the Irish and honoured their goddesses. For instance, they were allowed to come to Ireland provided they honoured the ways of the goddess by giving the goddesses' names to the land. Marriage and syncretism traditionally enabled the Irish to tolerate diversity, to welcome the stranger.

In *The Battle of Moytura* things began to take an ominous turn. *Goibniú* was the smith of the People of the Goddess Danú, but the weapons he made were magical. Brigit was a member of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* and in order to cement relations between two distinct peoples, she married one of the invaders, Bres of the *Fomorians*.

Goibniú made a weapon for Brigit's son, Ruadán, who thanked him by turning the weapon on him and attempting to kill him. Goibniú survived the triple attack but then turned the weapon on Ruadán killing him. On hearing of the death of her son, Brigit shrieked and wailed. According to the text: *this was the first time shrieking and wailing was heard in Ireland*. *The Battle of Moytura* ends with an ominous intonation from the Goddess, Morrighú, signalling the end of matri-centred Ireland:

Peace up to heaven,
Heaven down to earth,
Earth under heaven,
Strength in every one,

I shall not see a world that will be dear to me

Summer without flowers,
Kine will be without milk,
Women without modesty,
Men without valour,
Captures without a king...
Woods without mast,
Sea without produce...
Wrong judgements of old men,
False precedents of lawyers,
Every man a betrayer,
Every boy a reaver.
Son will enter his father's bed,
Father will enter his son's bed,
Every one will be his brother's brother-in-law...
An evil time!
Son will deceive his father,
Daughter will deceive her mother.⁸

Lives of Brigit

Clearly the culture of weapons, made possible by the arts of the blacksmith, is distinctly problematic: the spirituality of the old pre-Celtic matri-centred Ireland was antithetical to the new spirit now being introduced. In the Christian Lives of Brigit, this theme continues.

In one version of her *Life*, Brigit had a bishop, Conlaed who was particularly fond of fine vestments. Brigit gave these vestments away to lepers, beggars, or to whomsoever she felt needed them more. Several times she had to make the clothing *reappear* to appease Conlaed's wrath. A crisis arose when he appeared one day in search of them, and all she had to offer was a *garment like to the skin of a seal's head*. Exasperated, Conlaed set out for Rome for the third time, presumably to get more vestments, but Brigit said to him: *You will not get there and you will not come back. And so it was fulfilled, for wolves devoured him.*⁹

Possibly it was in relation to this and other incidents that a famous refrain of the early Celtic church was composed:

To go to Rome, much labour, little profit
The King whom thou seekest here,
unless thou bring him with thee, thou findest him not.
Much folly, much frenzy, much loss of sense, much madness (is it), since going to
death is certain, to be under the displeasure of Mary's Son.¹⁰

In another version of this story, however, Conlaed is not a bishop, but a smith. The garments of the religious officiators of old Europe, the *garment like to a sealskin*, referred to the power to be found by returning to the womb, symbol of the source of life itself. We know that in the old Indo-European tradition officiating priests curled up in such garments during their rites.¹¹ The seal was a symbol of immortality, but equally, the sealskin garment simulated the womb. In other rituals (possibly later) kings bathed in the blood of the slain mare, or entered menstrual huts at specific boundaried times to immerse themselves in female entropy.¹²

The old European priests entering the sealskin garment, the cave of Newgrange, or Loch Derg were returning to the womb of the earth for re-birth and regeneration. Even the early Christian churches remembered this: figures known as *sheela-na-gigs* were often

placed on the door lintels. Foetal-like in appearance, they held their genitals apart signifying to the person coming in that they were re-entering the womb/church, a place where our origins were honoured and remembered. The church was a place of peace: weapons must be left aside; the power of life and death remained the prerogative of divinity.¹³

This anecdote by the early church historian, Bede, is telling in this respect: When the Chief Priest of the British, Coifi, had heard the message of Christianity, (C.E. 627) he, together with the king, renounced his faith and set about destroying the temples and altars that he himself had previously dedicated. And so Bede relates, "He formally renounced his empty superstitions and asked the king to give him arms and a stallion-for hitherto it had not been lawful for the Chief Priest to carry arms or to ride anything but a mare-and thus equipped, he set out to destroy the idols." ¹⁴

In the culture of the blacksmith, social prestige has resided not in the ability to enhance and co-operate with the life-force and the earth, but in the military ability to effect victory, develop weapons, and dominance based on grandiosity.

Whether smith or bishop, Conlaid represented the emerging culture where nature was not enhanced but superseded. The bishop, Conlaid's, fine vestments were outer garments of grandiosity, pretension, and power. Holiness and awe was not naturally encountered in the artefacts of nature, but socially, culturally, and artificially induced by the ostentatious garments of religious culture.

It goes without saying that only privileged members of the privileged sex could wear such garments. Moreover, such new religious officaries would have to free themselves of all the symbols of abjection, that is to say all reminders of origins: menstrual blood, milk, contact with women. Not accidentally, the twelfth century Synod of Cashel forbade the Irish to baptise their children in *milk*--one of the last symbolic remnants of matrilinearity.¹⁵

A clear set of oppositions appears to be emerging. The first is the cultural transformation represented by the blacksmith: the culture of rivalry, ostentatious, war, destruction and death. The other is the transformation found when entering the womb/earth/cave or other representation of birth and re-birth, the transformation made possible by contact with the sources of life itself. The fires of the blacksmith apparently turn nature into culture, but what kind of culture and at what cost?

The culture of the blacksmith

The problem may well be related to the profound cultural changes induced by the manufacture and culture of weaponry that the blacksmith made possible. Scholars as diverse as Marija Gimbutas, René Girard, and Riane Eisler have argued that profound cultural changes were brought about with the introduction of weaponry.

Girard points out that while animals fight, they seldom fight to the death. However, the human development of projectiles and missiles short circuits the instinctual brakes to mimetic crisis found in animals. Therefore, he argues, the rise of weapons and the ability of humans to use projectiles in their battles is what finally distinguishes humans from animals.¹⁶

Patriarchy has thrived on developing and maintaining various dualisms: heaven/earth, sacred/profane, male/female, culture/nature, pure/impure. Such dualisms and logical oppositions are now clearly exposed as predicates of power relations. Nevertheless, they continue to grip unsuspecting imaginations in their power.

This culture was sacrificially achieved by the profound cultural splitting at the heart of the last two thousand years of patriarchal development. As I have argued elsewhere, such sacrificial practices and theologies are lethal in their consequences.¹⁷

At the turn of this century, against the sacrificial fires of the First World War then burning throughout Europe, a young Irishman, James Joyce, set out, self-consciously in his own words: *to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.*¹⁸

At a time when the boundaries of Europe were being re-drawn, Joyce's definitive gesture embodied Nietzsche's critique:

But blood is the worst witness of truth; blood poisons and transforms the purest teaching to delusion and hatred of the heart. And if someone goes through fire for his teaching--what does that prove? Truly, it is more when one's own teaching comes out of one's own burning!¹⁹

Joyce's craft was exile; his anvil, loneliness, and his gesture broke definitively with the security of his upbringing. One of the first post-modernists, his intellectual and moral courage inspired a whole new generation of intellectuals to break with the sacrificial oppositions and their political and religious counterparts.

Today, Irishwomen are perhaps being asked to go further: to encounter again the transforming powers of Brigit, our Soulsmith for the new millennium.

The Fire that does not Burn

Brigit as patroness of smithcraft had transformative powers that lay in a very different kind of fire than that used by the blacksmith. Fine vestments and military weapons both signified a culture of power, dominance and elitism.

Brigit used very different weapons. At times of battle, like the Morrigan, she used *magic mojo*, psychic warfare, rather than weapons to confuse the opposing sides.²⁰ She put them to sleep and gave them sweet dreams of victory without harming anyone; she placed clouds between opposing sides in battle so they could not see one another. At one of her major sites, the Curragh in Kildare (the Church of the Oak), no weapons were allowed to touch her sacred oak tree. Not only did Brigit give vestments away, but she also gave her father's sword away to a passing beggar.

The smith fires of Brigit are also quite different. In her church at Kildare in the fire-temple (it can be seen to this day), her nuns tended the fire for twenty days. On the twenty first, they left it to Brigit to tend it herself.²¹ Like the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome, whose dedication and purity of intention safeguarded the integrity of the political order, Brigit's nuns were charged symbolically and actually with maintaining the fires, the symbolic heart (hearth?) of the state.

Fire was also the means through which Brigit knew if her nuns had been faithful. Every morning, one of her nuns, Darlughdacha (the Daughter of Lugh) went to collect the seed of the fire. On one unfortunate morning, when she returned, the fire had burned through her apron, symbolising that her purity had been compromised. Shamefully, she confessed to Brigit that indeed a blacksmith had admired her ankles²² Brigit told her to put coals in her shoes to purify herself once again, and Darlughdacha eventually became her successor at Kildare.²³

The stories bear evidence of an old purification fire ritual, but the importance for us is that Brigit's followers were charged with holding the seed of the fire on behalf of the community. The fire would not burn providing they remained focussed, and undistracted by flattery.

Like her counterpart, Sul/Minerva, in her fires at Bath, the fires of Brigit *did not burn*. This theme emerges clearly in her *Lives*.

When she was born, the surrounding people saw pillars of fire shoot from her house, but were amazed that the house was intact. At her ordination as bishop (another

story!) a fiery column shot from her head and was seen for miles around. ²⁴ Brigit was known as the Fiery Arrow. ²⁵

In an old *Genealogy of Brigit* those who invoke her protection chant the following words:

I shall not be slain
I shall not be wounded
I shall not be prisoned
I shall not be gashed
I shall not be torn asunder
I shall not be plundered,
I shall not be downtrodden,
I shall not be stripped,
I shall not be rent in two,
Nor will christ let me be forgotten.

Nor sun shall burn me,
Nor fire shall burn me,
Nor beam shall burn me,
Nor moon shall burn me. ²⁶

For Irishwomen today our questions are these: What kind of fire does not burn? How do we keep Brigit's flame alive? How can we guard and protect the seed of the fire? These were the questions we wrestled with in Belfast at Brigit's festival. In the space here, I can only make hints and suggestions for our future journeys.

As a nun in the prophetic tradition Brigit took mercy as her distinct virtue. Her transforming powers, her smithwork, are allied to those of healing and poetry. Her fire is the fire that burns within, the life-force infused at birth into each one of us.

Her festival traditions recognised as much. On the morning of Brigit's day, traditionally women took a seed of the fire, put it in a sock, and went out to pound the earth. They were waking the gnéart (life-force), reminding the cold winter earth that spring had come. Their song was significant:

Today is the Day of Bride
The serpent shall come from the hole
I will not molest the serpent,
Nor will the serpent molest me.²⁷

On February 1st the serpent, the symbol of regeneration, was said to come out of the depths and was referred to as the noble queen. As part of the festival, an effigy of the serpent was pounded. ²⁸

On Brigit's Eve, women placed her cloak outside the house. Through the night, the spirit of Brigit was said to pass over blessing the cloak with her spirit. In the morning, the women took the dew soaked cloak back in, cut it up into little pieces and used the pieces to cure the sick--animals, pregnant women, and even delicate birds.

At one of our festivals, a woman told how her grandmother used the brat (the cloak) to wrap sick birds which she then placed in the ample folds of her breast for warmth. Her chirping granny came alive again through her memories.

Brigit may be patroness of smithcraft, but her anvil was that of the soul; her alchemy, that of the spirit; her *fire that does not burn*, the life-force within. Attentive to our soul-work, we keep the life-force ablaze and focussed on the work of justice and mercy.

Conclusions

This exploration has barely scraped the surface of the rich traditions surrounding Brigit, or even her patronage of smithwork. Many other aspects can be explored and in our future festivals we will continue to gather together under her cloak diverse groups of women committed to soul-work.

At the festival in Belfast, in our final gathering, we forged our spiritual weapons for the year ahead drawing on her symbols. We invoked the protection of her dew-soaked cloak; we cleansed ourselves with water from her wells; we drank milk from the pure white cow; we dipped her bread in the honey of her bees to nourish us for the journey ahead.

In a nuclear world, the old images no longer serve us. Our attitude toward the earth, our bodies and our souls must change. Our repudiation of the earth and our origins in women's bodies must give way to a profound sense of gratitude and responsibility.²⁹ From the sacrificial fires of patriarchy, we must shift toward the burning fires within. From the burning fires of the Inquisitions, we must now turn towards authentic sources of empowerment by committing ourselves once again to becoming, daughters of Brigit: *Keepers of the Flame.*