

Brigid – Pagan Goddess/Saint

Brigid has been with our association from the start and Amherst Irish Association/Cumann Gaelach Amherst was officially recognized by **proclamation** of the Amherst Town Select board on 1st February 2015, a date designated as **Irish day** in Amherst, and our association's logo is a Brigid's cross (www.amherstirish.org).

I've revised a piece I wrote in 2015 to explain the importance of Brigid, some rituals associated with her and this time (the Celtic festival of Imbolg), and why we look to the Goddess of smiths, fire and poetry to be our guide. Much of what I write is based on folk tradition. There are lots of wonderful events taking place this year, 2021, with Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs designating Brigid's Day, Lá Fhéile Bríde, February 1st as a day to celebrate Irish women's creativity (<https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/great-britain/news-and-events/st-brigids-day/>)

Amherst Irish Event

On Sunday, January 31st, 2021, Prof. Robert Emmet Meagher, a specialist on Early Christian Ireland, presented a talk on the blending of the Pagan and Christian traditions. Bob tells us that the Vatican demoted Saint Brigid in 1969. However, it was the Irish people, not the Vatican, who named her Saint, incorporating her Pagan, Goddess origins into their newfound Christianity. Bob's talk can be viewed on our YouTube account (Amherst Irish).

Brigid's Day/Lá Fhéile Bríde - 1st February

Brigid, the ancient Celtic Goddess of smiths, fire and poetry has a special place in Irish hearts, mine especially, and rituals associated with her have continued unabated for centuries in Ireland and abroad. Devotion to Brigid was so great and so much a part of the fabric of Gaelic society that during the 5th century she was incorporated into a Christian tradition and re-named St. Brigid, making her one of Ireland's first native saints after St. Patrick, the 'blow in' from Wales.

Much of what is written about her relates to the life of St. Brigid (also spelled as Bridget, Bríd, Bride etc.), her magical cloak that claimed for her lands to start a convent at Kildare (Cill Dara), her work with the poor, her great capacity for healing, her holy wells, all framed within the rich-girl-does-good scenario. However well meaning this history, it has obliterated the earlier, elemental, feisty woman whose legacy is almost like that of Sappho, only fragments of the real survive.

Brigid's Day is celebrated on 1st February, the first day of Spring and the Celtic seasonal quarter of Imbolg (February-April), pronounced Imm'ulk. It follows Samhain, pronounced Sow'en, (November-January), the Winter quarter, which in turn follows Lughnasadh, pronounced Loo'nassa (August-October), the Autumn quarter; and finally, the Summer quarter, (May-July), is Beltane, pronounced Bell'tane. Set within this context, Brigid's Day marks the start of a major Celtic festival. The fact that in the Irish language her day is simply referred to as Lá Fhéile Bríde/Lá le Bríde, Brigid's day, not St. Brigid's day, is evidence of Brigid's pre-Christian existence and her central place in folk culture and customs.

Celtic Festivals

Brigid's Day is the first day of the Celtic quarter of Imbolg (February-April), a period of insight and inspiration. According to C. Matthews (Celtic Devotional), Imbolg is a time when we are called on to "celebrate the lives of all 'soul-midwives' who have taught and prepared us." Surprisingly Matthews doesn't refer to Brigid at all in this work, but the Irish folk song Gabhaim Molta Bríde (I give praise to Brigid) taught in Irish schools for years, is certainly in this vein. You can hear it sung in Irish/Gaelic by Tipperary-born, Boston-based musician, Áine Minogue: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_WtdNS3FE

Feminist Theologian and Dubliner, Mary Condren's massive work, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (published by Harper & Row, 1989) is probably the most authoritative book on Brigid. I consult it on a regular basis. It is based on research Mary conducted for a PhD at Harvard University. I strongly recommend it.

Brigid's Day is laden with significance for me: It marks the start of the year, the opening of nature's door to new growth, new life - possibility. Rituals linked to Brigid seem to connect us to the ideas of transition and transformation, to force us to notice nature's cycle, to engage us in the magic of wishing for what we desire, starting anew no matter what we have endured through the long Winter, while at the same time affording us protection during a time of change. In the context of COVID-19 and these last four divisive years in America, we could do with rituals of renewal and a sense of hope/dóchas.

Brigid's cross

A simple ritual of weaving a cross from fresh, green reeds seems to capture this process of renewal best, because it brings us into contact with the earth, with life, with spirit.

During those times when I've been in Ireland on Brigid's day, I've gathered reeds by the Blackwater river in Lismore, Co. Waterford, and later mailed the completed crosses to friends in far away places.

Here in Amherst, we have to wait a while for the land to thaw before we see the reeds emerge in places like the Lawrence swamp, so that marking Brigid's day on February 1st, seems out of sync with the reality of our New England seasons. Nonetheless, the idea of marking the arrival of Spring with Brigid's rituals can still have meaning here. Once there's a thaw, I will walk out in in the fields, out there amongst the deep, green-colored reeds, bend my head to the sacred land to cut and gather clumps of reeds, all the while smelling the earth's sap rising.

Why a cross? There are several theories. When spun, some believe a Brigid's cross resembles a sun. I'm not sure of this at all. The most common cross has four points outward from a square, carefully woven center. My interpretation of these four points is that they symbolize the four stages of life – for females, child, girl, woman, crone; for males, child, boy, man, elder: the whole spin of life. In Ireland, the cross is usually placed inside the house, either over the front door or by the fireplace, or in rooms needing special protection. I place them all around the house in Lismore, and in Amherst, too. Often people burn the last year's cross with the intention of releasing all the experiences

of that past year before placing the new cross over the doorway and inviting prosperity, health and love in.

The Irish diaspora

By engaging in Brigid's Day rituals, members of the Irish diaspora and those interested in matters Irish are afforded an opportunity to connect to the folkways of our ancestors, to appreciate anew their elemental existence, to value the importance of traditions that unite us, despite the distance.

Brigid's cross was once a ubiquitous image in Ireland because Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), Ireland's national television station used it as its logo from the outset, though it was replaced by a modern image a number of years ago. Have a look at the logo for the US-based Chase bank. In there is a shape that resembles the most common form of a Brigid's cross.

Brigid's healing power

I always practice the Brat Bríde (Brigid's rag) ritual on January 31st, Brigid's eve, because it concerns healing. Apparently the Celts put night before day, which is why there are many Brigid's eve rituals. Traditionally a piece of cloth is placed outside the house to call on Brigid's protection for the household and also to bring prosperity in the year ahead. The rag is then taken in the next day and stored for emergencies, to be rubbed on the body during illness or injury (somewhat like a relic?). For the more adventurous, I suggest that you put an item of underwear outside on Brigid's eve since 'Biddy briefs' have been known to provide a covert power boost during those difficult or challenging

encounters in life! It appears that each generation has its own associations with Brigid, its own links to her rituals and practices.

America Brigids – Domestic servants

In nineteenth century America, Irish women immigrants established a niche market for themselves as domestic servants within the wealthy homes of New England's merchant class. The choice of labour was a wise one – the job offered secure income with lodgings included. Referred to collectively as 'Brigids/Bridgets' many of them saved their dollars to facilitate the passage of female relatives to the New World in a unique system of female chain migration (different to that of the Italian and Jewish immigrants of the time). These Brigids also pooled their dollars to help pay for the construction of St. Patrick's cathedral in New York – the irony here is that they were supporting the very patriarchal system that rendered them relatively powerless at home. Yet I understand their desire to have a beautiful place available to them where they could sit and be, outside their employer's home, where the smells, sounds and rituals remained constant, their spirituality nourished as a result. And if they were in a position to pay for this, well, good luck to them!

Brídeog – a house party in praise of womanhood

There is one other ritual associated with Brigid that I'd like to mention here, though I've never seen it in practice – it consists of a group of people going from house to house with a woven image of Brigid, in a ritual known as 'Brídeog' or 'Biddy.' I like the idea of a ritual that acknowledges and even praises the power of growth, of reproduction, of

womanhood, on the eve of the Celtic festival of Imbolg - in the belly – fecundity and pregnancy. In this ritual, Biddy's carriers must be shown a good time in each home - with plenty of food and drink - if the household is to be assured blessings in the year ahead. Once we're past the pandemic, we can return to this ritual.

Conclusion

So, this is one Irish woman's interpretation of Brigid's wonderful legacy, the Goddess of smiths, fire and poetry. I didn't even get to mention Brigid's fire (keep it going in the hearth all day - think wood stove, in New England), nor how to make the cross itself. That's for another day. Perhaps we'll organize a demonstration at one of our Amherst Irish Association events.

When our community-based organisation began in 2015, Amherst town leaders supported our fledgling organization, Amherst Irish Association/Cumann Gaelach Amherst, by designating Brigid's Day/Lá le Bríde, Irish Day in Amherst. The wording of the town proclamation captures the respect for our Celtic origins, the history and contribution of Irish immigrant domestic servants and laborers to the town (including Margaret Maher, who worked for the poet Emily Dickinson and her family for 30 years), and the name given to the Catholic Church in the center of our town, Saint Brigid's. Our re-framing of Irish Day away from St. Patrick's Day to February 1st, Brigid's Day, symbolizes our own claim to renewal, to new life, to new possibilities – with a strong female icon at its center.

There's an expression in the Irish oral tradition that at the end of a story you say: 'Sin mo scéal díobh, agus má tá bréag ann, fág é/Mar ní mise a chum ná a cheap/That's my story and if there's a lie there, so be it/For it wasn't me that composed it.'

May the spirit of Brigid guide and protect us all in the year ahead.

-- *Íde B. O'Carroll Amherst, Massachusetts*

*An earlier version of this piece appeared on our Amherst Irish Website
(www.amherstirish.org) in 2015.*