

ST. BRIGID OF IRELAND

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February 1 is the feast of St. Brigid, often called the Mary of the Gael, and her feast day, along with that of St Patrick, and Our Lady of Knock, are the official holy days of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who gather annually for a Mass in her honor. St. Brigid's life was a remarkable one, and the places in Ireland, associated with her, are scenes of pilgrimage throughout the year.

Brigid was born in a society ruled by the old Gaelic Order and the Druidic religion. St. Patrick had already reached Ireland, and was in the process of changing all that, but though his message may have reached the court of Dubhtach, the powerful Leinster Chieftain held firm to the old religion. In his religion, one of the most powerful Goddesses was Brid or Brigid, the Goddess of Fire whose manifestations were song and poetry, which the Celts considered the flame of knowledge. Her feast day was the first festival of the year and was held on February 1. It was the beginning of Spring; the working season for farmers and fishermen, and a time of husbanding of animals, and the Celts called on Brid to bless their work, and bonfires were lit in her honor.

Patrick did not condemn the Celts as idolatrous pagans, but explained their druidic customs in Christian terms, and gradually, Bible heroes and Christian saints began to replace the Celtic Gods and Goddesses on the Irish calendar. However, the personalities of some of the Celtic deities was so strong that they could not be replaced; one of these was Brid, and the rites associated with her continued to be practiced each February 1 right into Christian times. But that was soon to change.

At about 453 AD, a child was born out of wedlock between Dubhtach and one of his Christian slaves named Brocessa. The slave girl was sent to a Druid priest in a cabin at the foot of the Cooley Mountains near Dundalk, Co Louth, to have the child. The baby was a healthy girl, which was no great joy to Dubhtach who wanted a son. The mother was sold to a Chieftain in Connaught, and the child was left with the Druid to be raised and educated. The child was named Brigid, perhaps to seek the blessing of the Goddess, for from the very beginning, there were indications that she was special. It was reported that she was born at sunrise, and that the cottage in which she was born burst into flame when she left it.

Brigid grew in beauty, and her love for God's creatures knew no bounds. After her fosterage, she returned to her father's house as a slave, although she enjoyed the privileges of family. She was given to solitude, and loved to wander the woods befriending the animals. She was renowned for her generosity, giving much of her father's wealth to the poor. Many are the stories attributed to this remarkable lady, including her journey on foot from Leinster to Connaught to find her mother, whom she freed from bondage, and returned to the house of Dubhtach.

In keeping with the life planned for her, she became a priestess in service to the Goddess Brid, and eventually high priestess at **Cill Dara** (the temple of the oak), a sanctuary built from the wood of a tree sacred to the Druids, where a perpetual ritual fire was kept in honor of Brid. The exact circumstance of her conversion to Christianity are unknown, though it is certain that her Christian mother was a guiding influence. Some claim that she personally met St Patrick, which is possible since she was ten years old when he died, but there is no proof of that. Whatever the circumstances, Brigid and her companions in service to Brid, all accepted the Christian faith, and formed Ireland's first Christian religious community of women. Legend tells that upon her acceptance of her vows, fire appeared above her head. Brigid changed the pagan sanctuary of Cill Dara into a Christian shrine, which gave its name to the present County Kildare. She extinguished the ritual fire of the Druids, and lit a flame dedicated to Christ which was thereafter maintained by her followers until it was doused by the forces of Henry VIII.

Brigid's wisdom and generosity became legend, and people traveled from all over the country to share her knowledge. Her monastery at Kildare became one of the greatest centers of learning in Europe. She continued

her holy and charitable work until her death in 525 AD, when she was laid to rest in a jeweled casket at Cill Dara. In 835, her remains were moved to protect them from Norse invaders, and interred in the same grave that holds the remains of St Patrick and St Columcille at Downpatrick.

So strong was the respect and reverence for this holy lady that she became the patroness of parishes, towns, and counties, not only in Ireland, but all across Europe. During the age of Chivalry, she was so revered as a model for women of every age, that gentlemen, knights, and nobles began the custom of calling their sweethearts, their Brides - a custom that has come down to this very day.

In Ireland, the people likened her to Brid, the ancient Goddess of fire and wisdom - for wasn't Brigid's life touched with fire, and as for her wisdom - that was undisputed. She even had a symbol. As the shamrock became associated with St Patrick, a tiny cross made of rushes was linked with St Brigid. Supposedly woven by her to explain the passion of Christ to a dying pagan. Similar crosses are fashioned to this day as a defense against harm, and placed in the rafters of a cottage on the feast day of St Brigid - February 1.

So it was that reverence for this holy child of Ireland grew so strong that she not only eclipsed Brid, for whom she was named, but was given her feast day. And the Irish gladly accepted their new saint, and revere her to this day in place of a forgotten Celtic Goddess.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sadly, there is very little historic evidence – archeological or autobiographical – about this remarkable Saint. There are many ennobling tales written after her passing, glorifying her life, but some of them are conflicting. The Catholic Encyclopedia tried to excuse these inconsistencies by stating, "Viewing the biography of St. Brigid from a critical standpoint we must allow a large margin for the vivid Celtic imagination and the glosses of medieval writers." Wikipedia Encyclopedia adds that many tales exist which suffer inconsistencies common to such legends, and the only agreement between the various stories is that a girl was born to an Irish king named Dubhtach and that her name was Brigid.

However from the many stories, biographies, lives of the Saints, and other documentation we have researched – both in America and in Kildare – we compiled the beliefs that most often agree between versions, and those that we found to be the most logical. We have presented them in this biography in the hope of increasing devotion to a most inspirational servant of God and a most remarkable daughter of the Gael.



St. Brigid: Patroness of Ireland
Mary of the Gael