

Brigit: Goddess, Saint, ‘Holy Woman’, and Bone of Contention

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Introduction

The *vitae* of Brigit of Kildare have received considerable scholarly attention. However, tension exists between purely textual studies, which concentrate on demonstrating the Christian orthodoxy of the material in the *vitae* and the ways in which these texts contribute to knowledge of the early Irish Church, and the folkloric/comparative studies which indicate close ties with pre-Christian Irish religion and the transformation of Brigit from pagan goddess to Christian saint. This tension recently led Séamas Ó Catháin to suggest the term ‘Holy Woman’ for Brigit, which avoids favouring either pagan or Christian interpretations, side-stepping the otherwise inevitable ‘bone of contention’. This paper examines these two areas of ‘Brigit studies’, questioning the methodological assumptions underlying the rigid sequestration of textual studies from other forms of evidence. It is demonstrated that insistence on the Christian orthodoxy of Brigit and of early medieval Irish Christianity is misleading and can only be maintained through this sequestration. Once all the evidence is presented, it is clear that the figure of Brigit, and the traditions surrounding it, have pagan origins; this indicates the syncretic nature of early Irish Christianity. Finally, Ó Catháin’s descriptor, ‘Holy Woman’ to define Brigit is endorsed.

Brigit¹ and Patrick, two saints from the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland in the fifth century CE, retain their popularity with Catholic Christians to this day. Questions about the historical verifiability of saints, common since the Counter-Reformation, intensified in the 1960s and resulted in Vatican II striking many saints from the

¹ Throughout this article the name of the goddess and saint is spelled ‘Brigit’; where it is spelled differently in the works of other scholars that spelling is preserved when direct quotations are included.

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ecclesiastical calendar. So far, however, Brigit and Patrick have been left untouched. Their feast days, 1 February and 17 March, are celebrated in Ireland and the Catholic world, especially wherever the Irish have a presence. This is despite assertions by scholars ‘that the Christian Brigid is the personification of the Celtic goddess’² and despite historical research that ‘yields, not one, but two Saint Patricks’.³ There is, however, a qualitative difference between Brigit and Patrick.

Patrick is a historical figure who left writings, the *Confessio* and the *Letter to Coroticus*. These gave his seventh century hagiographers Muirchú and Tírechán some reliable material on which to base their accounts.⁴ From these texts we can see that Patrick was vitally concerned with the celibate religious life and that he had considerable knowledge of the Bible.⁵ No such texts existed for Brigit’s hagiographers, Cogitosus of Kildare and the anonymous authors of the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte*. Of all the early Irish saints celebrated in hagiography and cult, Brigit is the most difficult to link to a historical figure. Indeed, establishing such a link would appear to be impossible.

Yet there is significant resistance among certain scholars to the suggestion that the ‘historical Brigit’ did not exist and that Saint Brigit is a euhemerised pagan goddess. This paper examines the literary sources for Brigit and attempts to place them within two contexts, that of seventh and eighth century Ireland in which they were produced and that of contemporary scholarship. It is argued that resistance to the claim that Brigit is a euhemerised deity is problematic; no evidence can be gleaned to link her to any figure from the historical record. Demonstrating that the *vitae* of Brigit are

² D Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Cult of Brigid: A Study of Pagan-Christian Syncretism in Ireland’ in J J Preston (ed) *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations* (Chapel Hill, 1982) 75-94, 75.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ R Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives* (Oxford, 1991) 9.

⁵ M Herren, ‘Mission and Monasticism in the *Confessio* of Patrick’ in D Ó Corráin, L Breatnach and K McCone (eds) *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989) 76-85.

Christian documents, documents that nonetheless preserve authentic pre-Christian Irish (or pagan) material, is a daunting task. However, this interpretation is supported by cumulative findings from fields as diverse as text-editing, medieval history, religion studies, folklore analysis and anthropology.

Nativists and Anti-Nativists

To defend this stance on Brigit necessitates engagement with methodological issues in the study of early Irish texts, chiefly with the 'nativist' versus 'anti-nativist' controversy. This concerns the extent to which pre-Christian Irish traditions were preserved within Christian-authored early medieval texts. This controversy is not new; it derives initially from James Carney's 1955 *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, which first articulated the anti-nativist position.⁶ However, in the past fifteen years or so, anti-nativism has been reshaped by a new generation, including Kim McCone and others, and acquired a larger following, while itself being the target of new criticisms by a revitalized nativist scholarship.⁷

In summary, nativist scholars, such as Kenneth Jackson, Myles Dillon and Proinsias MacCana, interpret Irish texts from after the conversion period as preserving aspects of the culture of Ireland prior to its becoming Christian. Certain scholarly disciplines are employed in support of this position, which focus chiefly on the processes involved in the transition from an oral to a written culture, and use comparative Indo-European mythological and ritual material to elucidate obscure and tantalising elements in the Irish sources.⁸ The detection of such pre-Christian material has led to several hypotheses:

⁶ J Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955).

⁷ For example, K McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth, 1991). A vitriolic review of this volume by David Dumville in *Peritia* 10, 389-398 exposed contradictions in McCone's understanding and rejection of 'nativism'. Recent 'middle way' nativist contributions include J Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover and Aberystwyth, 1999) and F Di Lauro, 'Through Christian Hands: Evidence for Elements of Pre-Christian Tradition in the Mongán Myths', *Australian Celtic Journal*, 7, 2000-1, 38-47.

⁸ McCone, *op cit*, 2-5.

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that the Irish monasteries demonstrated an attitude of tolerance towards paganism that was unique among early medieval clergy; that the *filid* (poets) continued their traditional role in society and accrued certain of the functions of the druids; and that a clear distinction can be drawn between secular and ecclesiastical literary genres.

In contrast, the anti-nativist position argues that very little can be known of the earlier oral tradition of the Irish, since all that remains are Christian texts written by Christian clergy; that these clergy were not sympathetic to, but critical of, paganism; that the most appropriate models for these literary texts are found in the Bible and other Christian writings; that there is no hard and fast distinction between secular and ecclesiastical literary genres; and that the texts provide scholars with material about ecclesiastical matters of importance at the time of their production, first and foremost.⁹ Extreme versions of this position are sceptical of pre-Christian religion or ‘paganism’, because all the texts are Christian and, as Christians, their authors knew nothing of paganism.¹⁰ With its emphasis on the finality of the text, there are aspects of anti-nativism that are compatible with some forms of postmodernism.

Until Carney’s 1955 salvo, nativism had been the scholarly orthodoxy; anti-nativism has since gained ground to become at least as successful. Certain texts and subject matter remain sites of fierce contention between the two groups, often with irreconcilable positions being espoused in relation to them. Research on Brigit has not been drawn into the centre of the maelstrom, though the materials available to study her qualities and cult are fairly extensive and are

⁹ *Ibid*, Chapters 1-3 *et passim*.

¹⁰ This is now being argued more aggressively in the field of early medieval Germanic studies. Examples include: I N Wood, ‘Some Historical Re-Identifications and the Christianization of Kent’ in G Armstrong and I N Wood (eds) *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals* (Turnhout, 2000) 27-35 and H Janson, ‘Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia’ in Armstrong and Wood, *op cit*, 83-88. Both these papers argue that ‘paganism’ (Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian respectively) is derived from Christian/Biblical models and bears no relation to any actually existing phenomenon.

ideally suited to the controversy, being situated intriguingly at the boundaries of Christianity and paganism.¹¹

Arguably, at the centre of the debate between nativists and anti-nativists is a text called the *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (the *Book of Druimm Snechtai*), a book that does not survive to the present and was last heard of in the seventeenth century. References to it enable the reconstruction of its contents with some certainty. In 1912 Rudolf Thurneysen suggested that the contents consisted of fourteen items:

Ten ... are shared by the manuscripts London, British Library MS Egerton 88 and Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23.N.10: *Audacht Morainn*, *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*, *Compert Chon Chulainn*, *Compert Mongáin*, *Echtrae Chonlai*, *Forfess Fer Fálchae*, *Immram Brain*, *Scél Mongáin*, *Togail Bruide Uí Derga*, *Verba Scáthaige* ... Thurneysen proposed adding the poem 'Fil and grian Glinne Aí', not found in 23.N.10 but ascribed to CDS in Egerton 88; the stories *Scél asa mberar combad hé Find mac Cumail Mongán* and *Tucait Baile Mongáin*, lacking in 23.N.10 but present in Egerton 88, and grouped together with *Compert Mongáin* and *Scél Mongáin* in three other manuscripts; and *Echtrae Macha*. He ... noted that ... *Tochmarc Étaíne* cites CDS, indicating that some version of that story was also present there.¹²

Later Thurneysen, Mac Cana and Vernam Hull suggested that the following be added to the list of putative *Cín Dromma Snechtai* contents: *Compert Chonchobuir*, *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig*, and *Immacallam in Druad Brain 7 inna Banfátho Febuil*.¹³

This collection of tales has a pronounced 'pagan' flavour, with many involving an encounter between a human and an otherworldly representative. Anti-nativists argue that in these texts 'paganism' is being co-opted by Christians to present Christian doctrines 'by parable', to quote Carney. Carney argued that the woman who draws

¹¹ See A Trindade, 'Death and Gender: Some Reflections on *Aided Medbe*', *Australian Celtic Journal* 7, 2000-1, 25-36, especially 33 fn 5.

¹² J Carey, 'On the Interrelationship of Some *Cín Dromma Snechtai* Texts', *Eriu* xlvi, 1995, 71-92, 71-72.

¹³ *Ibid*, 72.

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Conlae away in *Echtrae Chonlai* represents the Church, and that the sections foretelling the coming of the semi-divine hero Mongan in *Immram Brain* are attempts to ‘explain the Incarnation by parable’.¹⁴ More recently, John Carey has argued that *Cin Dromma Snechtai* was the work of a single author, editor or redactor in the first half of the eighth century, who assembled ‘texts relating to the origins of Lough Foyle (*Immacallam Choluim Chille* and *Immacallam in Druad*) and a dossier of materials written late in the reign of Fínnechta Fledach (*Baile Chuinn, Echtrae Chonlai, Audacht Morainn, Togail Bruidne Uí Derga*), and then used these as the basis for compositions of his own (*Immram Brain*, the Mongan tales, the CDS Etain stories)’.¹⁵ The texts this redactor assembled were all seventh-century compositions.

Carey asserts that the motivations of these authors were far less Christian than Carney claimed and that the texts surviving from *Cin Dromma Snechtai* are evidence of a unique attitude characterising Irish Christianity. Euhemerism and demonisation, ‘two Christianising devices of unimpeachable orthodoxy which were disseminated throughout Europe’,¹⁶ were not employed until the tenth century. This was not due to ignorance; Irish clergy were aware that other Christian writers, such as Isidore of Seville, used these techniques. Instead, there developed the doctrine that the old gods, the Tuatha dé Dannan, were ‘half-fallen angels’ or ‘a branch of the human race which somehow escaped the contagion of the Fall’.¹⁷ This is clearly radically syncretic, and not merely an illustrative use of pre-Christian material, as proposed by Carney and others. The conclusions of Carey, a cautious scholar, are supported by other reputable research.¹⁸

These preliminary considerations contextualise the Brigit texts, the earliest of which is virtually contemporaneous with the seventh-

¹⁴ Carney, *op cit*, 288.

¹⁵ Carey, ‘Interrelationship’, 91.

¹⁶ Carey, *Single Ray*, 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁸ See C D Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993) and Dumville, *op cit*.

century *Cín Dromma Snechtai* core and the two *vitae* of Patrick by Muirchú and Tirechán, mentioned above.

Saint Brigit in the Ecclesiastical Textual Tradition

The *Annals of Ulster* give the date 452 for Brigit's birth and her death 'is variously recorded as 524, 526 and 528. Tradition has it that she was seventy years old when she died'.¹⁹ As it cannot be proven that she existed, these dates merely locate the perception of her as a younger contemporary of Patrick. More importantly, there are five Latin *vitae* of Brigit edited by the Bollandists in the seventeenth century *Acta Sanctorum*. The three that garner the most attention are *Vita Prima* (so-called because it appears first in the *Acta*, not because of textual primacy) and Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit*, which are both in Latin, and the *Bethu Brigte*, a text that is one-quarter in Latin and three-quarters in Irish. While Mario Esposito and Richard Sharpe have argued for *Vita Prima* being the earliest,²⁰ there now seems to be evidence that Cogitosus' *Life* is the earliest of the surviving accounts.²¹ Other seventh century accounts were used by Cogitosus in compiling his *Life*, but have not survived.²²

Evidence establishing Cogitosus as the earliest author includes the fact that Muirchú, hagiographer of Patrick and himself datable to the last quarter of the seventh century, refers to Cogitosus as 'my father'.

¹⁹ S Connolly, 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae: Background and Historical Value', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119, 1989, 5-49, 5.

²⁰ M Esposito, 'On the Early Latin Lives of Saint Brigid', *Hermathena* 24, 1935, 120-165; R Sharpe, 'Vita S. Brigidae: The Oldest Texts', *Peritia* 1, 1982, 81-106.

²¹ Another very interesting text, here neglected because of its later date and geographical remoteness from Ireland, is the *Vita Metrica Sanctae Brigidae* of Donatus, Bishop of Fiesole from 829-876. It is of approximately two thousand lines, incomplete, and constitutes the 'longest poem of any *Scottus* on the Continent'. S Young, 'Donatus, Bishop of Fiesole 829-876 and the Cult of St Brigit in Italy', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 35, 1998, 13-26, 16. An edition is available: D N Kissane, 'Vita Metrica Sanctae Brigidae: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Commentary and Indexes', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 77, Sect. C, 1977, 57-192.

²² K McCone, 'Brigit in the Seventh Century: A Saint with Three Lives?' *Peritia* 1, 1982, 107-145, 115.

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This may mean ‘predecessor’ or ‘spiritual elder’, but definitely suggests a generation between their respective *floruits*, placing Cogitosus in the third quarter of the seventh century or possibly slightly earlier.²³ More compelling evidence for the primacy of Cogitosus’ text is the fact that Cogitosus does not refer to meetings between Brigit and Patrick, while *Vita Prima* (eighth century) and *Bethu Brigitte* (ninth century) do.²⁴

The meetings between Brigit and Patrick in *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte* are vital clues to the purpose of the hagiographical texts under examination. Kathleen Hughes has noted that ‘hagiography is not history’, in that the author’s purpose in writing about a saint may involve manipulation of the material to achieve certain ends.²⁵ The purpose of hagiography is ‘an integrated narrative of the saint’s career’,²⁶ but, in constructing this narrative, other claims may be advanced. Cogitosus describes Kildare, the site of Brigit’s foundation, as a ‘great metropolitan city’. Knowledge of the absence of cities in any recognizable sense in seventh century Ireland alerts the reader that he is claiming a grand status for the church at Kildare, ‘at the least that she was the chief church in the province of Leinster, and probably that she claimed lordship over churches of other provinces’, according to Hughes.²⁷

Patrick’s seventh century hagiographers were also engaged in establishing a tradition of ecclesiastical authority for Armagh, the diocese with which he was traditionally associated. A text called the *Liber Angeli*, included in the *Book of Armagh* (folios 20v-22r), intimates the existence of a ‘pact’ between Kildare and Armagh with regard to the sharing of ecclesiastical authority or *paruchia*. It says:

²³ McCone, ‘Brigit’, 108-109.

²⁴ L Maney, ‘When Brigit Met Patrick’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* XIV, 1994, 175-194, 175-177.

²⁵ K Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge, 1977) 219.

²⁶ D A Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki, 1992) 11.

²⁷ K Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1980) 84.

Between S. Patrick and Brigit, the pillars of the Irish, such friendship of charity dwelt that they had one heart and one mind. Christ performed many miracles through him and her.

The holy man therefore said to the Christian virgin: 'O my Brigit, your *paruchia* in your province will be reckoned unto you for your monarchy but in the eastern and western part it will be in my domination'.²⁸

McCone's analysis of the Brigit texts and other material relevant to the historical period suggests that this agreement between Armagh and Kildare dates from the mid-eighth century (and probably not prior to the composition of *Vita Prima*) and is the reason for the strangely powerful meetings between Brigit and Patrick and their coded conversations, which appear in *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*.²⁹

Cogitosus' *Life*, written long before the Armagh/Kildare pact, lacks the meetings between Brigit and Patrick. Cogitosus does not need them, as his sole purpose is the exaltation of Brigit and her church at Kildare. So he has Brigit receiving the veil from Mac Caille, whereas the other *Lives* have Bishop Mel, Patrick's disciple, performing this important act (and so establishing her subordination to Patrick).³⁰ This interpretation of the interrelationship of the three texts also explains geographical biases within the narratives: Cogitosus keeps Brigit close to Kildare, whereas in the other two texts she ventures into other regions, chiefly further north into the area controlled by the Uí Néill dynasty.³¹

To exalt Brigit, Cogitosus constructs a narrative falling into four sections or parts: a prologue and an epilogue, framing two sets of miracle stories, thirty set during Brigit's lifetime and four after her death.³² Scholars have commented variously on these miracles: Hughes regards some of them as 'puerile and repetitive',³³ Wendy Davies has studied the healing miracles, noting that the percentage

²⁸ Hughes, *Early Irish Society*, 113.

²⁹ McCone, 'Brigit', 133.

³⁰ Connolly, *op cit*, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² McCone, 'Brigit', 109.

³³ Hughes, *Early Irish Society*, 147.

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overall is small and suggesting that ‘Irish clerical writers did not initially see healing as an appropriate manifestation of saintly power’;³⁴ and Connolly has argued convincingly that there is a theological agenda underlying the selection of miraculous events, employing the ‘two theological virtues of faith and charity’, interwoven with the two monastic virtues of virginity and obedience.³⁵ The later *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte* also contain numerous miracles and some elements that romanticise Brigit, the significance of which will be discussed in the following section.

Miracles were popular with the readers and hearers of saints’ lives and the attractiveness of the whimsical image of Brigit hanging her cloak on a sunbeam (in *Cogitosus*, Chapter 6.3)³⁶ is undeniable. Miracles also fitted into a Christian schema, in that Jesus in the *New Testament* is presented as a healer and miracle-worker. However, the miracles in the Brigit texts have attracted the attention of nativist scholars, who see in some of them the fragmentary recollection of the powers of the great pan-Celtic goddess Brigit,³⁷ who shares a name with the saint and may indeed be her source. The miracles in the Brigit *Lives* employ imagery such as fire and light, fertility and feasting; these qualities are all connected with the goddess. Another indication of identity is that Saint Brigit’s feast day, 1 February, is the day of Imbolc, a pagan festival of spring and fertility, associated with the goddess.³⁸

³⁴ W Davies, ‘The Place of Healing in Early Irish Society’ in O Corrain *et al*, *op cit*, 43-55, 51.

³⁵ S Connolly, ‘Cogitosus’ Life of St Brigit: Content and Value’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117, 1987, 5-27, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

³⁷ Brigit is also known as ‘Brigantia’ in some Celtic regions and gave her name to the British tribes of the Brigantes. Pdraig Ó Riain, ‘Sainte Brigitte: paradigme de l’abbesse celtique?’ in M Rouche and J Heuclin (eds) *La femme au moyen-age* (Maubeuge, 1990) 27-31, suggests that the high status accorded to Saint Brigit may reflect the tradition of female chieftainship among the Brigantes, 30-31.

³⁸ P Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess into Saint* (Boston, 1985) 70 and Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 229.

Brigit the Goddess in the Ecclesiastical Textual Tradition

Two texts provide the starting point for investigating the survival of Brigit the goddess in post-conversion Ireland. These are the entry in Cormac mac Cuillenáin's tenth century *Glossary*, and the twelfth century account by Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) describing the perpetual fire at the convent of Kildare. Cormac's text is as follows:

Brigit, i.e. a learned woman, daughter of the Dagda. That is Brigit woman of learning i.e. a goddess whom *filid* worshipped. For her protecting care was very great and very wonderful. So they called her goddess of poets. Her sisters were Brigit woman of healing and Brigit woman of smith-work, daughters of the Dagda from whose names all the Irish goddesses used to be called Brigit.³⁹

This passage indicates that 'Brigit' was a name by which all goddesses were known in pagan Ireland, that Brigit was the daughter of the Dagda, one of the great gods of the Tuatha de Danaan; and that she possessed a 'triple' form, being the patroness of poetry and learning, smithcraft and healing. Nativist commentators note that these qualities and areas of interest are duplicated in the lives of 'Saint' Brigit. Even the anti-nativist McCone has noted that there is 'an intimate ideological connection, apparently with pagan roots, between fire and the tripartite arts of medicine, craftsmanship and learned insight'⁴⁰ and that there is a proliferation of Saint Brigits ('ten different St Brigits and fourteen St Brigs alias Brigits. The problem of one or two St Patricks pales by comparison').⁴¹ He fails to draw the inference that this multitude may result from the fact that 'Brigit' was a name by which goddesses were generally known.

Giraldus Cambrensis' text offers a fascinating insight into the Kildare community in the later twelfth century. He toured Ireland as part of

³⁹ J F Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: An Introduction and Guide* (Dublin, 1979) 14.

⁴⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 165.

⁴¹ McCone, 'Brigit', 131, citing the 1912 text 'Comainmnigud nóem nÉrend', edited by Brosnan.

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the English court party which was engaged in the conquest of the Irish and was in the personal employ of the Angevin King Henry II. He describes the fire as follows:

It is not that it is strictly speaking inextinguishable, but that the nuns and holy women have so carefully and diligently kept and fed it with enough material, that through all the years from the time of the virgin saint until now it has never been extinguished ... Although in the time of Brigit there were twenty servants of the Lord here, Brigit herself being the twentieth, only nineteen have ever been here after her death ... They all, however, take their turns, one each night, in guarding the fire. When the twentieth night comes, the nineteenth nun puts the logs beside the fire and says, 'Brigit, guard your fire. This is your night'. And in this way the fire is left there, and in the morning the wood, as usual, has been burnt and the fire is still alight.⁴²

At least one other perpetual fire is known from early medieval Ireland, in a church dedicated to Saint Molaise. However, the most fascinating elements of Giraldus' description are those dealing with the resemblance between this fire, tended by professed virgins, and that of the Vestals in ancient Rome.

McCone's analysis of the role of the *aés dáno* (men of arts) in Celtic society draws out the connections between the figure of Brigit in the hagiographies and the poets (*filid*) and hospitallers (*bríugu*) of the sagas. McCone notes that the three significant males in Brigit's *Lives* represent the three main *aés dáno*, poet, craftsman and leech, all of whom are connected with fire.⁴³ His anti-nativist stance appears to have been forgotten; the material momentarily escapes the methodology. So too in Dorothy Bray's assessment of the role of fire in the cult of Brigit: she explicitly acknowledges McCone and constantly cautions that 'the transformation from goddess to saint involves several factors and is a far from simple process'. But it is difficult to accept her fence-sitting conclusion that, while Saint Brigit looks like the goddess, there are just as many biblical referents used in relation to her and therefore that 'Brigit the saint, the unknown and

⁴² Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographica Hibernica*, cited by M Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature* (Edinburgh, 1996) 157.

⁴³ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 165.

unknowable historical figure, revived memories of Brigit the goddess through the medium of the Christian myth of Mary'.⁴⁴

The importance of Kildare waned in the mid-twelfth century. After the rape of the abbess by the king of Leinster and her replacement with one of his relatives in 1135, the Council of Kells (1152) decreed that the abbess would no longer take precedence over the bishops in public assemblies.⁴⁵ The Archbishop of Dublin, Henry de Loundres, ordered the extinguishing of the perpetual fire in 1220. There were local protests, but it was never revived.

Before discussing folkloric survivals of devotion to the goddess Brigit, it remains to note that certain miracles featured in the hagiographical texts exhibit resemblances to so-called pagan sources. For example, in *Cogitosus* (Chapter 26, 2-3) Brigit stays under the roof of a poor woman, who slaughters her only calf and chops up the wood of her loom in order to cook it, so that the saint will receive an appropriate welcome. The next morning she 'found with her cow another calf of the same kind, which she loved as much as the previous one and she beheld the wood of the loom which had likewise been restored to her in place of the other'.⁴⁶ This miracle teaches the audience that no loss is sustained because the saint can restore all and that the provision of such hospitality is godly. Feasting is a common motif in accounts of the Celts from the Classical ethnographies onwards. The Norse mythological sources list two types of animals that can be slaughtered, cooked and eaten, only to resurrect the following morning: the goats that draw Thor's chariot and the boar on which warriors feast in Valhalla.⁴⁷

Earlier it was mentioned that there are elements of the post-*Cogitosus* hagiographies that romanticise Brigit. This observation relates to the

⁴⁴ D A Bray, 'Saint Brigit and the Fire from Heaven', *Etudes Celtiques* XXIX, 1992, 105-113.

⁴⁵ John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, quoted in Dianne Hall, *Women and the Church in Medieval Ireland c.1140-1540* (Dublin, 2003) 65.

⁴⁶ Connolly, 'Cogitosus', 22.

⁴⁷ *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, ed and trans J I Young (Berkeley, 1964).

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contention between nativists and anti-nativists as to whether there is a perceptible distinction between ecclesiastical and secular literary genres in early medieval Ireland. The nativists believe there is; the anti-nativists do not. In Cogitosus' narrative, the names of Brigit's parents, Dubthach and Broicsech, are given with little detail as to their relationship. The later *Vita Prima* posits that Brigit's mother was a bondmaid and that Dubthach had a wife who was deeply jealous of her mother. Anti-nativists (McCone, Bray) have argued that the origin of this change is the Biblical rivalry of Sarah, Abraham's wife, and his concubine Hagar.⁴⁸ However, this parallel is not exact, as Brigit (the concubine's child) is prophesied to rise above the children of Dubthach's legitimate wife, whereas in the Bible Hagar's son Ishmael is less favoured than Sarah's legitimate son Isaac. What is important in this change, from Cogitosus' plainer narrative to the more embroidered version of the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte*, is that the conditions of Brigit's birth and early life in the later texts bring her closer to the accounts of the birth of Celtic heroes in the 'secular' sagas.

Alwyn and Brinley Rees provide a table of nine 'striking features' in the birth of a hero in Celtic mythology.⁴⁹ Brigit's birth, as recounted in *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, can be seen to include at least six of these nine features. The conventions which this birth narrative fulfils are: 1) the future greatness of the child is foretold; 2) her advent is destined to bring misfortune to a presiding power; 3) her father is not a normal man (that is, he is a chieftain); 4) an auspicious time is announced for the birth; 5) certain animals are associated with the child's birth and upbringing (cows and milk); and 6) in her youth she displays qualities that reveal her extraordinary nature. The fact that Brigit does not fulfil all nine of the Rees brothers' conventions does not exclude her from the normal saga pattern; Cúchulainn in the *Táin bó Cúailnge* similarly conforms to only six.

For example, Cúchulainn and Brigit are alike in that both are born to parents who (in some sources) are not married, the implication being

⁴⁸ Bray, 'Saint Brigit', 108-9.

⁴⁹ A and B Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London, 1961).

that there may be supernatural involvement in the conception. In *Vita Prima* 15.2 Brigit is hailed as ‘the Mary of the Gael’ and her cult is closely associated with that of the Virgin Mary,⁵⁰ Mary, like Jesus, was said to be born without sin. *Vita Prima* 6.4 tells of Brigit’s birth: ‘That is how the prophet said this bondmaid would give birth, neither in the house nor outside the house, and the infant’s body was washed with the warm milk which she was carrying’.⁵¹ While this does not seem particularly relevant from a Christian point of view, thresholds and places and times that were liminal (like dawn and dusk) were regarded as powerful in pagan Celtic belief.⁵² Similarly, in the sagas there are examples of the alteration of time: these include the Dagda, who makes a year seem like a day; Nera, who ventures into a *síd* (fairy mound) for three days and three nights and finds on return that only a few minutes have passed; and the ultimate example of Oisín, son of Finn, who emerges from the Land of Youth to find that three hundred years have passed in the real world. The same theme occurs four times in the *Vita Prima*. Here, one example will suffice: when Brigit and Patrick meet, ‘they did not stop talking for three days and nights nor did the sun go down on them. On the contrary they all thought it was the one hour’.⁵³ Therefore, I would argue that the ‘romantic’ elements that have been added to the life of Brigit are more likely to be from the indigenous tradition and indicate the creation of a compatibility between the saints’ lives and the heroic stories.⁵⁴ This assertion is supported by the *Vita Prima* 88.6, which shows Brigit going into battle to support the cause of the king of Laigin, ‘with her staff in her right hand and a column of fire ... blazing skywards from her head’, granting him victory like the goddesses of Celtic paganism.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Connolly, ‘Vita Prima’, 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵² Rees and Rees, *op cit.*, *passim*.

⁵³ Connolly, ‘Vita Prima’, 31.

⁵⁴ For example, *The Tain*, ed and trans T Kinsella (Oxford, 1970) chronicles the exploits of the miraculously conceived Cuchulainn.

⁵⁵ Connolly, ‘Vita Prima’, 41. For goddesses and victory in battle see ‘The Second Battle of Mag Tured’ in T P Cross and C H Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York, 1969) 28-48.

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There is further evidence to support the identification of the saint and the goddess. The name ‘Kildare’ was derived from *cill dara*, the ‘church of the oak’.⁵⁶ Oak trees were particularly associated with druids and pre-Christian Celtic religion.⁵⁷ The ecclesiastical centre of Kildare was located a mere five miles from the village of Knockaulin, a former pagan sanctuary.⁵⁸ In addition to this is Brigit’s association with ale, feasting and the multiplication of food, all activities that were part of the warrior lifestyle of the pre-Christian Celts. In *Vita Prima* 42 Brigit multiplies food to feed Patrick’s entourage when he visits the monastery of Saint Laisre and in 52 she magnifies the contents of the granary of Bishop Ibor of Mag Geiselle.⁵⁹ Her resurrection of the poor woman’s calf is mentioned above. In a poem or hymn possibly composed in the eleventh century and attributed to Brigit,⁶⁰ is a vision of ‘Paradise in the form of a festival, a festival of beer, which is attended by the “king of kings” (the Lord) and all his entourage’.⁶¹ This is a suggestive image, harking back to the otherworld feasts described in the Ulster Cycle and other heroic saga texts. The image is reinforced by the later medieval quatrain recited on 1 February, St Brigit’s Day, ‘Tasting every food in order/This is what behoves at Imbolc/Washing of hand and foot and head/It is thus I say’.⁶²

⁵⁶ Sharpe, ‘Vita’, 105-106.

⁵⁷ A Watson, ‘The King, the Poet, and the Sacred Tree’, *Études Celtiques* XVIII, 1981, 165-180.

⁵⁸ Ó Cathasaigh, *op cit*, 82.

⁵⁹ Connolly, ‘Vita Prima’, 31.

⁶⁰ D Greene, ‘St. Brigid’s Alefeast’, *Celtica* II, 1954, 150-53.

⁶¹ Ó Riain, *op cit*, 27.

⁶² K Meyer, *Hibernica Minora* (Oxford, 1894) 49. Claire Stancliffe is persuaded that ‘stories and attributes of the pagan goddess Brigit were transformed to her Christian namesake’. C Stancliffe, ‘The Miracle Stories in Seventh-Century Irish Saints’ Lives’ in Jacques Fontaine and J N Hillgarth (eds) *The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity* (London, 1992) 87-115, 94.

Folkloric Evidence for the Continuation of Pre-Christian Devotion to Brigit

It is possible to sustain a purely anti-nativist orientation regarding pre-Christian Irish religion only by restricting attention to the texts. It is indisputable that these are monastic products and, although it has been demonstrated here that narrow anti-nativist readings of necessity explain away or suppress elements of the texts that fail to fit the paradigm, such readings are not untenable *per se*. However, once evidence from folklore and anthropology is admitted to build up the picture of the goddess Brigit and the survival of devotions to her in the modern era, it becomes nearly impossible to deny the identity of the Christian saint and the Celtic goddess, along with the pre-Christian origins of many of the devotional practices associated with them.

This folkloric evidence principally concerns those devotions of Irish Catholics that retain pre-Christian elements. These practices are of two kinds: those connected to the saint's day celebrations and those that can be performed at any time. Many of the second type take place at holy wells. Ireland is dotted with such water sources; water was inevitably twinned with generative and healing power in the pre-Christian world and usually with the female divine. The two most frequent dedications of Irish holy wells are to Brigit and to the Virgin Mary.⁶³ A recent study of Ireland's holy wells by Walter and Mary Brenneman stresses the 'loric' nature of well-devotions; that is, they are occasions for the transmission of lore, community knowledge very different from the official doctrines of the Church. Just outside Kildare there is a 'Brigit's well', of which the Brennemans observe:

There are several unique features of this well which link St. Bridget to the goddess Brigit and thus to the place and the power of the loric. Near the spring itself, which is located on the edge of a field, is a stone tablet standing upright. On one side is incised a St. Bridget's cross, whose swastika form symbolizes the fiery sun and maintains continuity with the goddess's association with the sacred smith and his fire. On the other side is incised a Christian cross, bringing together or syncretizing the loric and

⁶³ Brigit's identification as 'the Mary of the Gael' has already been mentioned.

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the sacred. But there is another stone image that seems forcefully to stress the loric roots of Brigit in the earth and especially in fertility as manifest through cows. As the water flows from the spring towards the glass-enclosed statue of the saint, it passes into and through two stone tubes and out their other ends. The tubes bring to mind the breasts of a woman, and the water flows through them as milk passes through the nipples of the Great Goddess to her children. There is nothing Christian to mollify this symbolism. In field interviews we were told that the stone tubes are called variously the 'shoes' or 'cows' of the saint.⁶⁴

The *vitae* refer to Brigit's cows and to her general ability to provide food and all forms of sustenance to people. The imagery of this well also raises the issue that the pagan Brigit has to be desexualised before she can be incorporated into the Christian company of saints. Other sexual aspects of Brigit surviving in folklore are noted below.

The association of Brigit with fertility has been discussed with reference to the wells. Much of the ritual engaged in on St Brigit's Day and on its eve concerned agricultural, pastoral and human sexual fertility. On the eve of 1 February, households prepared for Brigit to visit their homes. This tradition is attested in Scottish sources, including the *Carmina Gadelica*,⁶⁵ and in the archival sources of the Irish Folklore Collection (IFC). All accounts mention an effigy of Brigit, made from a sheaf of oats or a bundle of green rushes; J G Frazer notes that in the Highlands of Scotland the effigy was dressed and laid in a basket to sleep the night, whereas on the Isle of Man the custom was to stand 'with them [the bundle of rushes] in the hand on the threshold of the door, to invite the holy Saint Brigit to come and lodge with them that night'.⁶⁶ Frazer's research is dated and his methods are questionable by modern standards, but it has generally been acknowledged that the problems lie in his interpretations rather than in the material he collected.

⁶⁴ W L Jr and M Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland* (Charlottesville and London, 1995) 99.

⁶⁵ A Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh and London, 1928).

⁶⁶ J G Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London, 1949) 134-135.

However, folkloric research into Brigit was brought up to date in a most impressive fashion in the 1990s in the publications of Séamas Ó Catháin. Taking his lead from Máire Mac Neill's *The Festival of Lughnasa*,⁶⁷ a groundbreaking study of Irish customs concerning the feastday sacred to the god Lugh, 1 August, Ó Catháin painstakingly assembled materials from the IFC attesting to customs celebrating Brigit on or around 1 February. In these archives are recorded traditions that are now dying or have died out. These include Brigit's role in enhancing the milk supply:

It is still said here that the milk has gone up into the cows' horns from Christmas until after the Feast of St Brigid. This means that there is a scarcity of milk during this time. Usually milk is very scarce in January but the old people used to say during the month when they heard anyone complaining of the scarcity of milk – 'It won't be scarce very long now as St. Brigid and her white cow will be coming round soon'. I heard that some of the older women of the Parish take a Blessed candle to the cow's stall on Brigit's Eve and sing the long hair on the upper part of the cow's udder so as to bring a blessing on her milk.⁶⁸

Ó Catháin, convinced of the pre-Christian nature of Brigit but knowing her significance for Irish Christians, has proposed calling her a 'Holy Woman', so as to avoid the pitfalls of both 'goddess' and 'saint'.

In other investigations, Ó Catháin examines the symbolism of the Brigit's crosses that were woven during the festival and the sexual nature of some of the activities, especially those involving churning milk into butter. In an earlier article, he explores Brigit's connections with bees and honey-making, and with bears and fertility, and adduces useful evidence for similar traditions in the Scandinavian regions. The net effect of his research is to strengthen the connection of Brigit to fertility and to pre-Christian traditions that had survived as folk practices, where higher-order textual sources manifest no signs of

⁶⁷ M Mac Neill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: a Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of Harvest* (Oxford, 1962).

⁶⁸ S Ó Catháin, 'The Festival of Brigit the Holy Woman', *Celtica* XXIII, 1999, 231-260, 238-239.

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such syncretism.⁶⁹ This pattern of retention of older beliefs and practices, and their syncretism with the incoming religion of conversion, is observable the world over, as peoples convert to evangelistic new religions.⁷⁰ The argument for such syncretism is more logical and realistic than a strong anti-nativism which claims that the Christian texts can tell us very little about the old religion.

The suggestion that there was a period of overlap between ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Ireland, resulting in a mixed culture, is also supported by recent research into the coming of literacy to Ireland. If, prior to the arrival of missionaries in the fifth century, literacy was unknown in Ireland and if, as is the case with many other European peoples, literacy was exclusively associated with Christianity, the anti-nativist position would be easier to hold; it could be claimed that texts were only able to issue from ecclesiastical institutions. Research by Jane Stevenson, however, suggests that the adoption of literacy in Ireland was far more complex than this. Stevenson’s argument is detailed; it is sufficient to cite her conclusions here:

The true explanation for the state of literate culture in sixth- and seventh-century Ireland, which had reached such a state of sophistication that it had developed a standard literary vernacular by the later sixth century, is that the Irish discovered literacy, like their Continental cousins, by contact with Rome. Similarly, they developed their own sense of what it was and was not good for ... This knowledge of writing and its uses seems to have developed such a degree of self-confidence in them that even the impact of the fifth-century post-Roman Britons and their culture failed to unseat the native *aes dana* (‘men of art’). Ireland is, in this reading, not only one of the first Western cultures to show a medieval type of Christian literacy but also the last witness to the effect of the Roman Empire on the less developed and less technologically complex culture on its fringes.⁷¹

⁶⁹ S Ó Catháin, ‘Hearth-Prayers and Other Traditions of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 122, 1992, 12-34.

⁷⁰ C M Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London, 1998) Chapter 1.

⁷¹ J Stevenson, ‘The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 89:6, Sect. C, 1989, 127-165, 129-130.

Stevenson, a student of Carney, has produced a picture of Ireland that renders the hardline anti-nativist position absurd. Literacy was available to Irish who did not accept Christianity, which means that pre-Christian traditions could be committed to writing and enter into dialogue with Christian textual products, creating exactly the sort of radically syncretic ideas that Carey has discovered in the surviving material.

This evidence makes rather more explicable and much less astonishing the remarkable status of Brigit, who is equated with Mary. It also explains the remarkable status of the abbess of the foundation at Kildare, who from ‘the start of the tenth century ... seems to have been more honoured than the abbot of Kildare, and, in Ireland at this period, this signified that she was at a rank comparable with that of a bishop’.⁷² The goddess was retained in a Christian form. This was a lengthy and complicated transformation, which took place over several centuries. During those centuries Christianity was becoming enmeshed in the fabric of Irish society; older models of conversion, positing erasure of the old religion and an uncomplicated acceptance of the new, are simply not credible.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that anti-nativist scepticism concerning paganism and syncretic Christianity is not sustainable, nor is the preference for a severely restricted approach to the study of the early medieval Irish texts, an approach that yields only Christianity.⁷³ It has not been the intention in this article to probe the underlying reasons for advocating the strong anti-nativist position; suffice to say that it appears politically naïve or worse when the evidence from modern

⁷² Ó Riain, *op cit*, 30. The original text is: ‘*Puis à partir du Xe siècle, l’abbesse semble avoir été plus honorée que l’abbé a Kildare, et, dans l’Irlande de cette période, ceci signifierait qu’elle jouissait d’un rang comparable à celui de l’évêque*’. This translation is by Dr Christopher Hartney of the University of Sydney. My thanks are due to him.

⁷³ The clearest and most sober exposition of the difficulties of maintaining this position is: J P Mackey, ‘Christian Past and Primal Present’, *Etudes Celtiques* XXIX, 1992, 285-297.

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colonial encounters is considered. The Irish were not conquered violently, but their culture underwent a seismic shift when it encountered the Christian religion. Their worldview became unviable as their microcosm encountered the Christian macrocosm, the fifth century equivalent of a global culture. Insightful theorists of conversion note that the encounter of the microcosm with the macrocosm, and of polytheism with universalist monotheism, results in cultural and religious change, usually in the form of cultural adaptations to facilitate the survival of identity in the newly ‘globalised’ world.⁷⁴ To examine texts and discover only Christianity, to question the existence of paganism, is to ratify the result of colonialism while ignoring the process by which it is reached.

Brigit’s *vitae* were all written substantially later than her alleged lifetime and the intervening years are when the crucial negotiation and accommodation between the old and the new took place. Other historical evidence supports the existence of the syncretic, adventurous theology celebrated by Carey. Irish clergy throughout the early medieval period were known for their irregular views; rumours of Pelagianism abounded⁷⁵ and accusations of heresy were made against Irishmen throughout Europe (for example, Virgil of Salzburg, denounced as a heretic ‘for his views concerning the existence of the Antipodes’).⁷⁶

Brigit was part of the old Irish religion that continued into the new Christian culture. Her name, generic for ‘goddess’, became one of the most popular Christian names in Ireland. Her role in the lives of the

⁷⁴ For example, Robin Horton’s thesis, exemplified in ‘African Conversion’, is that three factors facilitate conversion from local, indigenous traditions to globalizing monotheism: the intellectual background of the indigenous religion, which creates a bridge to the new religion; an exposure to the global macrocosm, which leads the tribal culture to conclude that local deities and spirits are inadequate and that a universal deity is superior; and lastly, the prompt conversion of the major stakeholders (including rulers and priests) to preserve their status in the new world order. See the summary in Cusack, *op cit*, Chapter 1.

⁷⁵ Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2002).

⁷⁶ Wright, *op cit*, 41.

pious was generally concerned with the matters of daily life, food, sexuality, health and domesticity, rather than the more doctrinal and intellectual preoccupations evidenced in the *vitae* of the historical Patrick. Intriguingly, Maney has recently suggested that, when he places Patrick in Mide, Tírechán ‘seems to be suggesting that the Christian Brigit was already established there prior to Patrick’s arrival’ and that this affected the way Patrick conducted himself, including his performance of marvels at wells.⁷⁷ This is fascinating, although it is more likely that it was the pre-Christian Brigit that Patrick was following, since the arrival of Patrick himself marks the start of ‘Christian Ireland’. It also confirms the claim that, while saints’ *vitae* do tell us about ecclesiastical tensions from the time of composition, this focus is not exclusive. Other information (at least as important to ecclesiastics) might be included, such as details of the old religion, albeit in a disguised fashion.

Brigit was remade in Christian form and occupies a space between myth and history, pagan and Christian, oral and written, vernacular and Latin, folkloric and ecclesiastical. She may be contextualised either way, to be purely a Celtic goddess or purely a Christian saint. Yet both these versions of her are incomplete, mutilations of the complex and multifaceted reality. Thus, Ó Catháin’s suggestion that she be designated the ‘Holy Woman’ is an excellent one since, whether pagan or Christian, Brigit is always distinguished by her holiness and her femaleness.

⁷⁷ Maney, *op cit*, 183.

