

THE FESTIVAL OF BRIGIT THE HOLY WOMAN

I

‘Oíche Fhéile Bríde agus Lá Lúnasa’

IN her monumental *The Festival of Lughnasa*, Máire Mac Neill writes:

Fuller understanding of the old goddess’s part in the harvest festival must wait on studies, still to be made, of the local legends of the myth of the mythological old woman known as the Cailleach Bhéara, and also of the cults of St Brigid and St Ann . . . Brigid must have been closely connected – at least two important Lughnasa sites were dedicated to her, and she is named at several others. Still she hardly appears in the festival legends. She has only a passive part in the Lughnasa complex.²

Just as was the case for Mac Neill’s brilliant exposé of Lúnasa, so also much of the raw material which would form the basis for the kind of studies mentioned by her above is to be found in rich abundance among the manuscript collections of the Department of Irish Folklore.³ The Feast of Saint Brigid, in common with the other Quarter Days of Irish tradition,⁴ was the target of particular attention being the topic for an Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaire⁵ and also a popular and constant subject of enquiry among folklore collectors over the years. The purpose of this article is to attempt to isolate and highlight certain hitherto largely ignored or, at best, badly understood aspects of the cult of Brigid which feature prominently in Irish folk tradition and which cast her in the role of a fertility figure comparable to her harvest counterpart Lugh. In essaying this task, I could do no better than follow the trail blazed by Máire Mac Neill when she wrote:

¹ IFC 904 : 224. This is glossed by the informant – *Is é sin, is ionann fad daofa* ‘That is to say they are of equal length’. The reference is to the Main Manuscripts Collection in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin (IFC = Irish Folklore Collection [+ ms. volume number + page number(s)]). Quotations from the Irish Folklore Collection are by kind permission of Professor Bo Almqvist, (then Head of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin), whom I would also wish to thank for his encouragement and scholarly advice without which this article might never have been written. I also wish to thank my friend Dr Seosamh Watson who read this article in typescript and whose vigilance saved me from a number of mistakes. Responsibility for the opinions expressed here and for such errors as may occur is, of course, mine only. For a discussion relevant to the binary pair *oíche* and *lá*, cf. n. 110, p. 254 below.

² M. Mac Neill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: a study of the survival of the Celtic festival of the beginning of harvest* (Oxford 1962) 412–3. This was republished by the Folklore of Ireland Council, University College Dublin in 1982, which edition contains ‘Additions and Corrections’ by the author (pp. 671–80).

³ A brief account of the Department of Irish Folklore, its holdings and the relationship between it and the former Irish Folklore Commission is given in *Celtic Cultures Newsletter* No. 5, Christmas 1987, 28–32.

⁴ Cf. C. Ó Danachair, ‘The Quarter Days in Irish Tradition’, *Arv* 15 (1959) 47–55.

⁵ The Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaire on ‘The Feast of St. Brigid’ was issued in January 1942. The replies, which run to 2,435 manuscript pages – contained in IFC 899–907 and IFC 1135–cover most of Ireland.

Further material relating to St Brigid is contained in replies to the Questionnaires on ‘Local Patron Saints’ and ‘Holy Wells’. For an outline of the lines of enquiry followed by collectors concerning St Brigid and her feast, see Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin 1942) 324–6, 553.

Lughnasa is not a marrying time . . . If one pre-supposes a folk-logic identifying human fertility with the fertility of the crops, there is no magical reason for mating at reaping time. If the incentive (to help the crops) were thought of in terms of human pregnancy, the union should be made at Samhain; if in terms of the growth of the crops, it should be made at the beginning of spring, about St Brigid's Day.⁶

I am in complete agreement with Mac Neill's supposition that there is a 'folk-logic identifying human fertility with the fertility of the crops'. The correctness of this approach will be further substantiated by material I will adduce below. I will also try to show that her 'magical reason for mating' is, as she indeed hints, directly associated with the beginning of spring and the Feast of St Brigit.

II

One of the two important Lúnasa sites linking 'the old goddess' and the harvest festival, to which Mac Neill refers, is Brideswell or *Tobar Bhríde* in Co. Roscommon.⁷ Like *Daigh Bhríde* (St Brigid's Well) at Liscannor, Co. Clare⁸ and the St Brigid's Well in the parish of Ballinakill, Co. Galway,⁹ it is a Lúnasa site which bears the name of the saint whose feast day is celebrated, not in harvest time, but on the first of February, traditionally the first day of spring in Ireland.¹⁰ In common with a number of other wells dedicated to St Brigit, Brideswell also exhibits some highly significant connections with what may be broadly described as 'fertility', as is made clear by the following:

In 1604 Randal MacDonnell, son of Sorley Boy, and afterwards first Earl of Antrim (1620), married Ailis, daughter of the great Hugh O'Neill, and they were for a while childless. They made the pilgrimage to Tobar Bhríde and later, in gratitude, for answered prayer, Randal, now Earl of Antrim, erected a gateway leading to the well, bearing his arms and date 1625.¹¹

Kilbride (*Cill Bhríde*) near Ballycastle, Co. Mayo also boasts a 'St Bridget's Well' which 'is supposed to possess a cure for sterility' and which also happens to lie in close proximity to yet another major Lúnasa site.¹² The potential to 'cure sterility' was a feature of the healing powers of a number of holy wells here and there

⁶ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 424.

⁷ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 633–4.

⁸ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 275–86.

⁹ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 633–4.

¹⁰ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, contains reference to a number of such sites in chap. 12 *passim*, 260–86 and in Appendix II, 601–51.

¹¹ Quoted in Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 633–4. Énrí Ó Muirgheasa in noting the existence of this well and the McDonnell association with it, comments: '. . . wells with such a reputation must have been scarce when these pilgrims could find none nearer to North Antrim than that of Athlone . . .' (*Béaloides* 7 [1937] 174).

¹² IFC 903:199. Downpatrick Head (Dún Briste) and its Lúnasa connections is described in Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa* 107–12 *et passim*.

throughout the country.¹³ Devotion to St Brigit was, indeed, widespread among the ordinary people, finding in later years its most elaborate surviving expression in the Irish-speaking or recently Irish-speaking parts. Seán Ó hEochaidh, former full-time folklore collector in Donegal noted:

¹³ Cf., for example, É. Ó Muirgheasa, 'The holy wells of Donegal', *Béaloideas* 6 (1936) 158, and also IFC 903:98, which latter source refers to a lake into which people used to drive cattle to be cured, perhaps of sterility, though this is not specifically stated. J. Hall, *Tour through Ireland* i (London 1813) 21, categorically identifies such a well in Dublin: 'At St. Patrick's well, in a corner within the cathedral, which is an old Gothic building, notwithstanding that superstition and ignorance are fast decreasing, even yet many who have weak eyes and head-aches, wash their eyes and head, and think themselves cured. They also believe that the water of this well prevents retching, &c. &c and I observed a woman who had come more than forty miles to drink of, as it is believed also to cure barrenness' (cf. above p. 232). Ó Muirgheasa, 'The Holy Wells of Donegal', 148–9, describing 'Tobar na mBan Naomh' ('The Well of the Holy Women') in Teelin, Co. Donegal, identifies the eponymous trio as 'Ciall, Tuigse agus Náire', 'Sense, Understanding and Modesty' and states that they were 'said to have been three sisters' and that '... Fishermen sailing out from Teelin Bay to fish in the open sea lower their sails by way of salute on passing Tobar na mBan Naomh, take off their caps, and ask the help and blessing of the holy women.

An almost similar custom', Ó Muirgheasa continues, 'is observed by fishermen on the North-West coast of County Mayo, who when passing under a jutting cliff known as the Cailleach Crom, salute it bareheaded three times in occult terms, at the same time striking the water three times with the flat of their oars.' O'Donovan (Ordnance Survey Letters: Mayo. 1. Typescript, p. 104) documents more or less the same tradition in respect of Inishglora – also off the North Mayo coast – telling us that 'ships when sailing by it, lower their top sails in honour of St. Brendan'. The 'Cailleach Crom' referred to by Ó Muirgheasa is, in fact, a sea stack (cf. S. Ó Catháin, 'An tOsnádúr agus an Tíreolaíocht i Logainmneacha Mhaigh Eo', (ed. B. Almqvist, B. Mac Aodha and G. Mac Eoin, *Hereditas, essays and studies presented to Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga*, (Dublin 1975) [= *Béaloideas* 39–41 (1971–73), 217–20]) and 'the jutting cliff which he mentions is, in all probability, the Lúnasa site described by Mac Neill (*Festival of Lughnasa*, 189–91) called An Dúna and situated near Portacloy (cf. Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 189–91). 'Three rocks at the foot of the Dúna', Mac Neill tells us, '... are known as 'Tri Cailleacháí thón a' Dúna' (the Three Hags at the end of the Dún) and are believed to be three women under a spell of transformation by a witch' (cf. Ó Catháin, 'An tOsnádúr agus an Tíreolaíocht i Logainmneacha Mhaigh Eo', 212–27). *Tobar na mBan Naomh* and its three holy women are discussed in the context of *dísir* and *matronae* by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in his article 'Ferðaðættir frá Írlandi', *Skírnir* 121 (1948), 170–1 and the Norwegian scholar, Moltke Moe, in his article, 'Hellsenske og Norske Folketraditioner' (*Moltke Moes Samlede Skrifter*, 1 Serie B, [Oslo 1925] 23–82 [English summary 273–81]), mentions – in the course of his discussion of the role of the Nordic rulers of fate, the *normir*, female deities who appeared at the birth of children (cf. n. 139, p. 260 below) – 'several holy wells, in Germany, patronized by women wishing to have children, who invoke "the three Maries" (p. 274)'. For female triads, cf. J. Szövényfi's 'The Well of the Holy Women: Some St. Columba Traditions in the West of Ireland' in *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955) 111–22; A. Partridge in *Caoineadh na dTri Muire* (Baile Átha Cliath 1983) 123–6; M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London and New York 1989) 169ff.

For treatments of a number of tale types relevant to this and other themes dealt with in this article, cf. Moe, *Moltke Moes Samlede Skrifter*, 28–33; Donatien Laurent, 'Brigitte, accoucheuse de la Vierge. Présentation d'un dossier', *Le Monde Alpin et Rhodanien*, 1–4 (1982) 73–9; Paul Delarue, 'Le conte de Brigitte, la maman qui m'a pas fait, mais m'a nourri', *Fabula* 2, no. 3, 254–64; Nicole Belmont, 'Myth and Folklore in Connection with AT 403 and 713', *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, nos. 2 and 3 (1983) 185–96 (for which reference I am grateful to Fionnuala Williams MA; cf. also Lövkrona, n. 72, p. 246 below. The relevance of one of these tale types is noted thus by Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: studies in iconography and tradition* (London 1967) 217: 'The possibility that one of the Ribchester goddesses has horns has also been noted. In one Irish folktale supernatural women spin and weave for a lazy wife. According to the Tipperary version of the tale, they are horned.' For a brief survey of legends associated with Irish holy wells, cf. C. Ó Danachair, 'Holy Well Legends in Ireland', *Saga och Sed. Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademiens Årsbok* (1958) 35–42. For further discussion relevant to this subject, cf. p. 232 above and n. 127, p. 258 below.

According to tradition, the old people had great belief in Brigid in this district and any time they would be in danger or in difficulty they would place themselves under her protection and patronage. This was also the case with regard to their children as can be heard in some of their lullabies to the present day:

*Huis-a-bá, a lil ghil, ó huis-a-bá hí,
Beannacht Naomh Bríd ar leanbh mo chroí. [‘. . . Oh the blessing of
Brigit on the child of my heart.’]¹⁴*

Another Donegal collector, Aodh Ó Domhnaill of Rannafast, writing in or around the same time, declared:

I used often hear when an old woman would ask the name of a child and when she would be told that her name was Brigid, I often heard that old woman remark in a kindly way while, perhaps, at the same time placing her hand reverently on the child’s head – ‘Oh, Brigid, the Holy Woman or blessed!’¹⁵

Devotion to the saint as we shall see, often directly involved children or young adults and was frequently directed in particular towards the welfare of children and of females, both younger and older. One popular practice – highly relevant in the context of the present discussion – associated with the devotion to Brigit was that involving an object called the *Brat Bride*, described by an informant from Co. Cork in the following terms:

This was a custom that was confined solely to the women and girls of the house. A piece of any kind of unwashed cloth in the house was taken out on the day before the first of February and placed on a bush. This was left there all day for it was supposed that when the night came Saint Brigid used pass by and touch this cloth. It was then brought in after dark and was torn in pieces and a piece was given to every female in the house. This was to have Saint Brigid protect them wherever they went.¹⁶

An informant from Kerry is more specific:

¹⁴ IFC 904:131. The spelling of Irish-language IFC manuscript material has been modified to bring it more into line with modern usage and occasionally the punctuation in these and other quotations from IFC manuscript material has been adjusted for the sake of clarity. Longer quotations from original Irish-language IFC material are rendered here in English translation only. For a full Donegal version of this lullaby, cf. *An Stoc* 2/1 (1924) 2.

¹⁵ IFC 904:59. Translated from the Irish. The blessing is given in the original as – *Brid bhan-naomh nó bheannuigh*, the final element of which I take to be *bheannaithe* in reference to *Brid*. Noteworthy is the frequency with which the saint is referred to in the Feast of St Brigid IFC Questionnaire replies – especially those from Donegal as – *Brid Bhan-naomh* rather than *Naomh Bríd*. ‘Are girls named after the Saint in your district?’, one of the questions posed in the IFC Questionnaire ‘The Feast of St. Brigid’, drew a positive response from all parts of Ireland. A reply to the IFC Questionnaire on ‘Patron Saints’ sums up the popular attitude to the name: ‘There is a custom held by numerous families in South Longford to christen the first female child Brigid or “Bridie” and you find a lot of girls having that name’ (IFC 946:302).

¹⁶ IFC 900:53–4. Cf. n. 19, p. 235 below.

Pieces of the *brat* was sewn into young girls' clothes. This was supposed to guard them against any misfortune during the year and especially to preserve their virginity.¹⁷

Uniting the twin concerns of providing an antidote to barrenness or sterility and securing a safe delivery at the end of a pregnancy, we have the following dramatic account from Donegal in which the crucial role played by the *Brat Bride* is outlined:

There was a poor old woman going around this place long ago and she had a shawl which was a *Bratach Bride* of fourteen-years' standing and any request she made in the name of the shawl, she was granted it. She went into one of the houses here once. There was a cow tethered at the lower end of the house, about to calve, but the calf wasn't coming and appeared unlikely to do so and the cow seemed doomed. The poor woman enquired – 'Are you not doing any good?' They said they weren't. 'Well, go down again', says she, 'and try her once more.' The men went down and tackled the cow again. And the old woman shook the shawl over the cow and went down on her two knees there and began to pray to Brigid the Holy Woman. It wasn't ten minutes till the cow was all right. There was another woman in this place, long married, unable to have a family and not looking like she was ever going to have one either. This old woman came in to visit her one day. She told the poor woman how things were and how she would like to have a family. The poor woman removed her shawl and shook it three times over her in the name of God and Mary and Brigid the Holy Woman. She had her family after that.¹⁸

The normal method of utilizing the *Brat Bride* in maternity cases was generally a much less flamboyant affair; it was by no means an unusual stratagem resorted to by country midwives or 'handy women' when attending at a birth. This account from Kerry provides us with a first-hand description of the precise manner in which the *Brat Bride* was deployed:

N . . . had one of those *brat* . . . She was a handy woman and she used to place it on the head of any woman sick in childbed. I was very bad when I was having my first child and N . . . placed the *Cochall Bride* on my head and I got relief . . .¹⁹

¹⁷ IFC 899:169.

¹⁸ IFC 904: 67–9. Translated from the Irish.

¹⁹ IFC 899:108. Translated from the Irish. The *Brat Bride* – here called *Cochall Bride* 'Brigid's Mantle' – was also described as a *ribín* 'ribbon' and, as we see above, a *bratach*. It could, indeed, be any kind of cloth or practically any article of clothing (cf. Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland* [Cork 1972] 33, and IFC 900:159, 163; 903:50; 904:160), including men's clothing, especially waistcoats, significantly the latter also being commonly worn by women in childbed. In parts of Co. Donegal, it was the custom for each member of the family to deposit an article of clothing in a basket which was then left outside for the saint's blessing in the usual manner, the basket being subsequently brought in and their garments then retrieved by the different family members (cf. IFC 904:67, for example, and p. 234 above). For some interesting parallels in the Greek classical tradition, cf. L. Deubner in J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh 1909) ii 648, where it is stated: 'When birth had ended happily, the women brought their clothes to Artemis as an offering . . . Artemis Brauronia also received the clothes of women who had died in childbed'. Cf. n. 70, p. 245 below.

The *Brat Bride* was applied to parturient and postpartum cows in more or less similar fashion:

Brat Bride was supposed to be an infallible cure for cows after calving that had kept what they call here ‘the clanins’ . . . They mean the afterbirth. They placed it on the hindquarters of the cow and it got all right.²⁰ Always when a cow calves on that particular farm, the *brat* is spread over the cow’s back. This brings good luck and the cow will have abundance of milk and the calf will thrive marvellous.²¹

As we have seen above, the protection and preservation of virginity or, what is, in effect, its antithesis – the elimination and relief of sterility and barrenness – clearly forms an important part of the picture along with the adoption of various measures designed to guarantee a successful pregnancy and a safe delivery.

Of equal if not even greater importance were the measures taken subsequent to the birth in order to safeguard the new-born – be it human or beast – from evil forces, together with the steps taken to provide for its nourishment and sustenance in the early stages of its existence. The latter consideration centred mainly upon the necessity to secure and maintain an adequate supply of milk. This was something which was by no means guaranteed to be found readily to hand in the generally unproductive period that straddled the end of the winter season and the commencement of the spring proper, the period characterized, on the one hand, by the description, *Na Faoiligh*, an Irish name for the month of February, a word which may have been perceived as meaning ‘the leavings of the year’,²² and, on the other, by the designation, *mí silta*, ‘the month of sowing’.²³

III

The country people always regarded and do still the advent of *Féile Bride* as marking the end of nature’s sleep during winter and her re-awakening to a

²⁰ IFC 902:245.

²¹ IFC 902:254.

²² E. G. Quin et al. (ed.), (*Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* (Dublin 1913–76) (*DIL*) s.v. *failech*. In Scotland, we are told ‘The Faoilteach corresponded roughly to the present month of February, embracing the last two months of Winter, O[ld] S[tyle] and the first two of Spring. Sometimes the first half was called the ‘Faoilleach Geamhraidh’ and the other half the ‘Faoilleach Earraich’, A. Nicolson (ed.), *Gaelic Proverbs*, [Edinburgh 1881] (reprinted with index, M. Mac Innes [Glasgow 1951] 411). Ronald I. Black (‘The Gaelic calendar months: some meanings and derivations’, *Shadow* 2 [1985] 5–6) pinpoints what he calls an ‘important cosmological fact about the *faoilteachan*, namely that they lie like a bridge across the spring quarter-day, and can therefore be assumed to have roots in the pre-Christian calendar’, and he concludes that ‘it is likely . . . that *na faoilteachan* are in origin “the leavings” while not excluding “the possibility of interference by a derivation of *fáel* (later *faol*) “a wolf” or some other word’.

²³ H. Wagner, ‘Beiträge in Erinnerung an Julius Pokorny,’ *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 32 (1972) 80. Quoting from D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach* (Dublin 1970), ll. 535 ff. – *Acht nammá atáa mí nád n-imthet ri acht cethrur. Cia cethnar? Ri 7 brithem 7 dias a manchuini. Cia mí i(n) n-imthet in tucht sin? Mí silta(i)* – which he translates ‘there is, however, one month when the king goes around accompanied only by three people. Who are the four? The king, the judge and two in attending. In which month does he go around in this manner? In the month of sowing’, Wagner concludes that the term *mí silta* ‘is an ancient name for the month(s) of Spring’.

fresh activity of life. This is of course exemplified in numerous ways in the animal and vegetable worlds. The mating instincts of animals (beasts and birds) are aroused even to the fishes of the sea. In the vegetable kingdom, signs of budding life are evident, and there is altogether a general re-birth, so to speak, of the natural order in the world.²⁴

The folk tradition can, in fact, be quite detailed and explicit about such matters:

Jackdaws and crows and other birds mate on that day.²⁵ Eggs were put down to hatch on St Brigid's Day if there was a broody hen to be got as tradition had it that anything that started its growth on that day would prove 100% fertile.²⁶ There is nothing in the water or in the ground that is not thinking of propagating by the Feast of St Brigid.²⁷

By the same token, a definite connection seems to have existed in popular imagination between the instigation of the initial phase of the fertility cycle in beasts and also, perhaps, as we shall see, in human kind, on the one hand, and the preparation of the ground for the propagation of crops, on the other. While the generation of new human life must always have been of paramount importance – since, without having sought to guarantee the perpetuation of his own species in the first place, there would be little point in man continuing to devote himself to breeding animals and cultivating crops so as to provide for the physical welfare and further survival of the species – nevertheless, the management of livestock and the tilling of the soil in order to produce a reliable supply of food was also a vital consideration and, accordingly, demanded and received their due measure of attention.

New life is infused into the earth on Brigid's Day and a token to commence manual labour on the farm.²⁸ People always made an effort to start ploughing on St Bridget's Day. They said that if [you] had not your name 'written on [the] ground' before that day you were late.²⁹ Men planted something on St Bridget's Day in order to 'redde[n]' the soil.³⁰

The timing of the commencement of agricultural activity might vary according to the climatic conditions prevailing in different parts of the country. In Cape Clear, in the far south, for example, it was a case of not only getting the ploughing season under way but also actually starting to sow the crops:

. . . in this island wheat was always sown immediately after St Brigid's Day and potatoes likewise.³¹

²⁴ IFC 903:46. This passage serves as an introduction to the outstanding reply made to the IFC Questionnaire on the Feast of St Brigid by Michael Corduff of Rossport, Co. Mayo.

²⁵ IFC 902:242.

²⁶ IFC 903:78.

²⁷ IFC 902:57. The Irish text runs: *Níl aon rud dá mbíonn san uisce ná sa talamh nach mbíonn ag síobrí faoi Fhéile Bhríde.*

²⁸ IFC 901:129.

²⁹ IFC 906:113.

³⁰ IFC 903:78.

³¹ IFC 900:40.

By contrast in the far north of Donegal, however:

There was little or no connection between planting and the Feast of St Brigid . . . except that people liked to plant sally for making baskets for they feel there is no better or luckier time for this than the dark days around the Feast.³²

But whether the act of sowing seed or carrying out other planting took place on or about the actual feast day – around which time, at the very least, preparation for such activity was generally expected to have begun – ultimately Brigit was called upon to impart her blessing to the work:

On the night of the first of February the family rosary was always offered by the old people to Saint Brigid to bring blessing on the crops for the year.³³ A small sheaf of oats and potato used to be left on the doorstep until bed-time and stuck on a *scolb* [‘scollop’] and put up behind a rafter on St. Bridget’s Eve. When the spring came, the oats would be rubbed between the hands and the seed would be put with the oats for sowing. The potato used to be cut and put with the rest of the ‘slits’. While this was being done, St. Brigit was being invoked to protect the crops from diseases.³⁴

IV

With the end of winter and the coming of spring which brought the prospect of new growth and better grazing, it was confidently expected that the milk supply would improve, a process, it was widely believed, not likely to be left unaided by Brigit:

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.³⁵ 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.’³⁶ 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

³² IFC 904:405. This account was rendered by the famous Donegal *seanchaí*, Niall Ó Dubhthaigh. Sally – wound around the churn – was also used as part of a counter charm against butter stealing (IFC 169:404) and as a ‘virility herb’ which was ‘brewed to effect and produce sex virility in a lethargic (presumably!) man’ (IFC 1220:56). Cf. Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (London 1957), chap. 6 ‘The Willow Branch of the Next World’, 286ff and n. 116, p. 255 below.

³³ IFC 900:55.

³⁴ IFC 900:82.

³⁵ IFC 900:90. Translated from the Irish. This seems to have been a fairly common notion – cf. *Béaloidéas* 11 (1941), 75; *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge: The Gaelic Journal* 5 (1894), 89 and *ibid.* 15 (1905), 55.

³⁶ IFC 899:258–9. The significance of the colour white in relation to Brigit (cf. Lá Fhéile Bríde *Bán*: [IFC 901:157] and of Brigit’s white cow – *vis-à-vis An Glas Ghaibhleann* (cf. Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 165) – is a subject to which I hope to return on another occasion.

long hair on the upper part of the cow's udder so as to bring a blessing on her milk.³⁷

A cow would normally be expected to calve once a year and a newly-calved cow with a good supply of milk was a blessing indeed at this time of year. As A. T. Lucas points out, people were anxious to see to it that their cows would calve at this time:

. . . it was entirely logical to control breeding so that the birth of the calf coincided with the spring renewal of herbage so that the cow would benefit from the improving grazing thus enabling her to produce abundant milk for the sustenance of the calf during its first weeks of life. As the calf grew able to graze for itself, more and more milk became available for human use.³⁸

Protection of this milk supply was of crucial concern to man and beast alike:

The new calved cow is put under the protection of St. Brigid. The candles blessed on the day following her feast day are used in blessing the cow previous to milking after calving. St. Brigid is believed to have every interest in farming life at heart, especially the milch cow.³⁹ The new springer was always put under St. Bridget's protection. After she calved and before being put out on grass a sort of ceremony was performed by the man and woman of the house. One stood each side of the cow and then passed a tongs of coal round over [her] kidneys and under her udder three times and repeating prayers to Saint Brigid as they did so. Then the coals were quenched by throwing them in the drain in the cowhouse and a red rag containing a cinder and a grain of salt was tied on the tail, a drop of holy water was sprinkled on the cow and she was driven with great ceremony to join the herd. The spancel and the tongs were flung after her and then picked up and put away. How the tongs fell foretold how lucky the milker would be and being touched with her old spancel protected her from fairies or spells of any kind. *Faraoir!* This custom has now died out.⁴⁰

If for some reason or other, the cow was unable to give milk, once again recourse was had to Brigit:

In a prayer or charm called the *Buarach Tháil*, there is a special petition to St. Brigid where a cow is unable to yield or rather secrete her milk . . . For the purpose of this charm a *buarach* for the affected animal has to be made from rushes cut from one clump, and preferably growing in or on the bank of a river forming the mearing between two townlands. The *buarach* is tied around the cow's hind legs and the prayer *Buarach Tháil* then said. The spell is then broken and the cow gives the milk. This exercise or charm is still practised.⁴¹

³⁷ IFC 900:120.

³⁸ A. T. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny 1989) 41.

³⁹ IFC 900:100.

⁴⁰ IFC 903: 79–80.

⁴¹ IFC 903: 56. *Buarach tháil* means 'spancel of secretion' and is not, as far as I know, the name of a particular folk prayer as such; perhaps, the administration of this charm may have been accompanied

Spring calving as Lucas tells us:

. . . meant that the cows had gone dry by the end of the autumn but a very limited supply of milk could be maintained over the winter months if a few autumn calvers received special fodder and shared the warmth and shelter of the dwelling house.⁴²

The ‘stripper’, Irish *gambnach*,⁴³ was a kind of cow which was capable of providing another kind of answer to this problem, as this account from Co. Mayo succinctly explains:

This is a calf which did not calve at the usual time. From the time that a cow has her first calf, she should calve once a year. For about three seasons of that year she should be giving milk. She would be dry for about a season (three months) before calving. If that cow were to miscarry before she became

by the recitation of one of the many other occasional prayers in which the name of Brigit was invoked, for example, the prayer said when milking a bad-tempered cow (IFC 902:24) or the blessing for a cow after calving (IFC 257:23–4). *Naomh Micheál, Ardaingéal* – St Michael, the Archangel – is referred to in the latter: *Tarat a Bhríd agus bligh, tarat a Naomh Micheál, ardaingéal agus beannaigh an mart*. This saint, whose feast day is on 29 September, finds frequent mention in traditional prayers to St Brigit. St Michael is also mentioned in connection with a date in May – ‘The 8th of May, a day set apart to commemorate a fight between the devil and St. Michael’ (M. A. Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore* [1890] (reprinted Wakefield 1973) 34 – and this, perhaps, may indicate the possibility of his being connected with the second of the Irish Quarter Days, *Bealtaine*. Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 207) draws attention to St Michael in the context of a legend which links him to St Fionán and the Blessed Virgin Mary in connection with a number of holy wells and a West Kerry Lúnasa site and she concludes: ‘. . . it is pleasing to find the great archangel made a contemporary and equal of the Irish saint. Indeed we wonder if the Blessed Virgin, the Archangel and the Saint have not moved into the roles and changed the play of three earlier *Dramatis Personae*’. Cf. also nn. 110, p. 253 and 126, p. 257 below.

⁴² Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 41. It could be that these autumn calvers and their calves were thought of as being under the special protection of St Michael, the Archangel whose feast day occurs at this time of year and who is frequently mentioned in prayers addressed to St Brigit. Cf. n. 41 above.

⁴³ The word *gambnach* has often been replaced in modern spoken Irish by ‘stripper’, a word describing ‘A cow not in calf but giving very little milk’ (Joseph Wright (ed.), *The English Dialect Dictionary* 5 vols (Oxford [1898] 1905), s.v. ‘stripper’). Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, s.v. ‘strip’, quotes ‘to strip’ as meaning, *inter alia*, ‘To draw the last milk from a cow by pressure of the thumb and finger.’, ‘To cleave or wipe by drawing the fingers of the hand along the surface.’ It may be that this word bears a similar relationship to Old Irish *gam* ‘winter’ as that pertaining between *gam* and the word *gambhain*, as postulated by W. J. Watson, *The history of the Celtic place-names of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London 1926) 432, who also adds – ‘calves became stirks at Hallowmass’. Among the citations given by *DIL* s.v. *gamnach*, the following three may be of special interest: ‘*blicht a ngamnachaib* (a sign of evil times to come), *iar ndísca inar ngamnachaib*. . . Fig. of a very productive river’ and ‘Of a tree: *gambnach dharach duilleadhach ar siubhal go gnáth* – the leafy stirk of an oak swaying ever more’ (in respect of the latter of which, cf. n. 131, p. 258 below). C. Watkins, ‘Varia II’, *Ériu* 19 (1962) 114–118 has suggested that *mathgamain* – one of a number of Noah names for ‘bear’ – literally means ‘bear calf’. This etymology is of great interest in its own right, but should *mathgamain* prove rather to be a compound of *moth* (‘the membrum virile (?)’) and ‘hence in Irish gram. the masculine gender’ [*DIL*]) and *gambhain*, then, perhaps – given that the *gambhain* in question were female – *mathgamain* might be considered for inclusion with the binary pairs discussed in n. 110, p. 254 below. Male calves were unwelcome and tended to be disposed of relatively quickly (cf., for example IFC 171:288–9; 434:408; 463:186–7) whereas female calves were much more prized as the following clearly indicates: *Lá Fhéile Pádraig, leath an earraigh thart / Lao breá bainneann ag an bhoin / Agus lán meadair fána bhlas*. Cf. nn. 113, 115, 116 and 118, pp. 255–255 below.

dry, she would then have extra milk. In places where the land was poor and especially where little manuring was being carried out, it was very frequently the case that cows got a bad rearing so that they did not take the bull as they normally should. They might even continue without a calf for as much as two years. Such a cow would often be given to a household which had no milk (six months or so). It would be said that they had got the cow for her milk. Such cows received better feeding in those places and after a short while they would take the bull again.⁴⁴

The system of controlled breeding with all its vagaries fitted comfortably within an annual cycle running from spring to spring with the commencement of the process of insemination at one end and the delivery of new life at the other. The successful timing of the initial stages of this process could only be approximate and it was not, of course, totally under human control, no more than, say, the choice of date for the sowing of seeds or the planting of crops was capable of being determined in advance with exactness and precision from year to year: sowing/insemination might well occur within a limited period of time the exercise being repeated as necessary until such times as germination/conception occurred, in order for crops to come to maturity at harvest time and – of particular interest to us here – parturition to take place and a new supply of milk to arrive in or around the time expected – in other words, at the beginning of spring, the very time when it was most needed and likely to be of most benefit.⁴⁵ It is the beginning and the end of this process – insemination and parturition – that concerns us most here, not only in terms of cattle breeding, but also with regard to the cycle of human fertility itself. As Máire Mac Neill says, ‘folk-logic’ was, indeed, capable of ‘identifying human fertility with the fertility of the crops’, a perception which was likely to have been particularly acute, it would seem on the evidence, in the case of human sexual congress that happened to occur in spring rather than at any other time.⁴⁶ The mating of animals also readily fitted into this same picture and, with reference to cows and women, generated, in at least one instance, a degree of interchangeable terminology that is not without

⁴⁴ Personal communication from Mr. John P. Burns, Stonefield, Co. Mayo. Translated from the Irish.

⁴⁵ I would suggest that the ‘limited period of time’ in question may be equated with the season running from February 1 to May 1, the span between the first and second of the two Quarter Days. As distinct from *Lá Fhéile Bhríde, Bealtaine* was regarded as a highly unlucky time for a birth to take place – ‘A child born on May Eve is not supposed to grow at all’ (IFC 42:202); cf. also IFC 1835:141 and *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge: The Gaelic Journal* 14 (1905) 845. By the same token, as far as marriage was concerned, Harvest time, as Mac Neill, (*Festival of Lughnasa*, 424) has pointed out, was deemed an inauspicious season for marriage – ‘It is not lucky to marry in harvest – always poor, always gathering, never having anything’ (IFC 96:335). For a survey of Irish traditions relating to luck in marriage, cf. Noeleen McLaughlin (Conboy), ‘Old, new, borrowed and blue: a classification of some Irish marriage customs’, (M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, 1986).

⁴⁶ ‘Underlying the symbolic associations between the earth, its caves, furrows and waters and the vulva is the notion of the transformative powers of female sexuality. In the furrow the seed transforms itself into fruit or grain; in the cave/womb of the earth death transforms itself into life; in the womb of woman, male and female sexual fluids transform themselves into a human being.’ – F. Appfel Marglin in, M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* 16 vols (New York 1987), s.v. ‘Yoni’. Cf. also nn. 51, p. 242, 111, p. 254 and 126, p. 257 below.

its own special interest: in Kerry, a *maighdean bhuaile* – literally ‘a booley⁴⁷ maiden’ – was the name given to a cow which would not take the bull;⁴⁸ the same description was also applied to a wife who had failed to conceive.⁴⁹ As we have seen, tradition is fairly explicit with regard to the animal world (birds and beasts) and to the vegetable kingdom. As is evident from the folklore of childbirth, for example,⁵⁰ it has also proved relatively forthcoming about certain matters pertaining to human sexuality. Comparatively speaking, however, comment muted to the point of reticence is the hallmark of the folklore record in matters pertaining to sexual intercourse between humans.⁵¹ When touched upon, this was a subject which, naturally, tended to be handled with the utmost discretion; it was also a subject which is capable of being treated, as we shall now see, with a considerable degree of sophistication.

v

The definition of *imbolc/óimelc*, given in the ninth-century *Cormac's Glossary*, is couched in the following terms: *is [ī] aimsir andsin tic as cāirach. melg. .i. as arinní mblegar*⁵² (‘that is the time the sheep’s milk comes. milking i.e. milk that is milked’). Though condemned as ‘a fanciful etymological explanation’⁵³ this statement has, nevertheless, inspired oft-repeated assertions that the pagan name of our feast – as *imbolc/óimelc* is said to be – has something to do with the period of the coming into lactation of sheep.⁵⁴ Eric Hamp, characterizing Cormac’s gloss as

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the practice of booleying (transhumance), cf. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, ‘Summer Pastures in Ireland’, *Folk Life* 22 (1983–4) 39; for older Irish sources, cf. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 58–67; an account of the practice as remembered by Donegal *seanchaí*, Niall Ó Dubhthaigh, is rendered by Seán Ó hEochaidh in ‘Buailteachas i dTír Chonaill’ *Béaloidias* 13 (1943) 130–58. Cf. n. 48 below.

⁴⁸ IFC 146:129. Interestingly, *maighdean bhuaana* is one of the names given in Scotland to the last handful of corn cut; this is also called ‘maiden’ and – as in Ireland – *cailleach* (R. C. MacLagan, ‘Notes on folklore objects collected in Argyleshire’, *Folk-Lore* [1895] 149–51). For a survey and distribution of the latter and other Irish terms, cf. Alan Gailey, ‘The Last Sheaf in the North of Ireland’, *Ulster Folklife* 28 (1972) 1–33. MacLagan, ‘Notes on folklore objects collected in Argyleshire’, 153, in resolving what he perceives to be the crisis of identity between the *maighdean* and the *cailleach*, concludes: ‘There can be little doubt as to who is the Cailleach, and just as little who the Maiden, viz. Bridget’. Cf. n. 111, p. 254 below. T. G. F. Paterson (‘Brigid’s Crosses in County Armagh’, *County Louth Archaeological Journal* 11 (1945–8) 19) comments: ‘The making of straw crosses presents a rather perplexing problem. It suggests that the cult of the saint may have been in some way linked with the harvest in past days . . . [it] makes one wonder whether Brigid took over some of the attributes of the Calliagh, besides those of her pagan namesake’.

⁴⁹ IFC 20: 257–8.

⁵⁰ Cf., for example, the IFC Questionnaire on Childbirth and also Anne O’Connor, *Child murderers and dead child traditions: a comparative study in Folklore Fellows Communications* 249 (Helsinki 1991) 249.

⁵¹ ‘J. M. Synge in his *The Aran Islands* (1907) says of the Aran islanders of the beginning of the twentieth century that they were interested in fertility rather than eroticism, and on the evidence of the extant monuments and literature, his observation could apply to those people who created the mythology of the Celtic goddesses . . . Their sexuality was merely the instrument of their fertility, whether in terms of progeny or of the fruitfulness of the land with which they were so often identified’ – P. Mac Cana, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. ‘Celtic religion’.

⁵² *DIL*, q.v.

⁵³ *DIL*, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Cf., for example, Anne Ross, *The folklore of the Scottish Highlands* (London 1976) 126; Seán C. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘An Crios Bríde’, in A. Gailey and D. Ó hÓgáin (ed.), *Gold under the furze: studies in*

being ‘overdrawn and imprecise’, has shown that the word simply means ‘milking’, conceding that the earlier interpretation was not entirely misdirected since it still managed to point in the general direction of the true meaning of the word, in so far as it showed that ‘we are dealing with a name based on an old pastoral or husbandman’s term’.⁵⁵ ‘We are not told’, complains Hamp, however, ‘what the role of milk(ing) was in connection with the feast’.⁵⁶ Hamp goes on to show that there is a clear possibility of semantic development to a meaning ‘clean/purge’ from the original Indo-European root whose basic meaning, in turn, he argues, is ‘purification’. The latter meaning he establishes partly by association with various Roman institutions, particularly the Lupercalia, and partly by making a connection with the goddess Juno, one of whose many epithets is *februa*, a word which Hamp suggests may be ultimately derived from *februus*, meaning ‘purifying’.⁵⁷

Hamp’s identification of *imbolc/óimelc* as ‘a word based on an old pastoral or husbandman’s term’ is vindicated by Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s earlier advocacy of food-production as the chief line of study for understanding the meaning underlying the body of tradition associated with St. Brigit’s Day.⁵⁸ Food-production is, indeed, a key element: the production of food, however, is not by nature a one-off kind of affair, but rather a systematic, continuous process, involving, certainly in the case of livestock, the successful scheduling of reproduction of animals from year to year. In so far as that is implied by Ó Súilleabháin when he states: ‘Every manifestation of the cult of the saint (or of the deity she replaced) is bound up in some way with food production’⁵⁹ he still finds himself on safe ground. The concept of reproduction as it affects human kind, however, does not seem to have been a factor considered by Ó Súilleabháin or to have entered Hamp’s calculations. Ironically, it is reproduction – human reproduction – which provides the key to the puzzle of what Hamp called ‘the role of milk(ing) . . . in connection with the feast’. It is Hamp’s reference to Juno and to the Lupercalia, however, that provides us with an important clue leading us further along the road to a deeper understanding of what the festival of Brigit was really about. *Februa* was but one of many significant epithets borne by Juno – ‘first and foremost the goddess of marriage and protector of married women’⁶⁰ and ‘a special object of worship by women

folk tradition presented to Caoimhín Ó Danachair (Dublin 1982) 242 and Graham Webster, *The British Celts and their gods under Rome* (London 1988) 32, who states: ‘. . . Imbolc or Óimelg [was] celebrated on 1st February. It was based on the old pastoral lambing season and therefore had powerful fertility associations. Little is known about it, presumably as it was mainly practised by the women and carried out in secret, away from profane male eyes’.

⁵⁵ E. P. Hamp, ‘imbolc, óimelc’, *Studia Celtica* 14/15 (1979/80) 106.

⁵⁶ Hamp, *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Hamp, ‘imbolc, óimelc’, III. J. de Vries, *Keltische Religion* (Stuttgart 1961) 80, also indicates a meaning ‘purification’, relating *imbolc* (‘imb + folc’) to the Roman *Februa*.

⁵⁸ T. H. Mason, ‘St. Brigid’s Crosses’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 75 (1945) 164, n. 4.

⁵⁹ Mason, ‘St. Brigid’s Crosses’. Seán Ó Súilleabháin also provides a brief account of the customs associated with the festival in his *Irish folk custom and belief: Nósanna agus piseoga na nGael* (2nd ed. Cork 1977) 66–7. An illustrated overview of the festival customs is also contained in E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London 1967) 267–70, in S. C. Ó Súilleabháin, *Lá Fhéile Bhríde* (Baile Átha Cliath 1977) and S. C. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘An Críós Bhríde’ (1982). Cf. n. 48 above.

⁶⁰ M. Lurker, *Dictionary of gods and goddesses, devils and demons* (London and New York 1987) 178.

at all the critical moments of life'⁶¹ It is her oldest titles – Lucetia and Lucina – that principally concern us here. Juno Lucetia was the feminine principle of the celestial light (of which Jupiter was the masculine principle). Goddess of light, she was by derivation the goddess of childbirth – Juno Lucina – for the new-born baby was brought into the light and as such Juno Lucina was invoked by wives who were barren.⁶²

To the best of my knowledge, Alexander Carmichael was the first to reflect upon the relationship between Juno and Brigit, on the one hand ('she is . . . the Juno of the Gael')⁶³ and Brigit and Mary ('*ban-chuideachaidh Moire*', the aid-woman of Mary),⁶⁴ on the other. Carmichael explains her soubriquet – '*Bride boilsgé*', 'Bride of brightness' (she is also described as '*Lasair dhealrach oir, muime chorr Chriosda*', 'Radiant flame of gold, noble foster-mother of Christ')⁶⁵ – by reference to an Irish legend of which he quotes a rather curious version.⁶⁷ This legend is of a type common enough in Irish tradition,⁶⁸ the following Co. Galway example being a fairly typical representative of it:

The Blessed Virgin was about to be 'churched' and as she was going to the church, she met St. Brigid, Our Blessed Lady was very shy in going to the altar rails before the whole congregation and she told Brigid how she felt. 'Never mind,' says Brigid, 'I'll manage that part all right'. She got a harrow and put

⁶¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 11th ed., s.v. 'Juno'.

⁶² *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*, (new edition, London 1972), s.v. 'Juno'. As Juno Populonia, she watched over the multiplication of the race, as Juno Moneta, she advised those about to be married, as Juno Pronuba, she watched over the arrangement of marriages, as Juno Cinxia, she unknotted the bride's girdle, as Juno Ossipago, she strengthened the bones of the infant and as Juno Rumina, she assured the mother's supply of milk (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, idem., and Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend*, (Ed. Maria Leach, New York 1950, ii, 563) and W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman festivals of the period of the Republic*, (London 1925), Index sub 'Juno', 357). Practically all of the many attributes and epithets of Juno as well as many aspects of the Lupercalia, (the ancient Roman fertility festival held on February 15) and also the Matronalia (held on March 1) exhibit, in a variety of ways, strong similarities to traditions of Brigit and the range of customs associated with her feast day. I hope to discuss these and kindred associations to be found in other classical and pre- Indo-European sources as well as a wide range of Nordic and Fenno-Ugric (particularly Lappish) connections in future articles.

⁶³ A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i (Edinburgh and London 1928) 164. Consideration of Carmichael's account of Brigit and her festival in Scottish Gaelic tradition and a detailed comparison of the Scottish with the related Irish material together with the subsequent assessment of both in the context of the older Irish literary tradition as manifest in the various Lives of Brigit is a subject beyond the scope of the present article. For various assessments of Carmichael's contribution to the collection of Scottish Gaelic folklore materials in general, see E. MacCurdy, 'Carmina Gadelica', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 42 (1953-9) 240-56; F. G. Thompson, 'The Folklore Elements in "Carmina Gadelica"', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 44 (1964-6), 226-55; Hamish Robertson, 'Studies in Carmichael's "Carmina Gadelica"', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 12 (1971) 220-65; J. L. Campbell, 'Notes on Hamish Robertson's "Studies in Carmichael's Carmina Gadelica"', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 13 (1978) 1-17; Alan Bruford, "'Deirdire" and Alexander Carmichael's Treatment of Oral Sources', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 14 (1983) 1 - 24.

⁶⁴ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 165.

⁶⁵ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 169.

⁶⁶ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 174, 175.

⁶⁷ Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 169.

⁶⁸ According to information kindly supplied by Dr Pádraig Ó Héalaí, some twenty-eight versions have been identified hitherto.

it on her head turning the points upwards. They went into the church and no sooner had St. Brigid entered than every point of the harrow turned into a lighted candle. The whole congregation turned their eyes on St. Brigid and her crown of lighted candles and the Blessed Virgin proceeded to the altar rails and not an eye was turned on her until the ceremony was over. The Blessed Virgin was so delighted with St. Brigid that she gave her her day before her own and that is the reason that St. Brigid's Day is before the feast of the Purification.⁶⁹

By the spectacular assumption of a harrow candelabrum on her head, Brigit is, in effect, cast as 'light mother' to Mary, a position which confers upon her the honoured status of midwife *par excellence* making her the perfect role model for any ordinary country midwife or 'handy woman'.⁷⁰ 'Light mother', indeed, is what the country midwife was called in the Nordic countries as we learn from the following account from Wilhelmina in northern Sweden:

The lying-in woman was not allowed to lie in bed, but a straw bed was prepared for her on the floor. There she rolled herself to and fro and turned round according as the pains affected her, and what seemed to be most convenient for the arrival of the foetus. During the delivery she knelt down, her legs being fairly spread and the upper part of the body leaning against the seat of a chair. It was supposed that the very best position for her was to lean against her husband or grasp him firmly. This was believed to ease the delivery. When the lying-in woman had taken up this position, it was time for the light-mother to take charge. She knelt down behind the lying-in woman 'to catch the child' and this appeared from behind the mother – just as a female quadruped brings forth its offspring while standing.⁷¹

With this we may compare the following Irish account from Co. Mayo:

The expectant mother was transferred from the kitchen bed which was her usual sleeping place, to the straw-littered floor. She put on her husband's sleeved waistcoat or 'báinín' which was an outside flannel garment worn by men in those days. As the great event drew near, the husband stood at his wife's back, and placed his hands on her shoulders while she was in a kneeling position on the floor. With words of faith, hope and encouragement, he buoyed and morally supported her during her ordeal, the midwife being simultaneously engaged in the great task of bringing a new human life to the world –

⁶⁹ IFC 902:187–8.

⁷⁰ *Bean ghlúin*, the usual Irish name applied to such individuals, would seem to be what is reflected in Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 160–1 – *Is í Bride mhin chaidh air a glun* 'It was Bride fair who went on her knee'. An account from Co. Limerick highlights in a matter-of-fact way the casual linking of Brigit and Mary in everyday speech: 'Go into any house in this parish with the usual "*Bail ó Dhia oraibh*" and the invariable greeting is "*Brid is Muire dhuit*'. The fact that the name of Bríd is put first is no slur on the B.V.M.' (IFC 407:119). R. F. Willetts, *Cretan cults and festivals* (London 1962) 180, notes what he calls 'the old familiar relationship of Mother and Maid' exemplified by the association Britomartis-Diktyнна and Diktyнна-Artemis, figures of the utmost relevance for an understanding of Brigit. Cf. Green, (*Symbol and image in Celtic religious art*, 189–90) in relation to 'The dual mothers of Celtic tradition' and also *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. 'virgin goddess', and sources quoted there.

⁷¹ Quoted in N. Lid, 'Light-mother and Earth-mother', *Studia Norwegica* 1 (1946) 13.

the long story of mankind. In the absence of the husband he was usually represented by some man, if possible a neighbour or friend of the woman . . . To the present day one hears among the country people expressions such as ‘Paddy Moloney’s wife is in the *sop*’; ‘It is time she was in the *sop*’; ‘She was hardly out of the *sop*’ etc. These sayings are derived from the time when childbirth took place not in a bed but in straw on the floor, as already described. *Sop* is the Irish word for a wisp of straw. Similarly there are also old Irish expressions such as *Ón oíche a tháinig mo mhullach ar an tsop* ‘From the night my ‘top’ (head) ‘came on the ground’, *Ón oíche a tháinig mé ar an tsop* ‘Since the night I came to the straw’, which are the equivalents of saying ‘Since the night I was born’.⁷²

The country midwives of Scandinavia were also called ‘strawmothers’ and ‘earthmothers’⁷³ but neither of these terms, nor the term ‘light-mother’ seem to have been applied to their Irish counterparts. Nevertheless, they could have quite aptly been used of Brigit. The associations between light and straw (and rushes)

⁷² IFC 1340:418. Michael Corduff (cf. n. 24, p. 237 above), who wrote this account, also draws attention to a Mayo tradition of what he dubs ‘male accoucheurs’ (IFC 1340:431) in which context we may also mention the Icelandic *ljósi* ‘which indicates a male obstetric assistant’ (cf. Lid, ‘Light-mother and Earth-mother’, 4–5). Elsewhere in his description of what he calls ‘old maternity nursing’, Corduff provides the following information: ‘. . . after the woman had given birth to her child, she was accommodated to a bed on the floor, near or beside the kitchen fire. In Irish this bed was called *leaba thalúna* ‘ground bed’. In this bed, the woman was obliged to remain for nine days, and was then transferred to the ‘high bed’ or *leaba ard*, her normal sleeping place, where she had to stay for about three weeks, and then she was allowed to get up and resume her household duties. During her post-birth detention in bed, she was fed chiefly on oatmeal gruel, milk, toast bread and tea When a child was born all the neighbouring women and distant relatives came to visit the lying-in woman and took her presents of loaf-bread, tea and sugar, butter &c. During the convalescent period, the house was replete with the choice viands brought by the visitors and the family enjoyed their share of the good things – and the lion’s share at that, because the sick woman being on a special diet, did not consume much of the contributed food stuffs. When that short season of full and plenty was over the household had once again to revert to its erstwhile austerity.’ (IFC 1340:429–30). Cf., in the context of the above, G. Jacobsen, ‘Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North: A Topology of Sources and a Preliminary Study’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 9 (1984) 91–111, and sources quoted there; H. Grundström, ‘Sarakkagröt-nornegröt-barselgröt-lystenbit. Some parallels’, *Arctica = Studia ethnographica Upsaliensia* 11 (1956) 203–7 and, for a highly relevant folkloristic analysis, cf. I. Lövkrona, ‘The Pregnant Frog and the Farmer’s Wife’. Childbirth in the Middle Ages as shown through a Legend’, *Arv* 45 (1989) 73–124. In a recent article, ‘Noínden : its semantic range’, in A. Matonis and D. F. Melia (ed.), *Celtic language, Celtic culture: a Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp* (California 1990) 138–49, E. M. Slotkin argues for an interpretation of the *cess noínden* ‘the Ulster debility’ which would bring it well within the sphere of what he calls ‘an actual ritual assembly associated with human fertility and group integration’, (p. 145). Carmichael, with his description of the ‘banal Bride’ (the equivalent of the the Irish *Brideoga* [cf. the accounts given on p. 248 below]), provides us with the connection to Brigit: ‘The ‘banal Bride’, Bride maiden band, are clad in white, and have their hair down, symbolising purity and youth. They visit every house, and every person is expected to give a gift to Bride and to make obeisance to her. The gift may be a shell, a spar, a crystal, a flower, or a bit of greenery to decorate the person of Bride. Mothers, however, give ‘bonnach Bride’, a Bride bannock, ‘cabag Bride’, a Bride cheese, or ‘rolag Bride’, a Bride roll of butter. Having made the round of the place the girls go to a house to make the ‘feis Bride’ Bride feast. They bar the door and secure the windows of the house, and set Bride where she may see and be seen of all. Presently the young men of the community come humbly asking permission to honour Bride. After some parleying they are admitted and make obeisance to her. Much dancing and singing, fun and frolic, are indulged in by the young men and maidens during the night, (*Carmina Gadelica* i, 167).

⁷³ Lid, ‘Light-mother and Earth-mother’, 10ff.

are emphasized in a number of ways in the context of the body of tradition surrounding Brigit and the ceremony enacted in her honour on the eve of her feast. This ceremony is divided into three parts each of which, in turn, will now be subjected to a brief examination.⁷⁴

VI

The following account from Co. Mayo provides us with a good description of the first of the three constituent elements of the programme of activities customarily carried out on St Brigit's Eve:

Before nightfall, usually the man of the house procured a garment for the *Brat Bride* . . . The man took out this article of clothing into the haggard, drew a good long sheaf of straw out of the stack, and wrapped the garment around the sheaf in a manner giving it as far as possible the rough outline in appearance of a human body. He then reverentially carried the object between his arms, in the manner one carries a child, and deposits it outside at the back door. He leaves it there and comes into the house . . . Then when the supper is laid on the table, and the inmates are ready to sit in, the man of the house announces that he is now going out to bring in Brigit, as she too must be present at the festive board. The man goes out and round to the back door where he kneels, and then in a loud voice says to the people inside who are expectant and waiting for the coming request: *Téigt ar bhur nglúna agus fosclaigt bhur súile agus ligigt isteach Bríd*. Response from within: *Is é beatha, is é beatha, is é beatha* . . . On the third response *Is é beatha* from the people within he takes up the bundle, gets up off his knees, and comes around to the open door, while the people within continue repeating the *Is é beatha* as he is coming round, and when he enters the door they finish the response with *Maise, is é beatha agus sláinte*. Then the object (the sheaf of straw and *brat*) is laid carefully and respectfully against the leg or rail of the table, and under the table. The family then sit down to the supper preceded by a short prayer or invocation such as: *A Bhríd Bheannaithe, go gcuire tú an an teach seo thar anachain na bliana*. When supper is finished there was the ejaculatory prayer – the usual one – of *Deo gratias le Dia agus cumhdach Dé ar lucht shaothrú na beatha*.⁷⁵

The ritual here described was of a kind repeated with variations on this festive evening in many parts of Ireland.⁷⁶ At its heart is the demand for entry in the name of Brigit, a demand which is immediately and joyously conceded. Brigit is

⁷⁴ The analysis of regional distribution patterns associated with the various festival customs pertaining to the Feast of St Brigit has been touched upon here and there by Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 13–37, and the distribution of *Brideoga*, in particular, dealt with by the same author in 'Distribution patterns in Irish folk tradition', *Béaloidias* 33 (1965 [1967]) 97–9.

⁷⁵ IFC 903:51–3. The sequence commencing – *Téigt ar bhur nglúna* . . . is repeated three times. Elsewhere we are told that the grace before meals normally recited on New Year's Eve was the one recited on this occasion (IFC 904:137–8 where the text is also given and IFC 904:233 where it is stated that this 'was the only occasion when grace was said in my native place').

⁷⁶ Cf., for example, Seán C. Ó Súilleabháin, *Lá Fhéile Bríde*, 3; 'An Crios Bríde', (1982), 244; and Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 19–20.

represented by the straw out of which a rough image of her has been fashioned and out of which same materials, later in the proceedings, crosses, cow-tyings and various other emblems and artefacts were manufactured in her honour and named after her.⁷⁷ In some cases the unused remainder of the straw was used to make up a rough and ready bed – a *sráideog* or ‘shakedown’ – in which the holy woman was welcome to spend the night.⁷⁸ While the close communal nature and intimate family character of the circumstances in which a welcome was extended to Brigit rather tended to dominate the character of the evening, this did not exclude the possibility for the circle to be widened in order to accommodate the wider community: by means of the institution called the *Brideog*, Brigit’s arrival in the locality was announced and news of it carried from house to house.⁷⁹

The *Brideog* procession from house to house was and still is held on the eve of the feast. Both boys and girls took part and there are sometimes two or three (or more) groups, each group out for itself in an area of a square mile according as the district is thickly populated or not. Sometime during the last week in January the young people who may be of any age up to twenty years, gather at a certain house in the kitchen or barn of which the rehearsals take place. Boys dress in girl’s clothes as a rule and vice versa. Long ago a peeled turnip was used to represent the head of the *Brideog* which was draped like a baby being brought to the Chapel to be baptised. The places for eyes, nose and mouth were cut out and coloured with soot or any other colouring available. A stick was inserted in the turnip to lend body to the *Brideog* and to make it easy to carry. Each participant prepared some item of entertainment to be performed on entering the houses. These items took the form of songs, music on flute or violin (later accordeon), rhymes etc. When Irish was still the language, there were prayers in which the players interceded to St. Brigit for blessings and favours for the members of the house, who were then asked to contribute something for the *Brideog*. This took the form of bread or butter: it is only in very recent times that money has been given and accepted. Early in the evening of Jan. 31, the *Brideogs*, as they are called, commence their rounds. They are all disguised and are led by the one carrying the *Brideog* who is first to enter a house . . . The *Brideogs*, are always welcome as it would be regarded as unlucky to be uncivil or inhospitable where they are concerned . . . Long ago when what was received was in kind, it was all collected in bags and afterwards a ‘feast’ (as is said) was held in some of the neighbour’s houses . . . Priests were always against girls taking part in the processions and whenever they met them, they were sure to take the disguises off the *Brideogs* to find out if there

⁷⁷ Cf. J. O’Sullivan, ‘St. Brigid’s Crosses’, *Folk Life* 11 (1963) 60–81 and cf. also A. Gailey, ‘Straw Costume in Irish Folk Customs’, *Folk Life* 6 (1968) 84–93; A. Gailey, *Irish folk drama* (Cork 1969) 85, and E. Andrews, ‘Rush and Straw Crosses; Ancient Emblems of Sun Worship’, *Man* 22 (1922) 49–52.

⁷⁸ ‘The rushes that were left were formed into a bed and the best clothes that could be got were put on it’ (IFC 904:219). Cf. also IFC 904:51 and cf. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* i, 167–8.

⁷⁹ I use *Brideog* to describe what is usually called in English, ‘Biddies’ or ‘Biddy Boys’ (Carmichael’s *banal Bride*), i.e. groups of young people going from house to house carrying an effigy of the saint, and *brideog* to describe the effigy itself.

were girls among them. Should a girl be found she was severely reprimanded by the priest and sent home. Boys were allowed to carry on.⁸⁰

Occasionally the company might be entirely female, restricted to girls not older than fourteen years of age, who made their rounds on the morning of the feast day, rather than on the eve of the feast. The welcome was as warm as ever, however, with the woman of the house addressing the doll image of Brigit thus:

*Móire is dachad ar maidin duit, is a Chríostaí óig, tá an bhliain caite agus tánn tú tagaithe arís inár dtreo.*⁸¹ ['A very good morning to you and, young Christian, this year is spent and you have come to us once again'.]

'Then', this account continues, 'the woman of the house would take the *brídeog* in her arms and kiss it'. Frequently, the *brídeog* consisted of clothes arranged on a churn dash⁸² surrounded by stuffing and padding,⁸³ thus creating a 'figure which could stand by itself when placed on the ground.'⁸⁴ In some parts, the *brídeog*, while still maintaining a prominent role as part of the procession, seems, nevertheless, to have been eclipsed in importance by the *Crios Bríde*, around which a somewhat complicated ceremony involving 'passing through' was enacted.⁸⁵

The *Crios Bríde* was made from a straw rope ('*súgán*') whose two ends were attached to the bottom of the cross. The *crios* was about twelve feet long. Some of the people would go through the ceremony, that is, pass through the *crios* three times, kissing it and then emerging from it right foot foremost. . .⁸⁶

The following prayer usually accompanied the presentation of the *crios*:

⁸⁰ IFC 903:231-4. Cf. Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 24-31; S. C. Ó Súilleabháin, *Lá Fhéile Bríde*, 10; Gailey, *Irish folk drama*, 85, and cf. Erika Simon, *Festivals of Attica: an archaeological commentary* (Wisconsin 1983) 83-8 and cf. n. 19, p. 235 above.

⁸¹ IFC 899:154. Gifts offered included eggs and pins (IFC 899:53, 93) the latter being something generally associated with childbirth and fertility and, perhaps, symbolically binding and loosing and the avoidance of bonds that represent maladies (cf. n. 13, p. 233 above) – cf. P. Mac Cana, 'Placenames and Mythology in Irish Tradition: Places, Pilgrimages and Things', in G. W. MacLennan (ed.), *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies* (Ottawa 1986) 328 and sources quoted there. Cf. also n. 80, p. 249 above.

⁸² IFC 903:95. This is also noted by Carmichael *Carmina Gadelica* i, 167 as being an Irish custom. For the symbolic significance of the churn dash and churning, cf. p. 255 below.

⁸³ IFC 899:153. Cf. Gailey, *Irish folk drama*, 85.

⁸⁴ IFC 903:95.

⁸⁵ 'Passing through' – '*smjöjning*, *jorddragning*' – is described by C.-H. Tillhagen, *Folklig Läkekunst* (Stockholm 1958) 116, as being one of folk medicine's most frequently employed remedies with a 3,000-year pedigree stretching back to the Rigveda.

⁸⁶ IFC 902:5.

<i>Crios, Crios Bríde mo chrios,</i>	The Girdle, the Girdle of Brigid, my Girdle,
<i>Crios na gceithre gcros;</i>	The Girdle of the four crosses,
<i>Muire a chuaigh ann,</i>	Mary entered it,
<i>Agus Bríd a tháinig as;</i>	Brigid emerged from it;
<i>Más fearr sibh inniu,</i>	If you be improved today,
<i>Go mba seacht fearr a bheas sibh</i>	May you be seven times better,
<i>Bliain ó inniu.⁸⁷</i>	A year from today.

VII

<i>Oíche Shamhna gan bia,</i>	Samhain Eve without food,
<i>Oíche Nollag Mór gan arán,</i>	Christmas Night without bread,
<i>Oíche Fhéile Bríde gan im,</i>	St Brigid's Eve without butter,
<i>Is é sin an gearán tinn.⁸⁸</i>	That is a sorry complaint.

Her welcome and reception into the house complete, Brigit proceeded to be further incorporated into the family circle by means of a ceremonial meal held in her honour during which, it was believed, she took her place at table and partook of the food. This 'feast' generally consisted of little more than extra generous helpings of the normal daily fare and, as such, it revealed a strong bias towards milk foods and milk products, principally butter.⁸⁹

In order to give the festival a fitting celebration, the woman of the house for a week or ten days before Bridget's night, was, as they called it 'gathering a drop' that is collecting milk for churning on the eve of [the feast of] St. Bridget. Generally, milk was scarce at this season but the housewife, if at all possible, put some by for a bit of butter for this particular night, as the feast was considered to be a poor one if butter was absent from the supper table. If there was a neighbour who had but very little, or no milk, a can of the freshly made buttermilk with a lump of butter was sent to such a person by the more fortunate or better off neighbour or neighbours, in order that the needy one would also be able to do justice to his or her celebration of the night in question.⁹⁰

In certain parts of the country, special emphasis was laid on the making of *brúitín* or 'poundies',⁹¹ whose manufacture and consumption customarily involved the addition of massive portions of butter:

In the evening on the eve of the Feast of St. Brigid, a potful of potatoes suitable for making *brúitín* is brought in and peeled. Every house makes sure they have a bit of butter available for that night. Indeed very few houses you would

⁸⁷ IFC 902:4. For illustrations of the *Crios Bríde*, descriptions of the *Crios Bríde* ceremony and examples of the *Crios Bríde* rhyme, cf. Ó Danachair, *The Year in Ireland*, 34–7 and Seán C. Ó Súilleabháin, 'An Crios Bríde', 242–53.

⁸⁸ IFC 904:51.

⁸⁹ Cf. B. Mahon, *Land of milk and honey: the story of traditional Irish food and drink* (Dublin 1991) 124.

⁹⁰ IFC 903:48–9.

⁹¹ 'Potatoes peeled, boiled, mashed with a beetle, mixed with onions and eaten with butter', Michael Traynor, *The English dialect of Donegal: a glossary* (Dublin 1953) 217.

enter that day would not show the mark of the churn still visible on the floor, or, just as likely find the man of the house caught with his apron on him, helping his wife at the churning, if she was short of help. Anyway, no house is without butter At nightfall, the potatoes are put on to boil. A sheaf of scutched straw is brought in when the potatoes are boiled – well on in the night – they are removed from the fire and drained of water. The sheaf of straw is then placed on the floor underneath the pot and the potatoes are mashed. That sheaf of straw is called *Leaba Bhríde* and that is the straw with which the crosses are subsequently made I should add that it is customary for everyone within – big and small, young and old – to take a turn at the beetle, at the making of the *brúitín* that night.⁹²

Another account from a neighbouring part of Donegal adds a number of interesting details:

The pot is taken off the fire, the water is carefully drained away and the pot is placed on the middle of the kitchen floor. The woman of the house gets the pounder, saying: ‘Thanks be to Brigid for what she sends us’ – and begins to pound the potatoes. The man of the house tries his hand and so on until the poundies are ready. A large dish is then filled up for the grown up men and placed on the table. A large hole is made in the centre in which is placed a lump of butter. The butter soon melts. The men sit round, each with a spoon in his hand. A short prayer is said and they fall to and it is marvellous how quickly the dish of poundies disappear. The women folk and the smaller children just eat out of the pot, butter being put in just as in the dish.⁹³

VIII

The third and final phase of the festive ceremonial is that which concerns itself with the weaving of crosses and other artefacts from straw or rushes. Whereas this particular occupation was prescribed as an essential part of the festival, significantly spinning, or the turning of wheels, was strictly forbidden.⁹⁴

I remember hearing that no wheel should be turned. So carts, spinning wheels etc were idle.⁹⁵ On St. Brigid’s Day, the old women would spin no wool. They

⁹² IFC 904:50–1. Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 22, draws attention to the habit of the placing of the straw or rushes underneath the pot, as in this case, or, in some instances underneath the supper while it was being eaten. As is made clear by the account given above, this could easily amount to one and the same thing, since the supper was actually eaten from the pot.

⁹³ IFC 904:161–2. Yet another Donegal account (IFC 904:234) adds another interesting detail further emphasizing the notion of Brigid’s unseen presence at the feast – ‘It has been a custom here to leave a spoon over and above the number required by the members of the household. I think the idea was that the extra spoon was for the saint’. With regard to segregation of the sexes, cf. n. 72, p. 246 above.

⁹⁴ For a survey of highly relevant beliefs in Finnish tradition, cf. E. Enäjärvi-Haavio, *The Finnish Shrovetide* (Helsinki 1954) especially ‘End of the Spinning Season’, 49–53.

⁹⁵ IFC 903:77. Cf. also Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 14–5, where it is stated: ‘In some places any kind of work which required the turning of wheels, such as carting, milling and spinning, was carefully avoided. This was especially the case in south County Kerry and west County Cork, from which area we hear of dressmakers refusing to operate their sewing machines, and of men walking long distances rather than use bicycles. In a few localities ploughing and smithwork also came under the ban.’

would not turn the spinning wheel that day. . . .⁹⁶ In the evening, everyone ceased whatever they were doing. The old women stopped spinning and they washed and cleaned themselves up as well as if they were going to Mass and they donned whatever good clothes they had.⁹⁷

The remainder of the evening was given over to the weaving of tyings and straw or rush crosses, the latter made according to a variety of designs and patterns. This sometimes involved a division of labour as between the sexes and between the different generations within the household:

They would have their supper then and the young folk would start making the crosses. The man of the house did not start with the crosses, but rather, if he happened to have a few sheep, he would begin by making tyings from the first of the rushes for the lambs which were due to be born. When he judged that he had sufficient made, he would place them carefully behind the crib and then, when the lambing season commenced, he would place these tyings round the necks of the lambs when they were born. People were of the opinion that this would bring all kinds of luck and prosperity with the lambs. Then when he had finished making the tyings, he would start on the crosses and make his own share of them. They would all be left in a heap there until the morning of St. Brigid's Day.⁹⁸

The unused portion of the straw or rushes might serve to make up a rough bed for Brigit or be left to be strewn in the byre on the morrow, as bedding for the cattle: it was never simply thrown out or otherwise carelessly disposed of.⁹⁹ On St Brigit's Day itself, the crosses were placed in position in the dwelling house and in the various outhouses.¹⁰⁰ As was the case with the *Brat Bride*, which stood ready to be requisitioned and pressed into service, in the manner already described,¹⁰¹ the crosses could also serve the needs of the family which had fashioned them in ways which might necessitate their removal from their customary location; for example, a cross might be placed in a basket of seed potatoes and carried into the fields to lend its blessing to the business of planting the new season's crops.¹⁰² It is also the case that crosses were employed to promote human fertility, as is revealed by an account from Co. Mayo, which speaks of a specially woven cross – in the style of a St Brigit's cross – being used, with some modifications, to this very end:

When a couple were married the mother or mother-in-law as the case may be makes a cross of straw and burns a bit of each of the four ends of the cross. She

⁹⁶ IFC 903:35. Translated from the Irish.

⁹⁷ IFC 904:134. Translated from the Irish.

⁹⁸ IFC 900:138–9. Translated from the Irish.

⁹⁹ Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 22–3 and S. C. Ó Súilleabháin, *Lá Fhéile Bride*, 4 and 'An Crios Bríde', 244.

¹⁰¹ Cf. p. 234 above.

¹⁰² Cf. p. 237 above and also Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 35.

then places the cross under the tick in the bed in which the couple are going to sleep. This is done to make sure that there will be a family.¹⁰³

IX

‘The most striking thing about the folk-tradition of the Lughnasa assemblies’, writes Máire Mac Neill, ‘is the absence of Lugh’.¹⁰⁴ In the festival legends, he tends to be replaced by St Patrick and also sometimes by St Brendan.¹⁰⁵ Evidence for the association of Brendan with Brigit comes from the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte*;¹⁰⁶ the coupling of these two names also occurs, in a verse composed by a thirteenth-century critic of the Irish monks of the monastery of St Jakob in Regensburg. Outraged at the blatantly partisan Irish advocacy of both Brendan and Brigit’s close kinship with members of the Holy Family, he exclaimed:

*Sunt et ibi Scoti qui cum fuerint bene poti
Sanctum Brandanum proclamant esse decanum
In grege sanctorum, vel quod Deus ipse deorum
Brandani frater sit et eius Brigida mater.*¹⁰⁷

That Brigit should be regarded as being Our Lord’s mother and Brendan his brother was clearly too much for the local ‘ordinary poor Christians’, who, this critic declared, ‘do not believe that this is true, but rather reckon the Irish to be crazy and irreverent’.¹⁰⁸ Relevant in this context is also the existence of holy wells dedicated to Brendan and Brigit located in close proximity to one another at a number of Lúnasa sites.¹⁰⁹ We stand in prospect, therefore – it would seem reasonable to suggest – of matching the ‘passive part in the Lughnasa complex’, played by Brigit, alluded to by Máire Mac Neill, with the shadowy presence of Lugh, lurking in the background of Brigit’s festival celebrations. Lugh is not adverted to or named except, perhaps, in so far as the words *luachair* ‘rushes’ – an all-important ingredient of the festival and *dubluachair* ‘midwinter’, a compound which means literally ‘black brightness’ – may be etymologically connected with him, embracing

¹⁰³ IFC 1234:42. Singed straw was also placed in the bed of a parturient woman (IFC 469:124–5 and 1202:235–6) and in the nest of a hen going to clock (IFC 70:206), for which references I am grateful to Dr P. Ó Héalaí and Dr M. Ross respectively.

¹⁰⁴ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 409. For a wide ranging discussion of how Lugh ‘may have reappeared in the christian milieu in the persons of various saints’, cf. P. Ó Riain, ‘Traces of Lug in early Irish hagiographical tradition’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 36 (1978) 38–55.

¹⁰⁵ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 101 ff., 409 ff.

¹⁰⁶ D. Ó hAodha, *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin 1978) §6 p. 18 and §6 p. 34. Cf. also n. 13, p. 233 above, and n. 109 below.

¹⁰⁷ L. L. Hammerich, ‘Irland og Kontinentet i middelalderen’, *Saga och Sed, Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademiens Årsbok* (1970) 31–2.

¹⁰⁸ Hammerich, ‘Irland og Kontinentet i middelalderen’, 32.

¹⁰⁹ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 630. Eleanor Knott (ed.) *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550–1591)* i (London 1922 for 1920) xxi, quotes Eóin MacNeill as saying – ‘I have myself proposed to derive Brénaínn from Cymric brenhin < *Bregentinos . . .’, which would seem to indicate the possibility of the names Brigit and Brendan being derived from the same source. My thanks are due to Professor P. Ní Chatháin for this reference.

the central element and meaning of his name.¹¹⁰ In the context of the two Quarter Days named after them – *Lá Lúnasa* and *Lá Fhéile Bride* – Lugh and Brigit stand in relationship to one another in much the same way as did the Great Goddess and her youthful male partner, the Young God – Brigit the embodiment of generation and procreation in perpetuity, the mistress of fecundity and the protector and giver of life exercising her regenerative function in union with her male partner.¹¹¹ Union and regeneration are symbolic themes which dominate the three central phases of the festival celebrations in honour of Brigit. The chain of symbolic actions begins with the male partner – the man of the house – seeking admission to his home in the name of Brigit. He orders those within to go on their knees, open their eyes and admit Brigit¹¹² – in other words, to be prepared to submit themselves to the process of insemination and possible impregnation through the good offices of the goddess who rules over such matters. The commencement of this process is gladly welcomed by those within. The second phase consists of feasting, the centre-piece of which is butter, the product of churning. The act of churning –

¹¹⁰ Cf. *DIL* s.v. *luachair* ‘rushes’ and *luacha(i)r* ‘brightness, brilliance’. For the etymology of *luachair*, cf. N. Williams, ‘Some Irish plant names’, in D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and K. McCone (ed.), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic Studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth 1989) 454–6. Lugh ‘the brilliant young god’ (Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 426) stands in sharp contrast to his opponent Crom Dubh – ‘the dark bent one’ (Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 28). In similar fashion, he may be thought of as ithyphallic whereas Crom Dubh’s name would probably indicate the opposite condition. Mac Neill (*Festival of Lughnasa*, 410) was before her time in recognizing this ‘concept of a necessary duality, an opposition which is really a collaboration’. The same system of binary opposition finds, in a variety of ways, a ready application to Brigit as well as to Brigit and Lugh and this is a subject which I hope to discuss fully on another occasion. Cf. nn. 1, p. 231 and 43, p. 240 above, and n. 124, p. 257 below. And for an exposition of the theory of binary pairs as applied to aspects of early Irish literature – including reference to Brigit – cf. K. McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present* (Maynooth 1990) 193–4.

¹¹¹ Marija Gimbutas develops this theme at length in *The Gods and goddesses of Old Europe 7000–3500 BC: myths, legends, and cult images* (London 1974), and, elsewhere, sums up the process behind the development of the Great Goddess thus: ‘As a consequence of the new agrarian economy, the pregnant goddess of the Paleolithic was transformed into an earth fertility deity in the Neolithic. The fecundity of humans and animals, the fertility of crops and thriving of plants and the processes of growing and fattening became of enormous concern during this period. The drama of seasonal changes intensified, which is manifested in the emergence of a mother-daughter image and of a male god as spirit of rising and dying vegetation’ – *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. ‘Old Europe’. Treating of ‘Agriculture and Sexual Symbolism’, and, dealing in particular with the ‘invention of agriculture’, K. W. Bolle, (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. ‘hieros gamos’), comments: ‘The acts of a great goddess, the divine character of the earth, the significance of women, the ritual nature of work on the land and its bond with sexual involvement all amount to a new total experience of the everyday world and its ultimate foundation’. Cf. also Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, 20; E. O. James, *The Cult of the mother-goddess: an archaeological and documentary study* (London 1959) chap. 8 ‘The Goddess and the Young God’, 228ff. and nn. 46 and 51, p. 242 above.

¹¹² The fundamental meaning of the command ‘Open your eyes!’ I take to be ‘Let in the light!’ i.e. ‘Let Brigit in!’, an ultimatum immediately replicated by ‘*Lig isteach Bríd!*’ ‘Viewed in the context of Brigit’s role as midwife (Cf. Notes 62 p. 244, 70 p. 245 and 72, p. 245 above), the initial injunction in this passage could also be taken as directly relating to Brigit, the significance of the sequence being, therefore, that it may embody a triplicated enunciation of the name Brigit – i.e. ‘Brigid! Brigid! Brigid!’ – an announcement which in turn is met with the triplicated reply ‘Hail! Hail! Hail!’ ‘Open your eyes!’ may also be relate to the process of entering a trance – cf. E. A. S. Butterworth, *The Tree at the navel of the earth* (Berlin 1970) 74, where it is argued that ‘supernatural vision follows upon the “opening of the eyes”’.

an imitation of the act of sexual intercourse – represents creation. The appearance of the butter may be taken to stand for the arrival of the much hoped for product of that sexual union.¹¹³ The implements used for churning also carry their own obvious sexual message: the churn and churn dash representing the female and male sexual organs respectively. The etymologies of the words *cuinneog* (*DIL* s.v. *cuinneóc*) and *muí* (*DIL* s.v. *muide*) both meaning ‘churn’, and the word *loine* (*DIL* s.v. *loinid*), ‘churn dash’, would seem to further enhance the correctness of this interpretation: *cuinneog* may be related to Old Irish *cuiniu*, ‘a woman’¹¹⁴ and it may also be connected in some way to the Indo-European root **kuendh-ro-*, the basis for a number of words for Angelica Silvestris or wood angelica.¹¹⁵ This plant has an umbelliferous flower and a hollow stem and as such may also be thought of as symbolising the vulva and phallus.¹¹⁶

Interestingly, the wood angelica is called *lus an lonaid*¹¹⁷ in Scottish Gaelic and its Irish name *an chuinneog mhidhe*,¹¹⁸ it will be readily understood, is no less pertinent to the matter here under discussion. The word *muí* seems to possess definite sexual connotations: it comes from the Latin *modius*¹¹⁹ a word meaning ‘a vessel’, hence ‘a measure’ (called a peck) that which fills the vessel; ‘to peck’ is, in turn, a verb which means ‘to churn’ and it would also seem to be related to German *ficken*

¹¹³ This is the kind of reasoning that may lie behind the following passage in Brian Merriman’s famous poem, ‘The Midnight Court’: ‘*Cuinneog bhainne dhá greadadh le fórsa Mile moladh le Solas na Soilse*’ (L. P. Ó Murchú, *Cúirt an Mheanoiche* [Baile Átha Cliath 1982] 33). ‘*Solas na Soilse*’ most likely represents a reference to Brigit. The action of pounding potatoes in a pot (cf. p. 251 above) is symbolically the direct equivalent of churning.

¹¹⁴ *DIL*, s.v. *cuiniu*. Eric P. Hamp’s review of a range of scholarly contributions concerning the etymology of Old Irish *bé* (neuter) and *ben* (feminine) ‘woman’, in ‘Indo-European **g^w*en-Ha’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 93 (1979) 1–7, raises the prospect of identifying *cuinneog* with *bean* and hence with Vedic *jani*.

¹¹⁵ J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern and Stuttgart 1959) s.v. ‘*kuendh-ro-*, -no-’; ‘Lat. *combretum*, eine aromatische Pflanze, wohl eine wermutartige’; nir. *cuinneog*, Angelica silvestris . . .’. ‘The heavenly deities “churned” the primordial waters with the world axle, the Polarstar, a (phallic) spear, a high mountain etc. at the time of creation.’ – de Vries, *Keltische Religion*, 98, s.v. ‘churning’. Cf. nn. 114, p. 255, and 116 below.

¹¹⁶ ‘The plant is erect in habit . . . often as much as 5 – 6 ft. high . . . [it] was considered especially noisome to witches.’ – A. R. Horwood and J. N. Fitch, *A New British flora: British wild flowers in their natural haunts* (London s.d.) 3, 53. In Nordic tradition, this plant was credited with being able to cure menstrual problems and problems associated with pregnancy; it was used as an antidote for sicknesses in humans and in animals, believed to have been caused by witches’ spells; as a cure for various complaints in poultry and in newly-calved cows and it was put in the churn to prevent butter being stolen by magic means – V. J. Brøndegaard, *Folk og Flora: Dansk Etnobotanik* (Copenhagen 1979) 298, 299. Tomás de Bhaldraithe (‘*Varia* iv. . . 2, *clapar*’, *Ériu* 42 [1991] 147–8) concurs with K. Malone’s proposed interpretation (‘*Bonnyclabber*’, *Celtica* 5 [1960] 142) of the Irish expression *bainne clabair* as meaning ‘churn-dash’, adverting to the proverbial saying, ‘*Nár thaga suíche ar do loine*’, ‘May your churn-dash [i.e. *membrum virile*] never grow sooty’ (used jocosely in congratulating the father of a new-born child), and to the apposite use of the word *clapar*.

¹¹⁷ J. Cameron, *The Gaelic names of plants* (Glasgow 1900) 42.

¹¹⁸ F. Edmund Hogan, *Luibhleabhrán: Irish and Scottish Gaelic names of herbs, plants, trees, etc.* (Dublin 1900) 25. For a discussion of a number of other terms relating to churns and churning, cf. H. Wagner and H.-E. Keller, ‘It. *mattra*, *mastra*, prov. *mastra*, altfranz. *maistrel*, ir. *maistred*’, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 73 (1957) 277–301.

¹¹⁹ *DIL*, s.v. *muide*.

and to English ‘fuck’.¹²⁰ Finally, there is the intriguing possibility that *loine* ‘a churn dash’ may be related to *linga*, the main object of worship of the Hindu deity Śiva.¹²¹ *Linga* means ‘a sign’, here a sign in the shape of a cylinder with a rounded top; it also means ‘phallus’.¹²² The phallic qualities of the *loine* are also highlighted in a setting other than churning – but still connected with the celebration of the feast of Brigit – namely its function as the central axis around which the doll image of Brigit – the *brideog* (a word which also means ‘a bride’¹²³) We may also note that the act of calling for admission in Brigit’s name, while this decorated shaft is thrust through the door opening,¹²⁴ functions within the tradition as an alternative to the

¹²⁰ W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological dictionary of the English language* ([1879–82] new edition, revised and enlarged, Oxford 1910), s.v. ‘peck’, lists the following meaning for the verb ‘to peck’: ‘to strike with something pointed’. Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, s.v. ‘peck’, with ‘out’ or ‘upon’ provides the meaning ‘to churn a small quantity of milk’. Danish *pik*, Swedish *pick*, meaning ‘a pointed object’ are listed by C. Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of selected synonyms in the principal Indo-European languages* (Chicago and London 1949), as being ‘Among the semantic sources of vulgar terms (for penis)’. Cf. *ibid.*, 279 for *fuck/ficken*. H. Wentworth and S. Berg Flexner (ed.), *The Dictionary of American slang* (Toronto 1967) 380, records the use of ‘pecker’ for penis.

¹²¹ S. Kramrisch, in *Encyclopædia of Religion*, s.v. ‘Hindu iconography’.

¹²² *Ibid.* s.v. ‘Hindu iconography’.

¹²³ A. Harrison, ‘Tricksters and Entertainers in the Irish Tradition’, *Proceedings of the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, 307, draws a parallel between the *brideog* (=‘bride’) and the bride from whom strawboys ‘claim the favours of the bride (a kiss or permission to dance with her)’ and outlines the difficulty of establishing their exact relationship to one another, all against the background of the *crossáns* who, he warns, we should be careful not to assume to be ‘the forerunners of the biddy boys’ (p. 304). It may also be appropriate in the light of my findings here to devote further consideration in this context to the role of the Sheela-na-Gigs (cf., in this context, E. Rynne, ‘A Pagan Celtic Background for Sheela-na Gigs?’, in E. Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past. Studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dublin 1987) 189–202. The *brideog* is sometimes adverted to in the rhymes recited by the *Brideoga* in terms of her inability to speak (Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 29). The folk prayer, *Teagasc Bride*, would also seem to contain a reference to her speechlessness, ‘. . . Chloiginn úd anall atá gan teangaidh’, (*Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge : The Gaelic Journal* 4 (1893), l. 45, p. 214. The nature of the relationship between Brigit ‘the Speechless’ and *Labraid* ‘the Speaker’ (also known as *Labraid Moen* ‘The Dumb Speaker’) is a subject deserving of further examination. L. Honko, ‘Mute Brides and Bridegrooms’, *Inte Bara Visor: Studier kring folklig diktning och musik tillägnade Bengt R. Jonsson* (Stockholm 1990) 117–31, outlines aspects of the Fenno-Ugric tradition in regard to the passive role of both bride and bridegroom in the marriage ceremony, with its special strictures on the bride to remain silent. For an Irish parallel, cf. Gailey, *Irish folk drama*, 92. E. Hoffmann-Krayer and H. Bächtold-Stäubli (ed.), *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin and Leipzig 1935/36), s.v. ‘schweigen’, emphasizes the importance of silence in the agricultural context, e.g. when a cow calves, silence is observed in the house; a first-time calver must be milked in silence the first time she is milked after calving so as to ensure that, subsequently, she will be easy to milk; a cow which tends to be unruly when being milked is tethered with a pulley which has been removed from a spinning wheel, while maintaining complete silence. The same source also lists a wide range of other agricultural practices and spring customs for the proper performance of which silence is regarded as being a necessary prerequisite. For a discussion of the significance of silence and noise and the contrast between them, cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the cooked: introduction to a science of mythology* (New York 1970) 327ff. Cf. n. 126 below. For a review of traditions pertaining to *Labhraidh Longseach* and Brigit, cf. Máirtín Ó Briain, ‘The horse-eared kings of Irish tradition and St. Brigit’ in B. J. Hudson and V. Ziegler (ed.), *Crossed paths: methodological approaches to the Celtic aspect of the European Middle Ages* (London 1991).

¹²⁴ ‘When they arrive at a house, the leader raises the latch and puts in the *brideog*. All the others follow on’ (IFC 907:67). ‘Liminal situations cluster round Brigit’ as McCone (*Pagan past and Christian present*, 187) points out. The application of van Gennep’s principles of liminality to the account of the birth of Brigit (as found in section four of her *First Life*) which McCone accomplishes with relative ease, could be even more effortlessly applied to the Brigit of Irish folk tradition and would, of course, be equally apt (cf. n. 110, p. 254 above).

action of the man of the house in seeking entry, armed with a sheaf of straw – his ‘brídeog’, as it were – and it must be seen as an exact parallel to it. The third and final phase of the festival celebrations, that which centres upon the weaving of crosses in honour of Brigit, is dominated by the symbolism of the cross, an object which, as we have seen, was plainly perceived in folk tradition as possessing the potential to promote fertility. The symbolism of the cross is a multivalent complex of great antiquity.¹²⁵ The swastika – basically a Greek cross with its arms bent at right angles – is one of the oldest types of cross and it is also found among the variety of cross types in honour of Brigit. We find remarkable evidence of an early association between Brigit and the swastika on an inscribed stone from the early Christian period located near St Brigit’s Well at Cliffoney, Co. Sligo.¹²⁶ This stone

¹²⁵ Cf. A. de Vries, *Dictionary of symbols and imagery* (Amsterdam and London 1974) 118–20; and also J. Ries, in *Encyclopedia of Religion* s.v. ‘cross’, and sources quoted there.

¹²⁶ W. F. Wakeman, ‘On certain wells situate in the North-West of Ireland etc’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 15 (fourth series, 1879–1882) 365–84. Professor Michael Herity, to whom I owe this reference, informs me that this stone is unlikely to date later than the seventh century. Along the coastal fringe running from Galway to Tory Island, Michael Herity (‘The Antiquity of an Turas [the Pilgrimage Round] in Ireland’, in A. Lehner and W. Berschin (ed.), *Lateinische Kultur im VIII. Jahrhundert* [St. Ottilien 1989] 95–143), has isolated and examined six pilgrimage sites of special interest at five of which ‘The series of art historical dates in the sixth and seventh centuries . . . seem to date the institution of the turas . . .’ (p. 121). At two, probably three, of these sites, holy wells play an important role (p. 120), and at one of these – Rathlin O’Birne Island, Co. Donegal – there is a ‘Chi-Ro slab’ with a ‘canopy’ not unlike that described by Wakeman. There is a strong temptation to see a link between *turas* sites, such as those described by Herity, and other sites such as St Brigit’s Well at Cliffoney, *Tobar na mBan Naomh* in Teelin and the holy well and the traditions of St Brendan on Inishglora (cf. n. 13, p. 233 above). It may be said, at any rate, that Colmcille, Brigit, Brendan and a number of other Irish saints – such as Gobnait – all have fertility/fecundity connections, as well as wells and pilgrimages dedicated to them, the full significance of which has yet to be properly examined and explained. The circumambulation of the monuments of Glencolmcille, for example, in the course of making the *turas* there, might be regarded as originally having been a way of seeking magical protection and as such might be compared with other methods of achieving this aim, such as digging or ploughing a furrow around a settlement, once a common practice. ‘In most agricultural societies, the furrow or the seed hole stand for the vulva. The seed stands for semen, and the plough, or digging stick for the phallus’ – *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. ‘Yoni’. Needless to say, this approach would serve to further enhance and emphasize the potential fertility associations and affinities of *turas* sites such as Glencolmcille. Wakeman ties St Brigit’s Well at Cliffoney to an incident said to have occurred during her visit to Connacht when, we are told, it was her wont to seek out a pool of icy water near the monastery in which she would immerse herself, praying and weeping all through the night. By dint of the severity of her self-mortification, God saw to it that the pool ran dry, thus preventing Brigit from continuing with this penance (John O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints etc.* (Dublin s.d.) 2, 90–1). Bathing as a means of purification and a method of renewing virginity was practised by, *inter alios*, Hera, the pre-Hellenic Great Goddess and forerunner of Juno (R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* 1 (Harmondsworth 1960) 50–1, and wells ‘with trees symbolize[s] the divine marriage (vulva and phallus)’ – de Vries, *Dictionary of symbols and imagery*, 496; and cf. also A. T. Lucas, ‘The Sacred Trees of Ireland’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 68 (1963) 40–2. P. Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology*, 27, speaking of ‘Gaulish “Mercury” : Irish “Lugh”’ states that ‘he is often associated with a goddess ‘Maia or Rosmerta . . . who evidently represents wealth and material abundance’, and he later claims that Lugh and the goddess [‘the sovereignty of Ireland’] who represents the land and its prosperity can scarcely be dissociated from the Gaulish monuments to Mercury and Rosmerta’ (p. 29). Mac Cana’s description of the relief from Glanum in which ‘Mercury equipped with his usual attributes is accompanied by Rosmerta who bears a cornucopia’ (p. 25) forbears to make mention of another prominently featured object, grasped by Rosmerta in her right hand. This illustration also occurs in Green (*Symbol and image in Celtic religious art*, 59), and is there described as being a ‘rudder on a globe’. While this may not be altogether out of character, it could well also turn out to be a churn dash and churn. This interpretation would be

is described by W. F. Wakeman as presenting ‘the appearance of an early Christian cross’, but possessing, nevertheless, ‘the savour of a pagan origin’.¹²⁷ Wakeman also noted that, surmounting what he called ‘the Mithraic symbol or Swastica’, in the head of the cross occurs a canopy of not ungraceful design which is not like . . . anything found elsewhere in these countries.¹²⁸ This ‘canopy’ seems to me to bear a remarkable resemblance to the curving decoration of the horned head of the ‘Cernunnos’ deity, the ‘striking analogy’ between which ‘in his role as the Lord of the Animals and the god Śiva in his aspect as Pashupati ‘Lord of the Beasts’ is stressed by Proinsias Mac Cana.¹²⁹ If the Cliffooney swastika stone proves to have an association with the cult of horned deities, then, perhaps, it may be claimed that we see united on this Christian cross, the symbols of the same two potent fertility figures that continued to be remembered in the folklore associated with *Lá Lúnasa* and *Oíche Fhéile Bhríde*, down to our own time. We may also discern in Wakeman’s ‘canopy of not ungraceful design’ and what lies behind it an explanation for Brigit’s bizarre harrow head-dress (cf. p. 258 above).

Among the many interesting aspects of the symbolism associated with crosses, we may single out but four for special mention – the tree, the number four, navigation and weaving.¹³⁰ First, the cross represents the “tree of life”, the *axis mundi*; it evokes verticality and achieves communication between three levels of the cosmos – subterranean space, earth and sky.¹³¹ The tree provides access to the invisible world and in many cultures a particular species or a single tree was designated for this purpose. For the Celts, it seems to have been the oak¹³² and, significantly,

supported by Green’s fig. 22 (*Symbol and image in Celtic religious art*, 58) which shows ‘Mercury and Rosmerta with sceptre, ladle and bucket’, stating that ‘Rosmerta’s association with a vessel suggests links with cauldrons of renewal and regeneration’. While this may well be so, if Rosmerta is to be equated with Brigit, as I would suggest, then in view of my findings here, butter-imagery, rather than ‘wine-imagery’, as Green would have it, is what is likely to be intended.

¹²⁷ Wakeman, ‘On certain wells situate in the North-West of Ireland etc.’, 381. Descriptions of a number of ‘swastika stones’ elsewhere in Ireland – notably in Kerry – and in Scotland can be found in Wakeman, ‘On certain wells situate in the North-West of Ireland etc.’, 379–82.

¹²⁸ Wakeman, ‘On certain wells situate in the North-West of Ireland etc.’, 381.

¹²⁹ Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology*, 38. For further discussion of horned deities in Celtic tradition, cf. Mac Cana *Celtic mythology*, 44–8; Anne Ross, ‘Celtic and Northern Art’, in P. Rawson (ed.), *Primitive erotic art* (London 1973) 83ff.; and Green, *Symbol and image in Celtic religious art*, 86–9. Ibid. 27 also draws attention to instances of horned goddesses, powerful symbols of fecundity, embodying close links with the animal world.

¹³⁰ Cf. Ries, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 155–66.

¹³¹ Cf. Ries, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 158; Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology*, 50, 134; Mac Cana, *Encyclopedia of Religion* s.v. ‘Celtic religion’; A. Watson, ‘The King, The Poet and the Sacred Tree’, *Études Celtiques* 18 (1981) 165–80, and, with special reference to the monastery of Kildare, Lucas, ‘The Sacred Trees of Ireland’, 32 and C. Doherty, ‘The Monastic Town in Medieval Ireland’, in H. B. Clarke and A. Simms (ed.), *The Comparative history of urban origins in non-Roman Europe etc.* [Oxford 1985] 48. J. L. Campbell, (review of G. Murphy *Early Irish lyrics* [Oxford 1956]) ‘Two notes on *Early Irish lyrics* (Murphy)’, *Éigse* 9 [1958–61] 75–6, commenting on the expression *gammach darach duilleadach* (cf. n. 43, p. 240 above, which is used to describe a type of tree hated by Suibhne, notes: ‘the habit of the oak tree of retaining its last year’s leaves far into the spring, long after trees like the birch, alder and rowan have started putting out green leaves. Seen at this time, with its old leaves, the oak looks ugly amongst the other trees. In regard to the suggestion . . . that the phrase may mean ‘an infertile leafy oak’ it is interesting to note that in Mac Donald’s Vocabulary (1741) the Oak is included in the list of ‘Barren Trees’.

¹³² Mac Cana, *Celtic mythology*, 50.

this happens to be the tree commemorated in the placename *Cill Dara* marking the spot where St Brigit was said to have ‘founded a church . . . beside an ancient oak-tree which existed till the tenth century’.¹³³ The number four symbolises the totality of space and time: among its many cosmological aspects are the four cardinal points, the four elements, the four celestial beings (sky, sun, moon and stars) and the four divisions of time (day, night, month, year).¹³⁴ The image of the mast and the yard that crosses it is reproduced in the cross which thereby signifies navigation¹³⁵ while the process of weaving,¹³⁶ one of man’s oldest activities, is closely bound up with attempts to determine what the future held and with fate.¹³⁷ The most basic element of weaving is the crossing of two threads at a centre involving the formation of a vertical line (warp) through which a horizontal line (woof) passes, creating a cross at the central meeting point. Spinning the thread of fate for the new born was an activity commonly associated with goddesses of fate.¹³⁸

X

In this article, my main aim has been to attempt the widening of the base for the future investigation and consideration of the true nature of Brigit and her festival. I have sought to develop the strictly ‘agricultural’ interpretation of the festival to encompass the implications of regeneration and reproduction, particularly as it affects humans, touching briefly on such subjects as sterility and barrenness, mating, birth, fate and future prospects. I hope I have been successful, at least, in focussing the attention of folklorists and others on this, the most important of all Irish calendar festivals. As the sample material from the archived inventory of Irish folklore exposed here amply indicates, this is a worthy part of a rich Irish heritage which will prove most rewarding of closer study. Though, subject, to a process of censorship and reshaping from the beginning of the Christian era, the old traditions of Brigit’s festival survived and ultimately found a life-line among the lower orders of society.¹³⁹ The Irish country people – to use Máire Mac Neill’s

¹³³ D. Hyde, *A Literary history of Ireland* (London 1899) 158.

¹³⁴ J. MacQueen, *Numerology: theory and outline history of a literary mode* (Edinburgh 1985) 131, and de Vries, *Dictionary of symbols and imagery*, 201–2.

¹³⁵ Cf. Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, chap. 7, ‘Odysseus at the Mast’, 328ff.

¹³⁶ Cf. de Vries, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, 495–6 and n. 138, below.

¹³⁷ Cf. R. Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European thought etc.* (Cambridge 1951) 303ff, 349ff. I owe this important reference to Dr P. Ó Héalaí.

¹³⁸ ‘The prehistoric Great Goddess survives still in folklore. She appears as Fate (or sometimes) as the three Fates, who attend the birth of a child and foretells the length of its life’, Marija Gimbutas, in *Encyclopedia of Religion* s.v. ‘Old Europe’. Cf. n. 13, p. 233 above.

¹³⁹ ‘A remarkable continuity stretches from the pagan goddess to her Christian namesake of the early sixth century, the saint Brighid of Kildare whose monastery of *Cell Dara*, ‘the church of the [sacred] oak’ was doubtless on the site of a pagan sanctuary’ (Mac Cana, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. ‘Celtic religion’). In reference to ‘Gaulish “Minerva”: Irish “Brighid”’, Mac Cana, (*Celtic mythology*, 34) states that ‘dedications [to Minerva] show that her cult was especially strong among the lower orders’ and, with regard to the Cernunnos cult (cf. n. 126, p. 257 above), speculates – ‘if in fact the Cernunnos cult did not quickly wither under the pressure of Christianity, then it is not impossible that traces of it survived into recent times in certain areas of popular custom’ (p. 48). Horned *Brideoga* (cf. IFC 903:141) and horned Wrenboys (cf. Gailey, *Irish folk drama*, 83) undoubtedly marked part of that survival, also

phrase – ‘became its recorders’.¹⁴⁰ They promoted the tradition with dignity, piety and pride, assimilating it seamlessly into the deep Christian faith of Ireland, without allowing it to become totally submerged. It must have been something of a balancing act and a conscious one at that, if the attitude of one Donegal *seanchaí* is anything to go by: *Bhí dhá Naomh Bríd ann. Bhí Naomh Bríd thuas i gCill Dara, ach seo Naomh Bríd as an áit seo . . .*¹⁴¹ [‘There were two St Brigids. There was St Brigid up in Kildare, but this is the St Brigid from this place . . .’] The compromise between these two continued until the traditions of the old goddess – Brigit the Holy Woman, already in decline, were swept to oblivion by the new culture of the twentieth century.

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adorned, long after Ireland turned Christian, by Brigit and her festival customs as by Lugh and his. In both instances, we are fortunate to possess in the folklore record an invaluable witness to important aspects of the nature of what ‘must once have been a vast body of ritual which fell into disuse at some stage and was noticed only casually in the written record’ (Mac Cana, in *Encyclopedia of Religion* s.v. ‘Celtic religion’).

¹⁴⁰ Mac Neill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, 428.

¹⁴¹ IFC 694:189.