

# Imbolc

## Francine Nicholson

### Spring : Waking the Land

<i>Fromad cach bíd iar n-urd,</i>	Tasting each food in its order,
<i>issued dlegair i n-Imbulc,</i>	this is what's proper at Imbolc
<i>diúnnach laime is coissi is cinn,</i>	washing the hand and foot and head,
<i>is amlaid sin atberim.</i>	That's how it is, I tell

Traditionally, the Celtic feast associated with 1 February marked the beginning of spring. Often this coincided with the lambing season and the first ploughing in many areas. The success of all these events was of great importance to economies that relied on herding and farming. Thus, the basic theme was the waking of the land from its wintry, death-like sleep into new life. Once the land was wakened with blessing and ploughing, new crops could be planted. Also, many animals were also giving birth or preparing to do so. The beginning of lambing season brought fresh milk at the time of year when cow's milk was often unavailable. Fresh meat and milk were a welcome change after months of salted or smoked meat. Also, the winter stores of root vegetables, grain, and preserved meat might be getting low.

Many of the customs at spring and summer were aimed at ensuring that crops grew and herds flourished. Asking for blessings on the animals was also essential for several reasons. Milk production was relied on for a steady supply of milk products until the harvest began six months later. In Ireland, milk products---cheese, butter---were called "white meat." Also, spring rituals were designed to promote human fertility and health necessary for families and households to grow and maintain their position on the land and in the tribe.

### The Etymology of Imbolc

Scholars have suggested several possible meanings for the word Imbolc, including "milking," and also washing and ritual purification from the Celtic word folcaim, "I wash." This might also relate to the house cleaning, house blessing, and well devotions associated with Imbolc in recent folk practices. The lines of the medieval poem quoted above support this association of spring and washing.

Another possible explanation is "in the belly" which may relate to the processions held around the fields, often seen as the body of goddesses in which the grain and other crops would grow. This would also reflect the general association with rebirth of nature that was beginning at the time of Imbolc. The Irish verb imbolgaid means to "blow a bellows," and, since smithing was another aspect of Bridget, the goddess and saint often associated with Imbolc, one could visualize a ritual image of blowing the bellows to increase the fire that would warm the cold earth. Today, Imbolc is generally called St. Bridget's Day or it may be conflated with the Christian feast of Candlemas (the Purification of Mary) on February 2.

### Spring and Bridget

Since the medieval period, Imbolc in Ireland has been closely associated with the figure of St. Bridget, the reputed founder and abbess of the double monastery at Kildare. Most Imbolc customs collected by folklorists are specifically associated with her. Modern popular writers have followed the lead of scholars such as Mac Cána and Sjoestedt in suggesting that all these customs were originally associated with a single pre-Christian Celtic goddess named Br/ig or Br/id. St. Bridget was a dominant figure in the ritual life of the late medieval Irish

church. This popularity has led many modern writers and scholars to assume that a pre-Christian goddess named Bríg enjoyed similar prominence in pre-Christian Ireland. This assumption has been challenged in recent years by evidence suggesting that the saint's popularity may have owed more to the public relations efforts of monastic scribes and leaders than to any pre-Christian precedent.

It is also likely that many of the ritual sites and customs now associated with St. Bridget were originally focused on various, locally popular goddess figures. Cognates of the goddess, such as the British figure called Brigantia, were venerated throughout the ancient Celtic world. From Austria to Britain, Celts applied names containing the root bríg, meaning high or exalted, to rivers, tribes, and cities.

It is unclear whether the feast originally depicted the associated goddess as being reborn herself or whether she was the agent for regenerating the land. However, the aura of fertility hangs about most of the Imbolc rituals collected by folklorists. For example, butter is churned and the churn itself or the dash are dressed as a Bríd figure in some places. In others, a Bridget figure is ceremonially bedded close to the fire. In yet others, the figure was carried through the townland to bless the farms, or food and a candle were set out to welcome her as her spirit passed by.

### **Crossing the Border**

An Irish saying noted that, with the lengthening day that marked St. Bridget's day "the candlestick and half the candle" could be put away. Many of the folk customs focused on the increasing warmth and light, the rebirth of the cold earth, and the birth process itself. It is likely that myths and stories underlay these customs, but at this point it is difficult to say exactly what those stories were. However, the rituals probably were, in some cases, re-enactment of the myths.

### **Omens**

Imbolc was a time when farmers and fishermen depended on steady improvement in the weather. They also believed that the kind of weather occurring on Imbolc gave them some idea of how the coming months would go. Better than average weather was good but a truly fine day was a bad sign. The prevailing wind on Imbolc would continue for the rest of the year. The appearance of a hedgehog up and about was a sign that weather would continue to improve but wintry conditions would persist for several more weeks if the hedgehog returned to its winter sleep. A rainy February was thought to predict a good summer.

### **Talismans**

Many of the folk customs associated with Imbolc and St. Bridget's day in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands centered on the preparation of talismans to be used for protection and healing throughout the year. It was thought that such talismans were blessed by Bridget herself as she traveled from one household to another on the evening before her feast. Their effectiveness resulted from her blessing. Here are some of the talismans associated with Imbolc:

Dishes of water or salt were sometimes left out overnight for Bridget to bless. These would be put aside for use in healing illness.

Bridget's Cross was a symbol derived from ancient solar symbols known from early times in Europe. There were several regional forms but none resemble the classic Christian cross. The crosses were made from straw, sheaves of grain, rushes, or grass, depending on the region of origin. They were hung in the house and farm buildings as protection against illness and other misfortune. In the Scottish Highlands, women also made Bridget Crosses before a wedding

and placed one in the mattress of the marriage bed to ensure fertility. Making the crosses themselves was a ritual. The exact procedure varied and in some places the crosses were made ahead of time to be distributed as part of the brídeóg procession (see below). But in most places in Ireland, the weaving material was ceremonially brought into the house and laid under the table where the feasting would occur. After the meal, the household created the crosses. A farmer might also make circlets to hang round the necks of lambs as they were born. Any leftover materials were used to create a bed for Bridget or sprinkled in the byre for good luck. The crosses were hung the next day.

**Brat Bríde**, the brat or cloak of Bridget was a ribbon, piece of cloth, or an article of clothing left outside on the evening before the feast of Imbolc to receive the blessing of Bridget as she passed through the household. Afterwards, the cloths and ribbons were used as talismans of protection and healing, particularly aiding birth in women and cows.

The **crios** or girdle of Bridget was a rope of plaited straw or rope three or four meters long formed into a circle. It was held vertically aloft while those gathered passed through ritually, reciting a charm. The ceremony appears to have symbolized regeneration.

Sun, Moon, and Stars were a collage of straw created by the residents of some counties of the north of Ireland, an alternative to the Bridget's cross. They fashion the symbols from straw and, with a symbolic ladder, pasted them all onto a piece of paper or cloth. Later they were hung in home and farm. While this collage was probably some sort of fertility symbol to ensure the rebirth of the earth, its exact meaning is unknown.

### **Time Off**

In some places in Ireland, all work ceased on the feast, and devotions at holy wells took place instead. In others, the ban on work was confined to activities such as ploughing, smithwork, and anything that involved turning wheels (spinning, carting, milling, and sewing machines), activities associated with the saint.

### **Prosperity Magic**

In Scotland, a charm was chanted that referred to a snake coming from a hole. Doubtless, this referred to some divinatory or fertility ritual whose origins and details have been lost. In the Highlands, the married women of the house created a Bridget figure from a sheaf of grain and decorated it with ribbons, flowers, or other objects. Then they made a sort of bed with rushes and grain next to the hearth. After ritually inviting Bridget to fill this bed, the women placed the figurine into it. Before carefully smoothing the ashes of the hearth, they put a straight, peeled stick of birch or similar wood beside the figure to serve as "Bridget's wand," a symbol of sovereignty or perhaps a phallic symbol. The next morning, the women examined the hearth for signs of Bridget's favor, such as the imprint of a foot or mark of the wand in the ashes. If there were no such marks, the family assumed that Bridget had been offended. Steps to appease her---such as burying a cockerel or pullet at the junction of three streams---were then taken.

### **Protective Magic**

For seacoast dwellers, the spring tide closest to the feast was devoted to gathering seaweed for use as fertilizer. Around Galway Bay, a live limpet or periwinkle was placed at each of the four corners of the house to ensure good fishing and shellfish gathering in the coming months. Devotions performed at the holy wells of Liscannor (Co. Clare) and Faughart (Co. Louth) include ritually washing in the water. Also, a Highland Gaelic verse associated with Imbolc mentions ritual washing by Bridget as a means of ending the winter cold. This notion must reflect an earlier, pre-Christian myth in which a goddess took some action to end the

winter. The talismans created as part of Imbolc rituals were used as protective and curative magic throughout the year.

### **Mythic Acts**

In ancient and early medieval times, a particular type of pagan ceremony was held in areas throughout Europe, especially those with Teutonic and Celtic heritage. It consisted of a procession in which an image of a goddess was placed in a cart or wagon which was then drawn through the community, especially the fields, accompanied by dancing and singing devotees, priests, and designated attendants. Animals to be sacrificed and possibly designated human victims also formed part of the procession. After being drawn or carried through the fields, the goddess figure was bathed in a lake or spring. The procession is thought to have occurred in late winter or early spring, the time of Imbolc. Celtic remains that may illustrate such a procession include a bronze cart unearthed from a grave in Strettweg and a panel of the Gundestrup cauldron.

Nineteenth-century folk practices at Imbolc in Ireland and Scotland included processions that visited homes throughout the community, reminiscent of the processions described above. In some places, the central figure was a woman chosen to represent St. Bridget as An Bhrídeog. Beforehand, talismans of woven straw or grass were distributed at each home and farm, to be nailed up as protection for all within. Surrounded by an accompanying group, An Bhrídeog processed to each home and farm where she engaged in a ritual dialog with the residents and distributed a set of talismans: the Cros (cross), Sgiath (shield), and Crothán (veil) of Bridget. In other places in Ireland, the brídeog was a figurine made by dressing a doll or encasing a churn dash or other pole with straw and adding a carved turnip for a head. The figurine was carried by a group of young men called bríde óga or Biddy boys, dressed in white shirts, masks, women's skirts, and straw hats. These ambiguously dressed people carried the brídeog from one farm to another, singing, dancing, or playing music, and receiving gifts of food, especially cakes, butter, and eggs. More recently, such groups wear masks and brightly colored clothing to which ribbons, patches, and fringes are added, and the offerings they receive may be sweets or coins.

A Highland variation on the parade of the brídeog holds specific reference to human fertility. The young women of the community created a figurine from a churn dash and carried it about to the various households, collecting offerings of bread, butter, and other food. Later the young women feasted on these in company with the young men of the community, followed by singing and dancing throughout the night.

In some areas, visits to holy wells and streams have replaced the ritual bathing of the goddess statue. However, the devotions performed by pilgrims at those sites include ritual use of water from the well. Frequently the home, family, and talismans are blessed with water taken from such sites at Imbolc.

The ritual of stepping through the crios or girdle of Bríg may be a symbolic re-enactment of birth. At this point, it is unclear exactly what well rituals of rebirth were once associated with Imbolc to ensure the fertility of the awakening land. However, at a time when the natural world was coming out of its wintry sleep, one would expect rituals to dramatically re-enact this fact. It is probably not accidental that the holy well at Liscannor, Co. Clare, is situated underground; perhaps devotees once descended into the well chamber and re-emerged ritually. Mac Neill notes that Liscannor was primarily a site of pilgrimage at Lughnasa, but two of her sources attest that it was also a site used at Imbolc.

## The Flow of the Celtic Festivals

Underlying the traditional Celtic workflow was an assumption that we moderns are only beginning to acknowledge: the realization that the ability of this world to sustain life is limited. Because their daily lives were more directly and obviously affected by natural cycles, the ancient and medieval Celts were more aware of the basic fact that resources must be sustained and recycled so the world can continue to support life; death and rebirth were an essential component of this concept. Consequently, Samhain was the time to evaluate one's life, to remember those who had blessed one's life and gone on, and to treasure those still among the living. Imbolc was a time for blessing the home and celebrating the nurturing forces of life. Bealtaine focused on what was new, fresh, energetic, growing, and pleasurable. Lughnasa was the time to give thanks for blessings by offering back the first fruits of the harvest.

Honey under ground

Silverweed of spring.

Honey and condiment

Whisked whey of summer.

Honey and fruitage

Carrot and autumn.

Honey and crunching

Nuts of winter.

- **Carmina Gadelica** #398

Each season has its trials, its duties, and its entitlements. The ancient Celts and their descendants traditionally knew how to celebrate the sweetnesses that came with each turn in the endless cycle.

**Inbolc** by Frandine Nicholson *is taken from* :

**Calendar Feasts and Customs: The Insular Celtic Cycle of Seasons**

*The complete Chapter is available online at :*

**Land, Sea and Sky**

Edited by Shae Clancy and Francine Nicholson

<http://homepage.eircom.net/~shae/index.htm>

**Preface** by Shae Clancy

Francine Nicholson started this project about 10 years ago. Francine had a deep interest in all things Celtic and had an awesome knowledge of Celtic mythology and folklore. She dearly wanted to integrate genuine Celtic ideals and philosophies into her lifestyle and embarked on a voyage. She encountered many obstacles - counter-currents, contrary winds and conflicting tides - that impeded her journey and sometimes sent her off-course. She finally found her true bearings and, having arrived safely at her destination, vowed that she would do her best to help others avoid the obstacles that beset her.

She cajoled several people to contribute chapters to a book that would help to explain the difference between Celtic fact (what we actually know) from Celtic fiction (what we speculate). Several authors contributed and their chapters are gratefully acknowledged. We all hope that our efforts will be of benefit.

- *From the Preface* by Shae Clancy

**Francine Nicholson, M.A.**, was a librarian in New England and scholar of all things Celtic. The loss of her passing, perhaps appropriately on 1 February 2003 (Imbolc), is poignantly crystallised by fellow Celtic scholar, David Stifter: 'It is very sad news to hear that Francine Nicholson has left us. She had a vast and astounding erudition and knowledge of Celtic mythology and folklore, and her contributions . . . were a great source of enrichment and information. I feel it as a heavy loss that she will no longer contribute to our discussions.'

### **Land, Sea and Sky**

**Edited by Shae Clancy and Francine Nicholson**

<http://homepage.eircom.net/~shae/index.htm>

©All text in this on-line book is copyright of the individual authors and may not be reproduced without permission.

### **Making a Brigid's Cross**

By **Shae Clancy**

The following are step-by-step instructions for how to make a Brigid's Cross

1. Get a bundle of rushes or straw about 15 inches long.
2. Take two and cross them at the centre.
3. Fold one back on itself around the other one.
4. Take a third one and fold it around the second one, parallel to the first. You should now have a T-shaped piece, with one arm having one strand, another having two and the third having three.
5. Fold a fourth rush around the third one to form a cross again.
6. Fold a fifth one around the fourth, parallel to the single strand.
7. Continue folding rushes around the previous one until the central square is about one and a half to two inches wide (this is optional, but the cross gets a bit unwieldy if it's much bigger).
8. Finally, tie the ends of each arm tightly with wool or other natural fibre. Tidy up the ends with a scissors.

Straw can be used instead of rushes, but sometimes it is brittle and breaks easily when being folded. Remember too that freshly cut rushes will dry and the cross will become loose. Just untie the ends and pull them all tightly together again.

© Copyright Shae Clancy 1999

**Making Making a Brigid's Cross** previously appeared on **Celtic Well**

[http://www.applewarrior.com/celticwell/ejournal/imbolc/brighids\\_cross.htm](http://www.applewarrior.com/celticwell/ejournal/imbolc/brighids_cross.htm)

We are grateful to **Shae Clancy** for kind permission to host this work on [aughty.org](http://aughty.org)