



A tale of three Brigids: the Celtic goddess, a selfless Christian saint and the mortal woman



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BRIGID is many different things, and many different women. Perhaps best known as the only woman of Ireland's three patron saints, Saint Brigid of Kildare – also known as Mary of the Gael – her profile has risen in recent years following the shamefully belated decision to honour her with a bank holiday.

National affection for Saint Brigid seems to have flourished with her rising prominence – the extra day off can't have hurt. But as the lore around Brigid has grown, it has become a little confused. This is only natural when one considers how many times her story has been written and rewritten over a thousand years.

Perhaps it is easiest to consider the broadly agreed

stories of three separate Brigids – the pagan Celtic goddess, the supernatural Christian saint, and the mortal, charitable and pioneering historical figure. It is said that Brigid was born sometime between 450 AD to 455 AD in Faughart, Co Louth. A shrine remains at the site of her birth.

Her father was Dubhtah, a distinguished Leinster chieftain, and her mother was Broicsech, a Christian slave. The traditional story is that, even as a child,

She is credited with setting up the first convent in Ireland

Brigid displayed a deep and profound sense of compassion for others, and was associated with a number of miracles.

As a young girl, Brigid would give away her family's butter to those in need – yet no matter how much she gave away, her own stock of butter seemed to never deplete.

Brigid is now the patron saint of, among many other things, dairy workers.

Brigid's charity was renowned, and the legend of her life is peppered with tales of her regarding what was hers as belonging to those in need.

Thoroughly exasperated with his daughter's tenacity for giving things away, which he perceived as a threat to his own wealth, Dubhtah is said to have decided to try to sell Brigid as a slave to the king of Leinster.

While her father was talking with the king, Brigid was left outside with his prize jewelled sword – which she promptly gave away to a person suffering from leprosy so they could barter it for food for his family.

This story of the sword is sometimes used as a fable to tell the story of Brigid as a peacemaker – someone who turned an instrument of war into a means of nourishment.

Other interpretations credit this story as the moment Brigid's father understood she would be much better suited to religious life, rather than being married off, which Brigid had fiercely resisted.

She is said to have prayed for God to take her beauty away to deter any suitors.

Miracles attributed to her often feature tales of women seeking refuge or protection, and she was widely associated with healing. This led to the tradition of leaving out a "Bratóg Bride" the night before February 1, where a scarf is tied outside homes in the belief it would be blessed by a passing Saint Brigid and used to aid anyone who should fall ill.

Saint Brigid is credited with setting up the first convent in Ireland, as well as founding the "Church of the Oak" monastery in Kildare. She was said to have had a close friendship with St Patrick.

According to the Acta Triadis Thaumaturgae, an account of the lives of Ireland's three patron saints: "Between Saint Patrick and Brigid, the pillars of the Irish people, there was so great a friendship of charity that they had but one heart and one mind. Through him and through her, Christ performed many great works."

Of all of the stories about



Venerated: Breda O'Farrell performs as Brigid at 'the City' of Shrone, an ancient sacred site in Rathmore, Co Kerry. PHOTO: VALERIE O'SULLIVAN



Dig-out: Simon McDermott, Diarmuid O'Mahony, Abbie Maguire Flynn and Grace Roche at the Brigid 1500 Tree Planting Day ceremony at Roberstown National School in Co Kildare

her life, two miracles attributed to Saint Brigid have endured most: the first is the Saint Brigid's cross, little replicas of which are likely being made its way home in many school-bags this week.

The most popular story behind the cross is that Brigid was tending to a dying chieftain, consoling him in his final hours. To ease the man's restlessness, Brigid started to weave a cross together from rushes on the floor while telling the story of Jesus Christ and the cross. The story goes that the chieftain was so soothed by the story that he asked to be baptised moments before his death.

The cross has since become an emblem of healing, and a modern straw version has been hung in many

Irish homes in the hope of protecting them from evil, fire and hunger.

The second is the story of Saint Brigid's cloak. When Brigid was looking for land on which to build her Kildare monastery, she is said to have asked the king of Leinster to give her her desired site. The king declined, and Brigid prayed his heart would soften.

The second time she asked, she told the king that she would only need as much land as her cloak would cover.

Confident and unthreatened by Brigid's tiny cloak, the king agreed. Unfortunately for him, the four corners of her cloak miraculously grew and covered many acres.

Astounded and humbled, the king vowed to financially support Brigid's monastery

and he is also said to have converted to Christianity.

Over time, Saint Brigid has been blended and moulded with the fable of Brigid, the Celtic deity. So much so that the feast day of the Christian saint and the goddess are one and the same: February 1. The date was originally the pagan festival of Imbolc, a celebration of the beginning of spring.

The melding of Christian Saint Brigid with the pagan goddess Brigid has led to some claims that the church stole the story of the original goddess and rewrote it as a tale about a Christian woman.

Others believe that Brigid, the real historical figure, simply had her own story confused with that of the goddess.