

Festivals Part 3 - Imbolg

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Imbolg:

Imbolg is the Festival of Bride. She is known all across Gaelic lands. She is known by several variations of the same name, Brid, Bride, Brigid, Brigidh, etc, being amongst those most widely known. The differences are the result of there being different dialects of the same language. She is one of the most loved of the Gods. The date of Her festival is February 2nd, in the common era

A favorite author of Gaels of all ages is Fiona MacLeod. His writings are hard to come by today. However, if ever there was a person who was skilled with word, and evoked emotion through his skill, it was he. Surely anyone can see in his writings, the love he held for Bride. It is fitting that he held Her in such esteeme for he was much gifted by Her. The following are words from various of his works. We see in them not only the importance She has held to our People, but also her ancient connection to February:

" I have heard many tales of Bride, one of the most widely loved and revered beings of the ancient Gaelic pantheon. They are of the Isles, and may be heard in some of the 'Sgeulachdan Gaidhealach', or Gaelic tales still told among the seafaring and hill folk. 'Brigidh bhoidheach'. Bride the beautiful, is not infrequent in songs and seasonal hymns, for when her signals are seen along the grey beaches, on the sandy machairs, by the meadow path, the glen track, the white shore road, the islanders know that the new year is disclosed at last, that food, warmth and gladness are coming out of the south. Everywhere she is honoured at this time. Am fheill Bride was until recently a festival of joy throughout the west, from the Highland Line to the last weedy shores of Barra or the Lews; in the isles and in the remote Highlands, it still is."

"It is an old tale, this association of Bride with February. It goes further back than the days of the monkish chroniclers who first attempted to put the disguise of verbal Christian raiment on this fair woman. It is a tale that refers to one to whom the women of the Gael went with offerings and prayers and to one whom the seannachaidh speaks of when he tells of the oath taken by Brigid of the Flame. They refer to one whom the druids held in honour as a torch bearer of the eternal light, a Daughter of the Morning, who held sunrise in one hand as a little yellow flame, and in the other held the red flower of fire without which men would be as the beasts who live in caves and holes, or as the dark Fomor who have their habitations in cloud and wind and wilderness. They refer to one whom the bards and singers revered as mistress of their craft, she whose breath was a flame and that flame song; she whose secret name was fire and whose inmost soul was radiant air, she therefore who was the divine impersonation of the divine thing she stood for, poetry."

"She herself and no other, is she, that ancient goddess whom our ancestors saw lighting the torches of sunrise on the brows of hills, or thrusting the quenchless flame above the horizons of the sea; whom the druids hailed with hymns at the turn of the year, when, in the season we call February, the firstcomers of

the advancing spring are to be seen on the grey land or on the grey wave or by the grey shores; whom every poet, from the humblest wandering singer to Oisín of the Songs, from Oisín of the Songs to Angus Óg on the rainbow or to Midir of the Underworld, blessed because of the flame she put in the heart of poets as well as the red life she put in the flame that springs from wood and peat. None forgot that she was the daughter of the ancient God of the Earth, but greater than he, because in him there was but earth and water, whereas in her veins ran the elements of air and fire. And how could one forget that at any time she has but to bend above the dead, and her breath would quicken, and a pulse would come back into the still heart, and what was dust would arise and be once more glad. Yes, the Fair Woman of February is still loved, still revered."

On the eve of this holiday, Bride was invited into the house. Candles were blessed. Auguries were often taken at this time. This was the season when lambs were born. From Samhain to Imbolc was considered the winter. As there were few daylight hours during the season of cold to work outdoors, the family spent their time round the fire which was the source of their light, heat and warming food. The hearth was also the gathering point for the *seannachaidh* (story teller) who, with the fire of inspiration, would tell the stories of the People. The sacred fire is strongly associated with Bride. Her name translates as "fiery arrow". One of her aspects is the Goddess of poetry and it is She who is the 'flame of inspiration'. Another term given to Bride is 'the flame in the heart of all women'. This relates to the absolute authority of the woman in the house. Imbolc was a fire festival only for the household.

During Imbolg, particular attention was paid to the hearth fire. Throughout the day it was kept specially fueled with specific woods, to welcome Her arrival. Great care was taken over the smooching of the fire on that night when a rowan rod was placed in the heart of the fire. The following morning, before it was opened up, the fire was checked for the signs of a blessing from Her. The mark in question was a shape that looked like the foot print of a goose or swan. If the mark was found, there was an extremely fortunate time ahead for the family. The associations between Bride and the goose or swan is also found in some of the incantations in the *Carmina Gadelica* by Alexander Carmichael. **The Language of the Goddess** by Dr. Maria Gimbutas goes a long way toward helping understand the meaning of the *Bird Foot Goddess*.

A variation of this custom is found in Scotland on the eve of *St. Brigids Day*. Here the women of the house would dress up a sheaf of oats in womens clothes. They would lay the dollie in a basket called "Brigids bed" next to a phallic club. Then they would call out three times, "Brid is come, Brid is welcome!" and leave candles burning on the alter of the home all night long. The next morning they looked for an impression of the club in the ashes of the hearth. Like in the other version of this, if the sign was there then they knew that the year would be a prosperous and fruitful one. A similar custom was also found on the Isle of Man and was called *Laa'l Breeshey*.

It is still common Ireland, to find people making *St. Brigids Crosses* of rush or straw. This is thought to be, "...derived from a pre-Christian ceremony connected with the preparation of seed grain for growing in the Spring" (*The Irish Times*, February 1, 1977). It is part of an ancient custom called *La/ Fhe/ile Brid*. It starts with the collection of rushes. They are gathered and at midnight the person designated to bring the rushes covers their head, then brings them to the door and knocks. The *Bean an Tighe* (woman of the house) sends someone to answer the door. When the bearer of the rushes enters the *Bean an Tighe* says to them, "Fa/ilte leat a Bhri/d" ("Welcome, Brrigit"). In the modern era, the person entering replies, "Beannacht De/ ar daoine an tighe seo" ("God bless the people of this house"). This however can be easily back engineered. The people of the house then commence to making the crosses in the shape of the equal armed "Celtic Cross", which we know to be a solar sign. Since the Sun to the ancient Gaels and other Celts was feminine (The light was masculine), we can show that the solar sign of these rush crosses

were a sign of **Bride** Herself. Whatever rushes aren't used are buried. After the rushes were made, the family feasted. On Imbolg day itself, the crosses made the previous year are burned and the new ones put up in the house and other places that are held by the family. They must be burned, and not disposed of in a haphazard or otherwise profane manner.

It is still also common to find wells assigned to Her. As with the other festival days, it is common to find bits of cloth or whole articles of clothing attached to trees near to them after this festival. A common piece of weather lore from the Gaelic lands holds that clear weather on Imbolg portends more winter, while inclement weather shows that winter is over. All told this is a festival when the clann or family came together in their hearth for the feast. This festival is a festival for the hearth.

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