



# Two Lives of St. Brigid

A new book on Ireland's most famous female brings together the best of both worlds. Celtic Life International correspondent Candice Sage tells us more.



Phillip Freeman

**H**alfway between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal Equinox, Imbolc (pronounced im-YOLK) is the pagan celebration of the first day of Spring, when the days get longer, and seeds start to germinate in the ground. Imbolc means ‘in the belly’ and is dedicated to the pan-European Tri-Goddess Brigid, master of healing, poetry, and the smithy (fire).

In 2023, Ireland declared February 1 to be Saint Brigid’s Day - Lá Fhéile Bríde - a new national holiday celebrating Eire’s best known female saint. Also, 2024 marks the 1,500th anniversary of St. Brigid’s death. It is a fitting time, then, for the publication of the *Two Lives of Saint Brigid*, a new book by Dr. Phillip Freeman.

Freeman is the Fletcher Jones Chair of Western Culture at Pepperdine University in California. He was previously a professor of classics at Luther College and Washington University, and Christianity in early medieval Ireland is the subject of many of his works. The 62-year-old’s family heritage is from Ireland and England.

He began to write books in 2000; a biography of Saint Patrick was a first attempt at bridging the gap between academia and a book that everyday readers might enjoy. He writes non-fiction because he “loves teaching and this is a way to teach to a wider audience.” A good non-fiction book, he adds, is one that can accurately tell someone’s story but also draws non-specialist audiences. “It needs to be academically solid but also appealing to readers who want to learn about the subject.”

Freeman immerses himself into the life of the person under study, and *Two Lives* took 10 years to realize. Similar projects usually take one to two years. He had to communicate in French and German while contacting European libraries for access to manuscripts. In all, he reviewed over 80 manuscripts, narrowing down his list of sources to about a dozen, later working on the linguistics of translation from Latin.

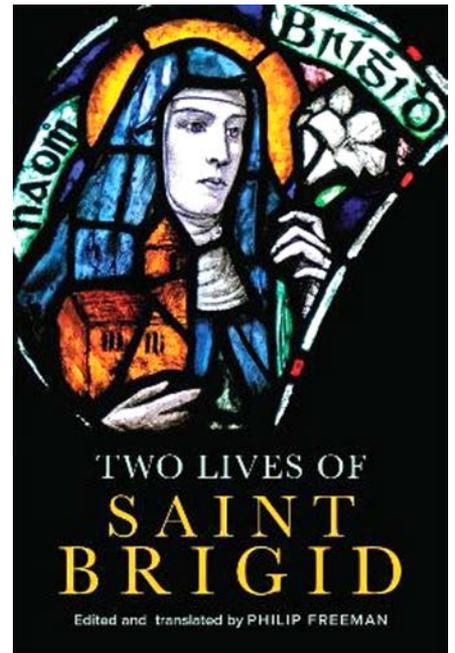
The most challenging aspect of the writing process was working with medieval manuscripts, editing them into finished translated products. He learned from other scholars in Ireland, Canada, and the U.S. who had previously worked on St. Brigid’s manuscripts.

“***St. Brigid was born in the middle of the 5th century and established a monastery at Kildare that served early Christian women as well as men.***”

Freeman’s book is based on two sources provided in the original Latin and translated into English, both written at least one hundred years after St. Brigid’s death. The first manuscript is the *Life of Saint Brigid* by Cogitosus, a devout monk from Kildare. The second is an anonymous manuscript called *Vita Prima* (VP) that speaks to Brigid’s accomplishments across Ireland.

While both contain over 30 similar stories about the miracles St. Brigid performed, VP is both much longer (covering 129 miracles versus 32 in *Cogitosus*) and richer. Freeman notes that the earliest manuscripts about the life of St. Brigid are not from Ireland, but rather from Britain and/or continental Europe. He explains that in the 4th and 5th centuries, Irish monks left and took their manuscripts with them to Britain and the mainland. Most of the sources are now from England, France, Austria, and Italy. Earlier manuscripts may have been influenced by the cultural presence of Brigid as a pan-European tri-goddess, Freeman writes.

“It was natural and advantageous for Christians establishing a new faith in Ireland to draw on the traditions and stories of native religion as much as possible to ease the

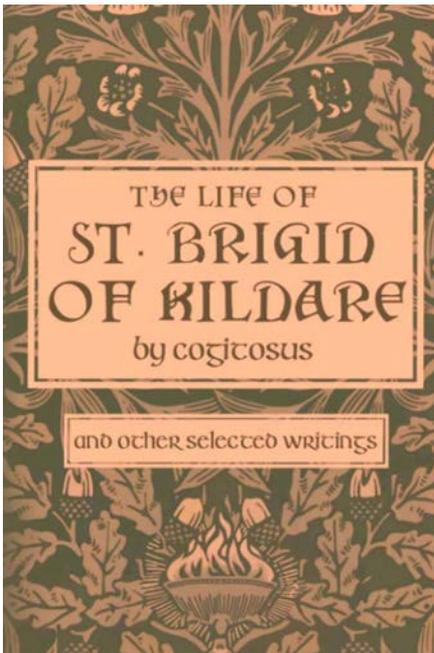


transition of new converts. But whether or not such syncretism was deliberate, some aspects of the goddess Brigid are probably present in the stories of the saint.”

In conversation, he continues, “the historic Brigid was a remarkable, brilliant, and determined woman, living in a world that was violent and dominated by men. She is like Mother Teresa, living in very adverse situations and making things work. Her determination is notable, even forceful in *Vita Prima*.”

In his new book, however, he cautions against “efforts to present St. Brigid as a thinly-veiled pagan figure from an earlier time - a kind of baptized goddess,” if only as the historical evidence from the earliest stories presents Brigid as an orthodox Christian devoted to good works as a means to serve God and spread the Gospel. He credits Brigid as overcoming many obstacles, especially as a child. Hers is the hero’s journey, “a character-building exercise. She would need it for butting heads with Kings and chieftains and priests.”

There are several other significant differences between the accounts by *Cogitosus* and VP. Both Brigid’s birth, and the identity of her parents, have long been topics of interest and debate for both Christians and Pagans, who celebrate Brigid as being the daughter of a druid. *Cogitosus* writes she “was born to Christian and noble parents from the good and most wise clan of Echtech in Ireland.” In VP, Brigid is the bastard daughter of a noble-



man named Dubthatch and his beautiful slave Broicsech. A druid foretells of the unborn child being “extraordinary.” However, the wife of Dubthatch and her family urge her husband to send the slave and her unborn child away. He sells his slave to a poet (but not the unborn child), who eventually gives the pregnant Broicsech into the care of a druid who came looking for the unborn child to protect her. In VP, Brigid’s foster father is a druid, not her biological father Dubthatch!

Along with her interesting birth story in VP, there are accounts of the presence of fire above the house where her pregnant slave mother resided, and fire-related miracles with the child Brigid. Freeman notes that fire could have been a reflection of pre-Christian stories, but fire and water were also important elements of Christianity too. It is not definite that these accounts are a case of preserving the pagan Brigid in Christian stories.

Another difference in the texts is the emphasis Cogitosus places on the importance of Brigid’s monastery in Kildare that she founded with the hermit holy man Conleth. VP is likely written by authors from the North, given the numerous references to St. Patrick’s monastery at Armagh (today’s seat of the Anglican Archbishop). Freeman elaborates that Cogitosus was a monk from the south who wanted to “elevate Kildare in the turf war with St. Patrick’s monastery in Armagh.”

“As a holy woman, Brigid stood out in a world mostly reserved for men.”

In both accounts, when Brigid sets out to work across the lands, she independently commandeers a horse-drawn chariot. Later in VP, after concerns for her safety on the road, St. Patrick orders a priest charioteer be present at all times with Brigid. Freeman confirms there “is sexism at play, the subordination of women in Christianity. Brigid was capable of handling it herself, but a man was inserted into the process.”

St. Brigid is sometimes touted as an inspiration for the modern LGBTQ+ movement. In both texts Brigid does not want to be married and willingly pledges herself to the Veil (becoming a nun or bride of Christ). Cogitosus states “this girl chosen by God and self-restrained behaviour for her age and full of modesty, was ripening into better things (than getting married).” In VP, Brigid’s female pupil Darlughdash was “in the same bed with Holy Brigid”. Though some believe Brigid may have been a lesbian, Freeman countered, “There is no clear evidence of this. Certainly, there was more empowerment and agency for women as nuns rather than being married. It was their only way out of a system that would see them under the thumb of a man. Who knows?”

Brigid’s monastery was governed and attended equally by women and men. She was a leader of importance to her congregation and beyond. Cogitosus writes of it as “surpassing all of the monasteries of the Irish paruchia spread through all of the land” and that “she herself was a living and most blessed member of the highest ruler, she performed everything she desired with power.” Furthermore, in VP, Brigid “sends out men to bring her news of the Masses and rules” - which speaks to connections as far and wide as Rome. When asked if Brigid’s influence and power seemed peculiar given the patriarchal nature of Christian religion, Freeman stated that “Brigid’s situation is not unparalleled in Europe as there are other abbesses, but it is unusual, especially because Conleth is presented as a junior partner in the monas-

tery.” Brigid needed a man to give the sacraments, but “it’s Brigid who wears the pants in the monastery.” Brigid also strikes out against those who do not repent “like an Old Testament prophet. She has a bite as well as kindness.”

St. Brigid remains relevant today to Irish Feminists in their fight for women’s rights, including both the Marriage Equality and Repeal that legalized same-sex rights to marriage, and the 8th Amendment Referendums on the legal right to abortion. Freeman concurs: “The amazing event is that there is now a National Holiday in Ireland celebrating Brigid. The women of Ireland spoke up that they need someone to model the feminine, which is strong and determined.”

As such, St. Brigid is seen by modern Irish Feminists as pro-choice. When asked if there was anything in the manuscripts that would support this, Freeman answered:

“Yes, no matter the how, the accounts are of ‘the first abortion in Ireland.’ A young nun is pregnant, a woman who has left her family and will be kicked out of the church and left to starve or become a prostitute. Then woman repents and Brigid solves the problem. It is a fantastic story of compassion, not focused on the rules, but rather on serving women. In many of Brigid’s miracles she is serving women, fighting against their oppression.”

That could be an inspiration in the United States, given the situation with Roe vs. Wade being overturned and women’s reproductive rights and autonomy significantly threatened. Freeman notes that there are churches of St. Brigid in the U.S. She is “coming into her time and the stories will be better known” with this book. It is a first of its kind, making St. Brigid’s stories available in easily accessible texts.

St. Brigid continues to be relevant to modern Celtic societies. Freeman hopes that his new book will help “St. Brigid to take her rightful place along with St. Patrick, representing half of the world’s population, which are women, emphasizing the feminine, and the feminine that isn’t meek and mild, but bold and smart.”