

A book about Brigid and bears

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE subject of my last article, the poet Domhnall Ruadh Phàislig, left us a wonderful ditty on a book he bought in MacLarens' in Argyle St called 'Bàrdachd nam Beann'.

*Am feasgar a cheannaich mi
'Bàrdachd nam Beann',
Siud feasgar a mheall mo thuras mi.*

("The evening I bought / 'Bàrdachd nam Beann', / That's an evening my footsteps misled me.")

*Gum b' fhearr dhomh mo chrùn
A chosg anns a' bhùth
Air fear nach robh ùr no urad ris.*

("I'd have been better to spend / My five bob in the shop / On something not new nor as big as it.")

That is the kind of disappointment I feel about Professor Séamas Ó Catháin's book 'The Festival of Brigit'. I had been looking forward very much to telling you — and telling you on St Brigid's Day itself, if you are one of the lucky ones who get your 'Free Press' on Thursday — that here was the book that does for the spring quarterday what Máire MacNeill's magisterial 'The Festival of Lughnasa' did for the autumn quarterday. In other words, an elegantly-written, systematic and well-presented account of the people's names, rituals and beliefs concerning the festival from earliest times in all parts of Ireland, firmly anchored in published sources and in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, including much detail on such things as ritual meals, hilltop gatherings, fairs, and pilgrimages to wells and other places, followed by chapters summarising what evidence we have for the survival of the festival in Scotland, the rest of the United Kingdom, and the continent of Europe.

The disappointment is particularly great because Ó Catháin is Archivist of the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin (the successor to the Irish Folklore Commission), as well as being Dean of the Faculty of Celtic Studies there, and author of a couple of delightfully unassuming little books which I have enjoyed quoting from in these articles now and then — 'Irish Life and Lore' and 'The Bedside Book of Irish Folklore'.

What in particular did I expect the book to tell me about St Brigid? Well, first of all I think we needed it to collect every scrap of information about the pagan name of the spring quarterday, *oimelg* or *imbolg*. The traditional interpretation of this as 'the time when ewes come into milk' always seemed highly suspect to me as Brigid is so strongly associated with cattle and not with sheep. Following a path indicated by the Irish scholar Tomás Ó Máille I had suggested that it was just a technical calendar term meaning 'around a gap', hence an intercalary period. Ó Catháin follows an American scholar, Eric Hamp, in explaining it as the time of coming into milk, not of sheep, but of animals in general and cows in particular. This seems fine but I think Ó Máille deserves a mention, and I think there should have been a systematic presentation of all references to *oimelg/imbolg* in early Irish literature.

Secondly, I think we needed a survey of what classical sources and archaeology can tell us about Brigid as a pagan goddess, looking out for her in the guise of Minerva, say, or of Medusa. In particular we needed an investigation of the tribe the Romans called the 'Brigantes' since, judging from their name, they probably worshipped Brigid above all other gods and followed her in war as their spiritual leader. Ó Catháin mentions this only on the first page of his introduction, referring to the 'Brigantiae' as "one of the great Celtic tribes of Ireland, Britain and mainland Europe" although they are usually associated with northern England only.

Thirdly, it would have been very helpful to bring together translations of the Lives of St Brigid of Kildare and other medieval accounts of her. The Lives are little more than a collection of folklore and the skills of the folklorist are needed to analyse them.

Fourthly, it would have been good to know how far the archaeological record of the Kildare area supports these accounts. Giraldus Cambrensis tells us that St Brigid and her nuns took turns guarding a sacred fire. This burned perpetually, he said, and was surrounded by a fence within which no male might enter. According to the late Kathleen Hughes' 'Early Christian Ireland' (1972) a pre-Christian ritual site has been excavated five miles from Kildare; traces were found of a small timber structure with a heavily burned floor, and outside it a circle of huge post-holes for some wooden 'henge' monument, the whole surrounded by two concentric wooden palisades. What is the latest on this? We are not told.

And fifthly, we needed a survey of the cult of St Brigid in Europe. Rivers like the Brent in England (and hence the London borough) appear to bear her name. It is surely not for nothing that her name survives, not just in every Bríd and Bridie and Breda in Ireland, and in Bridgetts and 'old biddies' throughout the English-speaking world, but in every Kilbride and Kirkbride in Scotland, every bridewell in England, every Brigitte in France and Germany, every Birgit and Birgitte and Britt and Gitte in Scandinavia, every Pirjo and Pirkko in

Finland, and in St Byrgita's where Lech Wa:ensa attends mass in Gdansk. On the face of it there seems to have been a deeply-rooted cult of the saint throughout western and northern Europe which Professor Ó Catháin is well placed to investigate, as he betrays not only a great enthusiasm for philology but also an

extensive knowledge of Scandinavian languages and folklore — with a clutch of awards to match, being for example a Knight of the Order of the Lion of Finland.

He tells us nothing of St Brigid in Scandinavia, even though Nordic folklore and mythology take up nearly half of this book! Instead he talks about bears.

His theory is this. The Festival of Brigid marks the beginning of growth. It celebrates lactation, insemination and parturition of man and beast. Brigid's role is as midwife. (That is all in Chapter 1.)

Then, there are eight words for 'bear' in Irish even though the bear disappeared from Ireland 4,000 years ago. Names for the wolf, bear and bee enjoy a common distribution within the Celtic, Germanic and Balto-Slavonic languages. The bear is central to aspects of Nordic wedding custom and ceremonial. The Gaelic word *dronn* or 'rump' was used here ceremonially at weddings of a piece of mutton which obliged its recipient to say a verse (see Dwelly). A similar custom can be traced in Ireland and also in the Faeroes, where the Gaelic word was borrowed as *drunnur*. The bear's tail features in Sámi (Lapp) bear feasts in a manner suggestive of fertility ritual. The bear is beaten with rods after its death. He therefore interprets a St Brigid's Day ritual described in 'Carmina Gadelica', in which Mrs MacLeod of Ullinish took off her stocking, put a peat into it and pounded it with the tongs, as the bear being killed on coming out of hibernation on that day. References to snakes in St Brigid's day rhymes in Scottish Gaelic, he says, are really references to bears. Spring in Scandinavia was greeted by the farmer hopping round his farmhouse wearing only one leg of his long johns while the other dragged behind, while in Ireland the husband sought admission to his own house in Brigid's name, and in Scotland the women took charge of indoor rituals notable for their dignity. All that is in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 considers the paraphernalia that seem to be held in common by Brigid (or her fellow-saints Latiaran and Gobnait) and Nordic fertility cults — fire rituals, bears, hounds, bees, oystercatchers, cranes, shellfish, barnacles, rocks, stones, oak-trees and so on. Whether you agree with the arguments or not, this chapter is full of interesting information.

Chapter 4 is free-standing. It focuses on an international tale-type involving a girl at a shieling, a plan by a gang of twelve robbers to kidnap her, and how she sends a coded SOS message. Ó Catháin concludes that (a) Irish versions of the tale may have influenced Scandinavian ones; (b) the girl may be Brigid; (c) the twelve men are a bear, on the grounds that the bear in Scandinavia is said to have the strength of twelve men; (d) the message is not an SOS but a charm. It has to be admitted that (c) is a good way of explaining why the twelve men seem too stupid to intercept or understand the message, but if so, conclusion (d) seems redundant.

Scotland is very much the potential 'missing link' in this chapter — for coded signals one thinks of pipe tunes like *A Cholla mo rùin, seachain an dùn*, while Ó Catháin seems not to know that we have elements of the tale here too. A story attached to the shieling song *Gur e m' anam 's m' eudail* tells how Rachel MacGregor of Dunan is abducted by Raghnaid na Ceapaich and his 'tail' of twelve men. She refuses to marry him, and he offers her the choice of all present, remarking, *Am boireannach nach toir a roghainn á triùir, bheir i a deòin às a dhà dheug*. "The woman who won't take her choice from three will have her desire from twelve." She picks Cameron of Blàr a' Chaorthainn and marries him willingly.

Finally, in Chapter 5 a structure of comparisons is built between Brigid, as one of three holy women of Teelin in Donegal, and the three Fates of Nordic mythology. Topics include the 'inbetweenness' of birth rituals, connections between milk and the hallucinogenic mushrooms (fly-agaric) of shamanistic religions, and the beliefs that a corpse can be restored to life by arranging its bones, and that an animal such as a bear can have a soul.

All in all, the bear idea is taken much too far. The issue is not how long bears survived in Gaelic-speaking territories. Thomas Pennant, at p. 197 of his 'Tour' of 1769, allows bears in Scotland to AD 1057 at least; that's as good an opinion as any, and Ó Catháin seems to be aware of it. The point is, is there any evidence connecting Brigid with bears that will stand up in court? I think not. If there are so many words for 'bear' in Irish, why do none of them feature in the rituals? And if we examine some of the rhymes and sayings used by Ó Catháin to make his connections, I believe that they turn out not to mean what he says they mean. Here are some examples.

Ó Catháin talks of colour-coding in sayings like *Oíche Fhéile Bríde Bric, Lá Fhéile Bríde Bán*: 'The Eve of Brigid's Feast, Speckled — The Day of Brigid's Feast, White'. We, too, have *Latha Fhéill Brighde Bàine*. Ó Catháin thinks these colours refer to fly-agaric. It is really much more likely that they refer to the worsening weather, as many other sayings predict snowstorms on St Brigid's Day.

He quotes Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gadelica':

*La Bride nam brig ban
Thig an rígen ran a tom,
Cha bhoin mise ris an rígen ran,
'S cha bhoin an rígen ran rium.*

Carmichael makes of this: "On the day of Bride of the white hills / The noble queen will come from the knoll, / I will not molest the noble queen, / Nor will the noble queen molest me," and adds: "These lines would seem to point to serpent-worship." Ó Catháin is rightly unhappy with 'noble' for *ran*, but tries to link it with *ràn* 'a cry', which won't wash grammatically. He also wants to turn the perfectly ordinary word *tom* 'a knoll' into a beehive, so that the *rígen* can then be the queen bee, no serpent at all. Unfortunately for him, a Scottish Gaelic speaker doesn't have to roll the words *rígen ran* (rhyming with *brìg bàn*) around his tongue for long before coming up with the answer — *rìghinn ghrànd*, 'an ugly snake'.

Of course this underlines the point I have been making on this page recently, that 'Carmina Gadelica' needs re-editing. Here's another rhyme quoted by Ó Catháin from the same book.

*La Fheill Bride brisgeanach
Thig an ceann de'n chaiteanach,
Thig nighean Iomhair as an tom,
Le fonn feadalaich.*

Carmichael made of this: "On the Feast Day of Bride, / The head will come off the 'caiteanach,' / The daughter of Ivor will come from the knoll / With tuneful whistling." This is well-trodden 'Quern-Dust Calendar' ground, except for *caiteanach*. Now *caitean* is the nap on cloth, so *caiteanach* could mean hairy or shaggy, and our man never misses an opportunity — *caiteanach*, he says, "may well represent yet another name for the bear".

I'm grateful to him for forcing me to think about it, and what I think is this. We know that Carmichael liked to elevate the tone of his informants' speech and exclude words borrowed from English. The word seems to rhyme with *brisgeanach*. So I think the line is actually *Thig an ceann den chidseanach*, 'The roof comes off the kitchen'. (It's in Dwelly as *cisteanach*.) Why? Those snowstorms again. And that, if you ask me, is the *fonn feadalaich* of the fourth line. The 'whistling tune' is the wind that can be expected to accompany the snake's emergence from hibernation, and not, as Ó Catháin would have us believe, the favourite music of the bear.

It is surprising that a reputable Irish folklorist should show so little appreciation of the preoccupations of country people at this time of year, and that he should be willing to stretch his arguments so thin that they snap.

- Séamas Ó Catháin, 'The Festival of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman'. xii + 194 pp. DBA Publications, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. £17.50 paperback, £22.50 hardback.

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