DEISEAL & WITHERSHINS:
EXPLORING THE CELTIC SUNWISE WAY

BY

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

When I thought this document would never come together, my advisor, Linda McKinnish Bridges would say the right things to encourage me. She has been an amazing mentor and friend on this journey. It was she who helped me conceive the metaphor that would aid me in birthing this “Celtic baby,” as she calls it. In one of our meetings she asked how I felt my material was coalescing—to which I responded that the connections seemed loose, at best. Linda suggested that I was putting a lot of things into my cauldron and needed to let the reader know why I was adding them; they all needed to begin to work together. As I sat sketching a cauldron, I knew that my stew was just not yet properly seasoned. I had to figure out why the carrots? Why the potatoes? Why the old boot and the lump of gold? A good stew must start with good ingredients that form a rich broth and yet maintain their own integrity and texture. There must also be elements of surprise and hints of flavors that make the reader want to savor each bite.

Stews improve as they simmer. Recipes evolve. Ingredients morph. This, too is part of the aptness of this metaphor for the work at hand for it involves old stories and ideas tossed together in a new way and, even for the writer, suggests many future possibilities.

So, warm thanks go to Linda McKinnish Bridges, my advisor; Stephen Whittington, a dear friend and scholar who generously agreed to chair my thesis
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Finally, I must thank the Richter Grant committee for sending me to Ireland to do first hand research on Ireland's holy wells in July of 2009 and my husband W. Cameron Dennis who not only assisted me with photographic documentation but drove a stick shift auto all over Ireland on the left hand side of the road.
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Abstract

This thesis explores the Celtic concept of performing ritual in proper orientation to the sun; identifies vestiges of sun veneration from Irish mythology and folklore, including lore associated with the holy wells; examines aspects of Saint Brigit, mythologically linked to the sun and considered by some to be a sun goddess prior to her incarnation as a Christian saint; considers connections between sun orientation, kingship rituals and sovereignty; analyzes connections between sun orientation, withershins, and attitudes toward women and witchcraft in Celtic areas; looks at healing traditions, related to sun orientation and cites folkloric evidence that some of these practices traveled across the Atlantic to the Southern and Appalachian regions of the United States.
Introduction

The journey leading to this project has a distinct starting point—a fascination with Ireland's holy wells and their traditions. Any interesting topic will take one to surprising places, and this one is no exception, for what I began to become aware of is that when one encounters a holy well, the experience is truly about one's place in the universe—a sacred place, a sacred moment, addressed in a sacred and ritualized way. I discovered that ancient practices relating to sun veneration are integral to the mysteries of Ireland's holy wells, and, further, to traditions related to Ireland's mythology, folklore, history, and healing practices. And, though not limited to Irish influence, healing practices that refer to sun orientation, made their way to this side of the Atlantic.

My travels to Ireland took place during the summers of 2008 and 2009, the second time with a Richter Grant from Wake Forest University. I was fortunate in many ways, for I was able to meet Irish families and interview Irish people about the topics that interested me. On both trips I was able to spend time on the remote island of Inis Mór, and though I only discovered the holy wells in 2008, in 2009 I returned with the intention to research them, and was able to locate and visit fourteen different wells and several sites associated with healing. By then I also knew that the wells, though still in use in Ireland, had once functioned more widely in this part of the world, including Scotland, both Lowland and Highland, from whence many people migrated to the Appalachian region of North America,
via Ulster, in the eighteenth century.

The Scotch-Irish and English predominantly populated the Appalachian region.\(^1\) Anyone wishing to examine how vestiges of these traditions may have passed to the New World must compare and link the holy well traditions in Ireland and Scotland—difficult at best since the Scottish wells were by many accounts destroyed during the country’s sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. All holy wells, however, were not destroyed, and in fact, they are referenced numerous times in the Scottish Witch Trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Goodare).

While there is always danger of conflating what one knows about one culture with that of another (and nowhere is that notion fraught with more peril than in dealing with the complex history of Ireland), this line of questioning opens doors to the past that are worthy of investigation. What is revealed are commonalities to practices associated with holy wells that can be generally defined and traced to more distant sources. Among these are the concepts of *deiseal* and *tuathíul* in Irish and the Scottish concept of *withershins* or *widdershins*, the latter of German derivation. All of these delightful sounding words relate to the direction of the sun’s perceived movement and whether or not one is moving in harmony.

\(^1\) There is also a strong German influence in Appalachia, though David Hackett Fischer says that, “... altogether, the Germans made up only about 5 percent of the population in North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky in 1790” (635).
with it. My research has led me to believe that there is another layer of meaning embedded in human directional movement in relation to that of the sun; I would suggest that in the ancient world ritual actions and how they were performed in relation to the sun reveal much about dominant power structures—political, sexual, and religious. To some extent directional movement associated with the sun may be a function of human perception, but it may also have once been used as a tool to set up an oppositional structure between Christianity and paganism, the new and the old, the masculine and the feminine.

This thesis explores the Celtic notion of performing ritual in proper relation to the sun. Chapter one discusses how sun orientation may have been understood in the Attic Greek and Roman worlds in contrast to how it was understood in the Gallic world. Chapter two identifies vestiges of sun veneration from Irish mythology and folklore, in particular the figures of *Lugh* and *Balor*. Chapter three focuses on holy wells and sacred sites associated with *Lughnasa*, one of Ireland’s traditional agricultural festivals, associated with the sun god *Lugh*. Chapter four continues the discussion with an analysis of Saint Brigit, mythologically linked to the sun and considered by some to be a sun goddess prior to her incarnation as a Christian saint. Chapter five discusses Brigit’s cross, a symbol found throughout Ireland, and its possible connection to sun symbolism. Chapter six introduces the *Cailleach Bhéarra*, a mythological Irish figure associated with sovereignty and kingship, and the *bean feasa*, the Irish wise woman healer or witch. Chapter
seven analyzes connections between sun orientation, the notion of moving 
*withershins*, and attitudes toward women and witchcraft. Chapter eight looks at 
healing traditions past and present, and how they have retained an association 
with sun orientation and chapter nine at folkloric healing practices in 
Appalachia and the American south that also reference the sun. Finally, chapter 
ten will address conclusions from this research.
Chapter 1

Sun Orientation in the Classical World

Looking back to the classical world we can quickly determine that by no means has the human relationship to the sun been universally understood. This lack of coherence seems to complicate how cultures relate to and communicate about one another. The first chapter of this thesis will examine how perception plays a role in understanding correct orientation to the sun and introduce the Celtic concept of sun orientation as reported by various folkloric sources in the early part of the twentieth century.

Religious rituals were developed in relationship to the sun's movement. “Right-hand turn,” or in Gaelic, deiseal, is sometimes used to describe the ritualized human action mimicking the sun's rotation. In 1879, Samuel Ferguson attempted to trace the practice of the right-hand turn in the classical world in a paper entitled “On the Ceremonial Turn, Called Desiul.” Ferguson cites several sources as evidence that the right-hand wise turn was indeed a religious practice. The work of Plautus is one example: “In one of his comedies, Phadromus says, “Which way to turn myself I know not.” Palinurus jestingly replies: - “If you worship the Gods, right hand-wise, I apprehend”(35)² Further evidence comes from Valerius Flaccus:³

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² The following note is included in Ferguson’s text: [Ph. “{Quo me vertam nescio.” Pa. “Si Deos salutes, dextroversum censeo.” (Curclio, I.i. 69.)}]
³ Another note from Ferguson’s text: (Aryon. VIII. 243).
Here, where this altar now receives thy vows,
Comes young Esonides and comes his spouse.
Together they approach, together pray;
Pollux advanced the nuptial torches' ray
And ritual water, while, in holy round,
Right-hand-ways they together tread the ground (358).

These two examples connect the right-hand turn to worship and matrimonial practices—both conceivably rituals of a religious nature. The question, however, that must be apprehended and that is to this day a matter of confusion would seem to be: Which way is the right-hand turn in the classical world?

Alice F. Braunlich elaborates on just how confusing this notion of right-hand wise and left-hand wise can be. Citing Frazier's *Golden Bough* as her reference, she says, “In Ireland and Scotland, *Deiseal* is defined as a movement from left to right, following the course of the sun”(246). Braunlich's notes also provide these insights from the scientific world:

Charles Darwin states in *The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants*, ed. 2, revised (New York, Appleton, 1876), p. 33: "A greater number of twiners revolve in a course opposed to that of the sun, or to the hands of a watch, than in the reversed course, and consequently, the majority, as is well known, ascend their supports from left to right."
In agreement with Darwin's terminology, D'Arcy W. Thompson, *Growth and Form* (Cambridge, University Press, 1917), p. 619, accepts the convention of calling a horn which "winds so that we follow it from base to apex in the direction of the hands of a watch" a "left-handed spiral" (246).

Conflating these ideas, one could reach the conclusion that point-of-view matters in interpreting the movement of growing plants, or human beings, in relation to the movement of the sun. What we can ascertain is that the movement, more natural to the growth of plants, is known as a left-handed spiral and also known as *deiseal*. This notion of doing things right-hand wise or sunwise was widespread in the ancient world, though seemingly interpreted in a way that allowed different groups to take precisely the opposite approach to ritual turns, albeit with similar intentions. The question of what it means to follow the sun, however, becomes more and more convoluted.

For example, continuing her investigation into classical sources, Braunlich addresses the notion of the right-hand turn in terms of its social and celestial ramifications in Attic Greek. She deduces from studying Aristotle's *De Caelo*\(^4\) that a right-hand turn in his cosmology is a counterclockwise turn. Taking a further cue from a passage in Plato's *Republic*, she speculates that a right hand turn of

\(^4\) *De Caelo (On the Heavens)* is Aristotle's cosmological treatise that includes such topics as the movement of heavenly bodies. This work is publicly accessible on-line through the University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
the spindle would, in fact, be a counterclockwise turn—despite testimony from one hand-spinner, Mary Schenk Woolman, to the contrary (252). In this example, however, Braunlich demonstrates how open to interpretation the notion of the right-hand turn may be, acknowledging as she does the correlations of the right with goodness and social stature and the left with bad and lesser rank. She concludes that the turn to the “right” in the Attic Greek is indeed counterclockwise, rather than clockwise as would be assumed in Celtic cultures (253-255).

To confuse the issue further, Samuel Ferguson gives this example: The apparent reversal of motion, according to the side from which the moving object is regarded, has been a source of seeming contradictions. In a passage from Pliny's twenty-eighth book of *Natural History* (c.5) a statement is made that has exacerbated this type of confusion: “In the act of adoration, we carry the right hand to the lips, and turn round our whole body, which the Gauls esteem it religiosius to do left-hand wise” (360). It seems as though the Greeks and later Romans understood the right-hand turn in a way that was quite different from how it was understood in Gallic cultures.

W. G. Wood-Martin, in his instructive description of the Western Islands of Scotland (from 1902), furnishes us with a great variety of instances of the practice of the ceremonial turn called *deiseal*, as observed by the natives of those remote
parts of the Old World. Having described the "dessil," which is performed by carrying fire in the right hand (whence he seems to think the word derived) round home steads, and round women before churching, and infants before baptism, Wood Martin provides this example, from Samuel Ferguson's *Western Islands*:

Some of the poorer sort of people in these islands retain the custom of performing these rounds sun-ways, about the persons of their benefactors, three times, when they bless them and wish good success to all their enterprizes. Some are very careful, when they set out to sea, that the boat be first rowed about sun-ways; and, if this be neglected, they are afraid their voyage may prove unfortunate (38).

James Frederick Metch Ffrench, writing in 1912 for the *Irish Church Quarterly*, discusses the importance of fire in Irish and Scottish ritual practice. He is witness to folk traditions that remained vibrant into the twentieth century. He stresses that in these practices it is not the fire that is worshipped but God represented in the fire (49). As regards the concept of *deiseal*, Ffrench has this to say:

A peasant always approaches a holy place from the north side, and he must move from east to west in imitation of the supposed motion of the sun. In the same way a corpse must be carried to its last resting-place a bride should approach her husband, an infant should be carried to the baptismal font, and the glass should be circulated at the festive board. Even now it is believed that every movement of persons or things should be with
the course of the sun. To move against the sun was productive of evil consequences, and was called withershins. Witches in their dances always went withershins.

To move "with the sun" is desiul, a Gaelic word akin to dextra. Withershins (contraryways) is German, Wilder Sinn. The adoption of a foreign form for the ill-omened words is curiously significant. The ancient dagobas of India and Ceylon were also walked around in the same way. The old Irish and Scotch custom is to make all movements desiul or sun-wise. To go withershins and to read prayers or the creed backwards were great evils, and pointed to connexion with the devil (51-52).

Here we get a glimpse of a topic of serious import—the malevolent nature of moving against the sun, and this is, of course, why it is so important to grasp just what it means to move in accordance with the sun. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scotland when vast numbers of women were tried as witches, a woman's life, in some measure, depended on it.

From James Ffrench we learn that deiseal is a movement “... from east to west in imitation of the supposed motion of the sun.” Approaching from the north, one may assume the rotation, again, to be clockwise. But, how did the ancient Irish people arrive at this notion of the sun-wise rotation? The sunrise on the horizon
in the northern hemisphere would appear to move gradually to the west for half of the year before changing the direction of its rotation. Aristotle, too, commented on this annual shift in the sun's perceived movement (Braunlich 254-55).

One possible key to the way the Irish came to equate deiseal with clockwise is the sun dial. When the sun follows its course, the shadow cast from a standing stone would naturally follow a clockwise course. The ancient standing stones and stone circles of the Celtic region are thought by some to have served as a type of celestial marker and as a way to visualize the passing of the days and seasons for the early inhabitants of these regions. While we cannot but speculate on the possible functions of these magnificent prehistoric sites, there are ancient standing stones and crosses in Ireland that are marked with radial designs seeming to designate the sun. In some cases, a stone will have a hole “drilled” through it, suitable for the insertion of a stick. There is a stone like this on the Island of Inis Mór and one that is well known called the Kilmalkedar Monastic Dial, c.800 A.D., in County Kerry in the Dingle Peninsula.

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5 See Harbison pp. 94-95 for a discussion of the archaeological veracity of this theory.
Figure 1: Secondary holed stone at Teampall Chiaráin on Inis Mór

I have had the opportunity to visit *Inis Mór* twice and meet several residents, both permanent and seasonal. The stone on *Inis Mór* is now used in marriage ceremonies that are conducted by Dara Molloy, also called Dara Ó Maoildhia, a Celtic Priest who lives on the island with his family. Dara, and wife Tess raise and educate their four children, grow organic vegetables, run an international internship program, write and publish, even as Dara travels around Ireland performing priestly duties. They are a typical Irish family. seemingly upholding the values of centuries past. However, there is nothing romantic about this lifestyle; it is hardscrabble, close to the earth, rooted in time and place.
Dara often conducts ceremonies and rituals at the *Teampall Chiaráin* complex. His *Pocket Guide to Árainn* tells us that the aforementioned sundial stone is not in its original position as the face is no longer turned to the south. It is used in modern times in marriage ceremonies and as a wishing stone. In particular, a silk scarf is drawn through the hole as a wish is made three times successively—often a wish for offspring (43).

These stones, known as “secondary holed stones,” are also discussed in Wayland Hand's article “Passing Through,” where he cites several examples of stones used for betrothal and oath swearing purposes—beyond those more often used in curative practices (391). Hand cites holed stones as important curative sites throughout Europe, particularly France and the British Isles, and also provides examples in India and North Africa. While the holed stone is apparently unknown in the Americas, other vestiges of the *passing through* motif are clearly articulated in North Carolina folklore. Wood-Martin also provides innumerable examples of secondary holed stones, often used for aphrodisiac purposes, in chapter 6 of his *Traces of the Elder Faiths, volume 2*.

Other than these holed stones, few could miss the significance of the Neolithic *Brú na Bóinne’s* orientation in the landscape. Here, at the winter solstice, under ideal conditions, the womb-like subterranean chamber is pierced—illuminated by a shaft of sunlight in a carefully planned celestial rite that may, in ancient times,
have been a powerful portent for the coming year. Brú na Bóinne or Newgrange is one of many passage tombs found in Ireland that is oriented to the sun.⁶ Though the most ancient Irish peoples left no written history, their archaeological relics point to sun veneration.⁷ Their mythology, recorded much later, may underscore the importance of the sun in their world view.

6 Radiocarbon dating has placed Newgrange at a date in calendar years of 3200 BC. See Michael O' Kelly 's Newgrange for a complete account of the excavation with wonderful photographs. 
7 In Pre-Christian Ireland, Peter Harbison speculates, “If the passage-tomb builders worshipped any single god, surely that god must have been the sun, whose rays shine annually into Newgrange tomb. It must be more than idle speculation to suggest that the rayed circle, found particularly at Loughcrew, might represent the sun, and the round shape of the passage-tomb might also reflect the orb of the sun”(81).
Chapter 2
Stepping into the Realm of Irish Myth

This second chapter will introduce background on Irish myth related to an interview with Dara Molloy (Ó Maoildhia) on Inis Mór during the summer of 2009. In this interview, we discussed Molloy's conception of Ireland's holy wells and the myth of the sun gods Lugh and Balor.

Ireland's myths come to us through the pens of twelfth-century Christian monks, whose moralizing motives are often thinly veiled. Despite the apparent biases, it requires little imagination to uncover imagery suggesting a rich oral tradition and earlier beliefs related to sun veneration, the agricultural year, fertility practices, and the timeless theme of life, death, and rebirth. One could say of the latter that this is a Christian concept, articulated in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but in the ancient Irish mythos, it is the sun's incessant journey that is represented. Elaborate patterns, have been developed in ritual recognition of this journey; these take place at holy wells, sacred mountains, and other sites across the Irish landscape.

In addition to the “evidence” drawn from myth pertaining to Ireland's ancient

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8 Proinsias MacCana says, “According to Caesar the Gaulish druids were both teachers and disciples of learning: distrusting the written word, they memorized vast quantities of poetry, and some continued their studies for as much as twenty years” (15).
9 Pattern is a term used for the practice of carrying out certain circumscribed rounds or rituals at a sacred site, at a sacred time, also known as Patron Day i.e. Patron).
past, this land's archaeological history takes us as far back in our speculations as c.7000-3700 BC (*Exhibition Floor Plan*). Further, there is recorded history that comes to us from the early centuries AD, written in the hand of ancient Romans who also had mixed motivations in putting forth their impressions of the rural Gallic peoples of the north (Green, *Myths 8-9*). Perhaps this is what is so magical about this verdant island nation—it lies wrapped, both literally and figuratively in mists and fogs, creating an environment that shape shifts continually.

Ireland's people are steeped in stories. Indeed, the land itself is the embodiment of myth, perceived as the body of a woman, the mountains or paps are her breasts, the wells her womb (Molloy 16-17). The stones as often as not are remnants of some ancient edifice—often of prehistoric significance. Myth and history seem to be integrally interwoven in the Irish psyche. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin provides this wonderful example as she explains the dating of Ireland's mythic cycles:

> Apparently the Irish did not view their past chronologically (with dates) before the arrival of Christianity: everything simply happened in the past. . . . There were a certain amount of historical events available to them to create this history, but it was not enough to fill in the gaps, so they used the literature and turned it into history. Dates were applied to the story cycles; the Ulster Cycle was dated to the first century AD to coincide with Christ's death, the Fenian Cycle to the third century AD, and the
Mythological Cycle was used to bring history back thousands of years to the time of Adam and Eve in the Bible (17).

This seems rather arbitrary, but it says something special about the Irish regarding their sense of time and space, and certainly of the high value of literature. There are still those who place a very high value on myth and its ability to reveal truth in the modern age. Dara Molloy is one of those people.

On the island of Inis Mór, in the summer of 2009 I sat with Dara Molloy for an interview about traditions related to Ireland’s holy wells. We spoke of many things as young college-aged interns roamed in and out of the dormitory-style quarters where they come to study organic farming, and sustainability. About halfway through our interview, Dara spun an elaborate metaphor, taken from Irish myth, that he imagines the ancients to have embraced. In his conception, the sun god, Lugh, rises each morning, dances before the feminine earth all day, and returns to bed with her at night. The earth goddess has many names, including Dan and Anu. The rising of the sun each morning is the explanation for all the fertility that goes on around us. The well represents the earth goddess, the womb of the earth, and when the people circumnavigate her sunwise or deiseal, they mimic the larger celestial myth. Dara also feels that people have lost this most fundamental mythology, which he believes to be the origin of the holy wells.

Dara says that in ancient Ireland there were two sun gods: Lugh and Balor. While
Lugh is benevolent, Balor is an evil figure. Balor could tax your strength, destroy your crops, steal your best assets. A yearly mythic battle takes place between these two, and Lugh’s victory is celebrated at the Festival of Lughnasa. The first sheaf of cut corn represents the offspring of Lugh and the earth (Ó Maoildhia, interview).\(^\text{10}\) Later, the potato displaced the emphasis on grain, and the first of August would became the time when new spuds would be dug and eaten (MacNeill 43).

There are various stories about the sun god Lugh, considered the most brilliant figure of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the divine race that people early Irish myth. Maire MacNeill shares many of these stories in her exhaustive work called The Festival of Lughnasa. One of these describes “... the brilliance of Lugh’s face, likening it to the sun”(5). Another, from a Dindeshenchas verse, states “... a red colour used to be on him from sunset to morning”(6). A story from County Donegal that is particularly well-drawn, illustrates this point: Balor, who has a “baleful” or burning eye, is fated to be killed by his grandson. Thus, Balor keeps his daughter, Eithne, locked in a tower on Tory Island. There is also a smith on the mainland who owns a cow that Balor covets. A champion herds the cow and the smith makes arms for him. Balor disguises himself as a red-haired boy and tricks the champion into abandoning the cow which Balor then steals. The champion, with the aid of a magic helper, finds the tower and mates with Eithne

\(^{10}\) The stories of Lugh and Balor come from The Battle of Moytura from The Mythological Cycle.
(and her twelve attendants in some versions of the story), takes the cow and
returns it to the smith. Eithne gives birth to three children or, in some versions of
the story, twelve children—born simultaneously to the twelve attendants. Balor,
apparently aware of the fate he may suffer, wraps these children in a cloth and
throws them all into the sea. One child, Lugh, belonging to Eithne, is rescued by
the magical helper and raised by the smith. The rest become the ancestors of the
seals. Balor meets the champion one day and kills him. Lugh grows up helping
the smith at his forge. On another fateful day Balor comes in boasting of the
killing, and Lugh, in recognition, thrusts a glowing rod through the baleful eye,
killing Balor. Some versions say that Balor asks Lugh to behead him and place
his head on Lugh's so that he may attain Balor's power. Lugh, instead, places the
head on a rock which is split by the venom inside it (MacNeill 8).

Though a later version of the Lugh/Balor conflict, this myth contains many
familiar motifs, but the smith is of particular interest. The god Lugh, raised by a
smith, is himself a smith. Smiths are figures of magical stature in Celtic
mythology\(^\text{11}\) (and the art of smith craft will prove to be a defining characteristic
for the figure of Brigit in her mythological sun goddess form). Smiths manipulate
fire and act as agents of transformation. In this story, the nurturing role of the
smith is implied, though not fully articulated. The smith supplies the tool that
allows the sun god Lugh to triumph over Balor, and mythically speaking, people

\(^{11}\) See Randolph 184-187.
can be assured, once again, of a bountiful harvest. Though the champion and magical helper are active in the story, it is somehow understood that the power behind everything benevolent or positive that transpires is the smith.

Most often *Lugh* is depicted as representing a benevolent force. Perhaps this comes partly from his role in *The Battle of Moytura* where the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* battle the *Formorians*, usually thought to be forces of evil (MacNeill 4). Ironically, though, there is a tradition in Tory Island that describes *Lugh* as 'wicked' in one of many local legends about *Ballor* (MacNeill 8). In Ireland there are many local permutations of a good story—or an ancient myth. Nonetheless, Irish mythology features these two figures, *Lugh* and *Balor*, both associated with the sun, pointing to the cultural and religious significance of the sun in the early Celtic world.
Ireland’s mythology is interwoven with its calendar of ancient festivals marking the life cycle of its people and the agricultural passages in the landscape: festivals tied to the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. November 1 is *Samhain*; February 1 is *Imbolc*; May 1 is *Beltaine*; and August 1 is *Lughnasa*. This chapter will focus on *Lughnasa*, which in particular, is associated with many of Ireland’s holy wells and sacred peaks. As discussed in chapter two, *Lughnasa* is identified with the sun god, *Lugh*, and held in honor of the new harvest. Here, we take the discussion further to look at how these sites have retained some of the rituals, including the sunwise round, that could be associated with their pre-Christian past.

Maire MacNeill identifies a number of parallels and precedents for the Irish *Lughnasa*. *Lammas* likely was a Celtic feast, meaning loaf mass, that English Anglo-Saxons adopted and Christianized—also held on August 1. In Roman Gaul, at *Lugudunum*, now Lyon, a festival was held on August 1 in honor of Augustus, and French Celticists speculate that it may have earlier been a Gallic festival in honor of *Lugh* (MacNeill 1). Indeed, woven crosses, resembling Brigit’s crosses, which are widespread in Ireland, have been found in French villages (Andrews 52).

At *Lughnasa*, in days past, times of want and hunger would come to an end, and
the light, both literally and metaphorically would conquer the dark. As with many Irish traditions, the symbology of *Lughnasa* was ripe for Christian overlay.

MacNeill provides a case in point when discussing the history of *Domhnach Crom Dubh*, popularly known as a pagan power, that is remembered as having been defeated by St. Patrick. *Crom Dubh* is intriguing for the purpose of this study because his various names seem to mean the Dark Bent One—ironic since he is celebrated on a festival day honoring the sun god, *Lugh*.¹² Thus on the first Sunday in August or last Sunday in July people in many parts of Ireland celebrate some version of *Crom Dubh Sunday*—a vestige of the old *Lughnasa* Festival (MacNeill 28). Oddly, MacNeill finds no evidence of *Crom Dubh* in either the Munster area defined by a rough line from Dingle Bay to Cork Harbor or in County Donegal, both regions known for their continuity of Gaelic tradition and lore (31). Surprisingly, however, “Crumdubh” shows up in a Scottish verse associated with Easter:

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Didomhnuich Shlat-Phailm,
'S ann 'tha mo stoirm;
Didomhnuich Crum-dubh
Plaoisgidh mi' n t-ubh.
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On Palm Sunday is my stir:

On crooked black Sunday I'll peel the egg (MacNeill 33).

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¹² Frankie Kelly says that *Crom Dubh* is local to the region where he is from: County Cavan, and is a manifestation of *Lugh*.
The multidimensional nature of Lugh's personality is intriguing, seemingly both dark and light, an acknowledgement, perhaps, that with the light comes shadow.

MacNeill also points out the remarkable fact that many Lughnasa celebrations survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without being Christianized. She says that while all of the holy well sites associated with Lughnasa were co-opted by the church, only a minority of the hillside variety—most notably the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage and patron commonly known as “The Reek”—were adopted (68).

One of the very first wells I visited in 2008 was Tobernalt in County Sligo—a well once used as part of the Festival of Lughnasa. The site is now notable for the fourteen stations one encounters—seven sorrows and seven joys moving southward or sunwise along a path toward the well. MacNeill gives an account of pilgrimage to this well including overnight stays and dancing. Once, there was a “wishing chair” where people sat after making their rounds (607). The Brennemans, authors of Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland, tell of a curved stone at the site where pilgrims may attain healing for back issues (65). Most astonishing, though, was the abundant clootie (cloth) hung in the trees near a grotto wherein stands a figure of Mary and child. The clootie is not only the traditional strips of cloth, but chains, bits of jewelry, small dolls hung by their

13 St. Patrick's Well, County Tyrone, which is a bullaun, is an apparent exception. See page 21, Figure 5.
hair, a child's shoe, mementos of every kind that might suggest a connection to a specific person, a desire, a wish, an entreaty.

W.G. Wood-Martin speaks of the clootie found at Ireland's holy wells as a type of “scapegoat” for the ills afflicting the individual supplicant. He suggests that people would leave a scrap of their garment behind as though leaving an illness or malady (82). This would explain the presence of items like crutches and inhalers—the latter an item of abundance at a well in Donegal, en route to Glencolumbcille. Wood-Martin bases his theory on anecdotal evidence of people taking clootie from holy wells in an effort to transfer ill will to another individual (82). Doubtless, removing items from a holy well site also brings bad luck onto the perpetrator of this type of action.

Figure 3: Tobernalt Holy Well, County Sligo

20
MacNeill has uncovered some fascinating information about another well in County Tyrone—a site dubbed on the roadside, "St. Patrick's Well and Chair." According to MacNeill this is a *Lughnasa* site never incorporated into the Christian canon, despite its name. On the Sunday following July 26th, known as "the Big Sunday of the Heather" a local gathering was held here up until the second quarter of the twentieth century. This was a place for singing and dancing,
eating, drinking, courting and all manner of festivities (154). The chair is a stone, probably artificially cut, from whence Patrick is said to have preached and to have banished an evil serpent. The “well” in this case is a bullaun or basin in a larger flat stone that is said to never go dry or change its level. The plaque that now graces the small parking area proclaims this well as one noted for the healing of warts, and in a tree near the well, branches are laden with light cloths and even tissues—the sooner the clootie disintegrates, the sooner the wart vanishes.

![Figure 5: St Patrick's Well, County Tyrone](image)

St. Brigit's well at Liscannor is also an ancient Lughnasa site, its patron day the last Sunday in July—known as “Garlic Sunday” (276). As MacNeill describes the celebration, it began at the well the night before with pilgrims participating in the ritual rounds, invoking the Saint, and then remaining at the well overnight—with
singing and dancing to while away the long hours. Celebrating would continue the following day at *Lehinch* (276). People from the Aran Islands are said to have traversed the waters in their *curraughs* 14 to come to this well and sing all night on *Cranndubh* Saturday (280). This pattern day is held in association with the traditional date of *Lughnasad* rather than *Imbolc*, the traditional feast day for St. Brigit.

Figure 6: Brigit's Well at Liscannor

14 The *curraugh* is an early type of Irish canoe-like boat constructed from a wooden frame covered in skins.
Figure 7: Brigit’s Well at Liscannor, interior detail

Figure 8: Brigit figure at Liscannor
Likewise, St. Patrick’s Well in Belcoo is said to have been part of the ancient *Festival of Lughnasa*. This well, in County Fermanagh, boasts the coldest water in Ireland, two rivers flowing from it, and a volume of 600 gallons of water per minute (Carly Meehan qtd. in Ó Dolain 104). This well has a local history of its pattern day being celebrated at *Lughnasa*—late July/early August. *Tobar Pádraig* at Belcoo is associated with many types of cures, including nervous anxiety, healing of the eyes, warts, eczema, and numerous other maladies. The pattern includes but is not limited to sunwise rounds at sacred stones; “ploughing the river”—what once was a passage of about 50 yards over sharp stones through “the coldest water in Ireland” with the greatest efficacy said to be achieved by going barefoot; prayers at two ash trees; and the sunwise circumnavigation of the adjacent churchyard (Ó Dolain 107). Crossing a busy highway now replaces the trial of “ploughing the river.”

Figure 9: Tobar Pádraig at Belcoo
Moving on to the high places, The Reek, or the annual pilgrimage at Croagh Patrick takes place on the last Sunday in July, and pilgrims come from all over the country and world to participate. Maire MacNeill reports, “... a strong local tradition current in the immediate neighbourhood, which speaks of Aoine Chrom Dubh, the Friday of Crom Dubh, as the correct day for performing the pilgrimage...”(83). This bit of local lore and the surviving pilgrimage date lend credence to The Reek’s connection to the pre-Christian Festival of Lughnasa where Lugh must defeat Balor but finally is himself overcome by Christianity.

*The Reek* is strongly identified with Patrick and tales of his triumph over demons as he fasted for forty days and forty nights. In one story he must defeat Satan’s mother herself! From these tales, non-Irish commentators derived the notion of Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland (MacNeill 72-74). Regardless, Christian pilgrims faced travails patterned after those of St. Patrick. Though the pilgrimage now takes place shod, traditionally, the mountain was ascended barefoot and sunwise rounds of some of the various stations would be made on bare knees.
A more lighthearted example of ritual pattern in Gaelic culture can be seen in this verse from the *Carmina Gadelica*, Alexander Carmichael's collection of folk poetry, prayers, charms, and blessings from the Western Isles of Scotland, circa 1900:

**Hatching Blessing**

I will rise early on the morning of Monday,
I will sing my rune and rhyme,
I will go sun-wise with my cog
To the nest of my hen with sure intent.

I will place my left hand to my breast,
My right hand to my heart,
I will seek the loving wisdom of Him
Abundant in grace, in broods, and in flocks.

I will close my two eyes quickly,
As in blind-man’s buff moving slowly;
I will stretch my left hand over thither
To the nest of my hen on yonder side.

The first egg which I shall bring near me,
I will put it withershins round my head.

I will raise my left hand on high,
I will stretch it without halt quickly,
I will lift the two eggs down hither,
There shall be then three in the cog.

I will stretch my right hand again,
I will lift with it at the time three,
I will seek ruling from the King,
Then verily there shall be six in the clutch.
I will raise my left hand the second time,
I will lift four with it down,
In name of Christ, King of power,
There shall then be ten in the cog.

The right fist of strongest claim,
I will lift with it two in my fingers,
Thus at ceasing my brood will be complete,
Beneath the breast of the speckled big hen.

I will put soot on their two ends,
And I dumb as the dumb the while,
In name of Creator of sea and hill,
In name of saints and apostles all.

In name of the most Holy Trinity,
In name of Columba kindly,
I will set the eggs on Thursday,
The gladsome brood will come on Friday.

(Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica-English 106)

This wonderful blessing is an amazing amalgam of the Christian and pre-
Christian, practically humming with ritual and pattern as it moves through the
days of the week, referencing the movement of the sun and the body in a virtual
dance of life, perhaps death (why else put soot on the ends of your eggs?), and
rebirth.

*Lughnasa*, the annual festival celebrating the sun god *Lugh's* triumph over the
sun god *Balor*, the light over the dark, the harvest, the return of plenty, is now
marked in different colloquial ways throughout Ireland: as *Crom Dubh Sunday*,
*Garlic Sunday*, *Garland Sunday*, *The Reek*, and in Leitrim, where Frankie Kelly
hails from, as *Bilberry Sunday*. The *pattern* or *patron* may involve a holy well or
a particular mountain-top ritual. The name of the sacred day may vary from
county to county, but the time of year for the celebrations, whether sacred in
nature or secular, harkens back to Ireland's harvest mythology.

*Lugh* and *Balor*, however, are not the only Irish deities who represent the sun.
The Celtic Brigit is also known and revered as a sun goddess. The next chapter
explores Brigit's mythology, both as goddess and as the early medieval Christian
leader who kept the flame of sun veneration alive in the early Irish church.
Chapter 4
Brigit: Sun Goddess & Christian Saint

This chapter will examine the mythology surrounding Brigit, sun goddess and Christian saint, a revered feminine figure throughout Ireland. Her miracles mirror those of Christ. Her goodness and virtue are legendary. Born of a pagan father and Christian mother, Brigit, like Jesus, is depicted as one who can inhabit two worlds simultaneously; she possesses both human and supernatural attributes. As such, she holds the ability to cross boundaries. According to Tírechán, the seventh-century biographer of Saint Patrick, she is said to have made her first journey around Ireland widdershins. This chapter will also examine some implications of this statement.

Brigit may have an international ancestry; the Irish form of her name simply means “high” or “exalted.” 

Brigantia, her Latinized form is a name found throughout Europe. Imagery and myth seem to tie her closely to the Roman Minerva. (MacCana 34-35). Mary Condren also comments on Brigit's genealogy:

The stories and images connected with Brigit contain remnants associated with several goddesses and in other parts of the ancient world, among them, Belisama, Juno, Isis, Vesta, and Sul. Indeed the rites practiced at the convent in Kildare. . . were said to resemble those of the Roman goddess Minerva. Three of Brigit's most common symbols, the vulture, serpent, and cow, were all symbols of the goddess Isis. . . (57).
Comparing the lives of seventh-century Saints Brigit and Patrick, T. M. Charles-Edwards makes several interesting observations. He says that the seventh-century version of St. Patrick was noted for having defeated the druids and pagan elements in Ireland and that his purview was as likely the court as the church—whereas Brigit was brought up in the home of a druid after her mother, Broicsech, a slave or concubine, was sold to him. Drawing on sources such as the Vita Prima and Bethu Brigte, Charles-Edwards examines and compares the miracle stories of these two saints, noting time and again that Brigit was the saint of the poor and the oppressed, and always reluctant to participate in power politics (84-85).

Of particular interest, Brigit's first journey around the country of Ireland stands in marked contrast to that of Patrick. Brigit's travels began in Leinster, proceeded from there south to the lands of the Úi Néill, then north and on to Connaught and Munster. Charles-Edwards tells us that this journey is undeniably widdershins or tuaithbiul (88). It is difficult to believe that this detail could be insignificant since much is made of Patrick's journey around Ireland, driving out the snakes and Christianizing the wells, being made sunwise or deiseal:

Yet there are clear differences between Brigit's journey and the circuit around northern Ireland made by Patrick according to Tirechkin.\footnote{Tírechán was a seventh century Irish bishop and biographer of Saint Patrick.} Part of the journey was made by Brigit when she was still in her mother's womb; moreover, whereas Patrick's circuit went sun-wise, deiseal, Brigit's went
widdershins, tuaithbiul. Because of her association with a poet and a druid, her journeyings were more directly linked with the circuits of poets and other 'people of art' than with the circuits of kings (88).

Brigit is a mysterious and powerful figure in Ireland. Many have tried to tell her story, to disentangle the goddess from the saint who not only captivated all of Ireland but conceivably much of Europe. Her association with “poets and other people of art” is one that also deserves interpretation.

Lisa Lawrence has written an intriguing article examining the relationship between Brigit, the goddess and Brigit, the saint. She comes down squarely against those who would suggest that Brigit's association with fire is a remnant of Ireland's pagan past. Instead she sees this as having direct Christian referents. While she fully acknowledges the fire imagery in early Irish tradition, she also says,

One can only guess at what biblical precedents might have informed the fire miracles recounted in Brigit's Lives: perhaps Exodus 3:2-3, where God appears to Moses in the burning bush, and Exodus 13:21-22, where God leads the Israelites by night in a pillar of fire (columna ignis in the Vulgate, just as in Brigit's Lives); perhaps also Acts 2:3, where the Spirit descends as tongues of flame (45).

Her argument comes undone somewhat, and she herself undoes it when discussing the tripartite nature of the goddess and how the art of smithcraft
happens to be a form not found in the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. Yet, smithcraft remains very much a part of Saint Brigit’s skill set—something readers could interpret as a likely holdover from the goddess tradition. Following is an entry from Cormac’s Glossary, which Lawrence cites in order to describe Brigit, the tripartite goddess:

Brigit, i.e. the poetess (ban-file), daughter of the Dagda. This is Brigit the female seer or woman of insight (ban-éces no bé n-éicsi), i.e. the goddess whom poets (filid) used to worship, for her cult was very great and very splendid. It is for this reason that they call her (the goddess) of poets (poetarum) by this tide, and her sisters were Brigit, the woman of leechcraft (bé legis), and Brigit, the woman of smithcraft (bé ngoibnechta), i.e. the goddesses, i.e. three daughters of the Dagda are they (41).

Smithcraft seems an important key in understanding something about Brigit. Though often male and disfigured, like the Roman Hephaestus, the smith was allied with the artist, the sorcerer, and with fire. Mary Claire Randolph, in her article “Celtic Smiths and Satirists: Partners in Sorcery,” says that as far as she knows, Brigit is the sole case of a female associated with the art of smithcraft (186). Often associated with Druidism, the smith was seen to cast powerful charms and spells; the wonder associated with the iron the smith could transform into weapons and tools transferred inevitably to the smith himself (187). Like alchemists, smiths would “. . . potentially conflict with certain Christian notions
that the nature of substances was divinely established and should not or could not be altered” (Bailey 95).

While it does seem clear that the stories about Brigit have Christian intent and champion Christianity over Druidism—the faith of Brigit’s father, Dubthach—they also clearly depict a character with a history and symbols in the very process of transformation. In fact, transformation seems to be one of Brigit’s defining attributes.

Brigit’s birth story as revealed in the Lives of the Saints is not unlike that of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Charles-Edwards also notes this correlation (88). When her mother, the bondmaid Broicsech, becomes pregnant with her, Dubthach’s wife is jealous and Broicsech is sold to another druid (though the child she carries, Brigit, is not). The druid who purchases Broicsech gives a feast for the king of Conaille, whose queen is also pregnant. Brigid’s birth is recorded thus:

A soothsayer at the feast prophesied that the child born at sunrise neither within nor without the house would out-do every child in Ireland. The queen’s child was stillborn in the night, but Brigit was born just as Broicsech, carrying a vessel of milk, stepped over the threshold at dawn: the infant was bathed in the milk. The druid then took the bondmaid and her daughter to Connacht, ‘for her mother was of Connacht, but her father was
Brigit's role as a boundary crosser is evident in this passage as is the importance of her relationship to the sun. She is born at sunrise, as her mother steps over a threshold (neither inside nor outside the house!) She is also said to have been fed the milk of a special white, red-eared cow. Creatures of this description belonged to the mythic Irish Otherworld (McCone qtd. in Green, Goddesses 199).

The *Behtu Brigte* begins with the story of the holy girl sleeping alone in her house when it catches fire. When the people rush to the house they find it intact, and the child, Brigit, still sleeping, “. . . her face like . . .” (Ó hAodha 20). Like what, we wonder? Radiance of some kind I imagine. Another time, the druid (Brigit's father) and his uncle, a Christian, were to observe a column of light emanating from the house where the female slave (Brigit's mother) and her child were located (Ó hAodha 20). Later, having performed many miracles and plucked out one of her eyes in defiance of marriage, Brigit is consecrated:

> The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognize what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop. 'This virgin alone in Ireland', said Mel 'will hold the episcopal ordination'. While she was being consecrated a fiery column ascended from her head (Ó hAodha 24).
I was able to visit three of Brigit's holy wells in Ireland, among the many wells I encountered. The three wells were, traveling tuaithiul, at Faughart, Brigit's birthplace; Kildare, where her monastery is located; and at Liscannor, on Ireland's western coast. Of these, two require the supplicant to enter into the body of the earth as into the womb of the mother. The well at Faughart is particularly challenging to find and located in a corner of a cemetery, a site of birth surrounded with relics of death. The well is located in County Lowth, in Gaelic, Lugh—as in the sun god. Padraigin Clancy says that the holy wells are the source of the divine feminine and that every well has its source in the Otherworld (interview). This well lies off the beaten path, and the stone well enclosure is beehive shaped, close, and feminine, like I imagine the monastic huts to be on Skellig Michael—only large enough for one individual to enter, a return to the womb, a place of solitary contemplation. The imagery evoked here is not that of a virginal saint; rather, what is palpably visceral is a sense of entering the earth's body, Dara Ó Maoildhia's myth made manifest.
By contrast, the previously mentioned well at Liscannor draws tour buses. Just south of the Cliffs of Moher and also adjacent to a cemetery (and a local pub), the well is at the end of a narrow subterranean passage encrusted with relics and bits of memorabilia and ephemera, plaintive prayers and pleas for healing, news clippings, candles, and all manner of items that humans might think to leave as some kind of intercession with healing power. Both wells, though, take the visitor into the earth—for certainly all holy wells do not possess this feature. I am reminded of Dara Molloy's conception of the wells as “wombs.”

Possibly the most famous of Brigit's wells is located at Kildare; the well site features breast-like forms, carved stones through which the water flows as if to metaphorically reference the goddess and her associations with the cow, life-
giving milk, and fertility. Kildare is the site of Saint Brigit's original abbey and
curch where Brigidine sisters once again keep the embers of Brigit's perpetual
flame, dark since the sixteenth century, alight following a 1993 peace conference
(Minehan 14-15).

St. Brigit's fire temple is discussed in *Rekindling the Flame*, and an account by
Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales, who seemingly witnessed the
inextinguishable flame firsthand is recorded:

> At Kildare, in Leinster, which the glorious Brigid renders ennobled, many
> miracles are deserving of being recorded, amongst which the fire of Saint
> Brigid comes first. This they call inextinguishable, not that it could not be
> extinguished, but because the nuns feed it with fuel and so carefully that it
> has ever continued inextinct from the time of the virgin, and notwithstanding
> the great quantity of wood that has been consumed during so long a time, yet
> the ashes have never accumulated, when in the time of Brigid twenty nuns
> served their Lord there, she making the twentieth
>(Minehan 26).\(^\text{16}\)

At Brigit's well at Kildare, we spoke to a gentleman who was there filling many
plastic jugs with holy water. This kind man offered a couple of jugs to us so that
we might also take some water away. His was to be placed on the grave of his

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\(^{16}\) MacCana says that in this instance “Brighid” is to be equated with Minerva whose
British sanctuary also housed a perpetual flame. See *Celtic Myths* pp 34-35.
deceased wife. St. Brigit, boundary crosser could still ritualistically create a bond between this world and the next.

![Figure 12: Brigit's Well at Kildare](image)

Cogitosus recorded the miracles of St. Brigit in the seventh century. His is considered the earliest of the recorded Christian documents that talk about the abbess of great faith who led the community at Kildare, turning water into ale,
churning abundant amounts of butter and distributing it to the poor, causing a single cow to give milk thrice in one day, transforming a dead lectern into a living tree. Through the fascinating dichotomy of Brigit's virginity and her miraculous acts that produce abundance and suggest nothing short of fecundity, we see remnants of a figure more ancient than Brigit, Christian abbess. In fact, Mary Condren says, “The figure we know as 'Brigit' is a composite goddess who took over many positive aspects of the old Irish goddesses Tephi, Danu, Macha, and the Morrigan” (Ó Briain and McConne qtd. in Condren 59). Dwelling for a moment on Macha, she too is thought to have been a sun goddess, as one of her symbols was the horse. The horse, the fastest creature known, could be seen as a corollary for the sun, which traversed the sky daily (Sjoestedt and Ross in Condren, 31).

One miraculous act stands out in the writings of Cogitosus for its wonderful sun-related imagery:

**Of the garment thrown over a sunbeam**

1. Here, I think I ought to slip in for your Reverences this other miracle in which the pure mind of the virgin and God's co-operating hand clearly appear to combine.

2. As she was grazing her sheep in the course of her work as a shepherdess on a
level grassy plain, she was drenched by a very heavy downpour of rain and returned to the house with her clothes wet.

3. There was a ray of sunshine coming into the house through an opening and, as a result, her eyes were dazzled and she took the sunbeam for a slanting tree growing there. So, she put her rainsoaked clothes on it and the clothes hung on the filmy sunbeam as if it were a big solid tree.

4. And the occupants of the house and the neighbours, dumbfounded by this extra ordinary miracle, began to extol this incomparable lady with fitting praise (Connolly and Picard 15).

Brigit's mythology is filled with imagery denoting the sun and fire. Most intriguing, though, is Tírechán's Christian perspective regarding the Christian St. Brigit's first journey around Ireland being made widdershins, in contrast to that of St. Patrick. Not only is Brigit, goddess and saint, associated with the sun, she is
also described in the seventh-century, by St. Patrick's biographer, as moving against the sun. In the next chapter, Brigit's association with the sun becomes even more focused as we examine the symbol of St. Brigit's cross. This well known Celtic symbol bears resemblance to solar wheels, suggesting the idea that veneration of Brigit may be connected to sun veneration in the larger context of early Celtic culture.
Chapter 5

Brigit's Cross: A Sun Symbol

The four-armed Brigit's Cross can be found all over Ireland—a swastika-like form woven of rushes that grow in the marshy areas of the countryside. Many Irish people make these crosses, including children; they seem to be a type of folk art, a heritage symbol or handicraft, and they can be found in some form in many Irish shops. But, the four-armed Brigit's cross, it turns out, is not the only form this symbol takes. There are myriad formal possibilities for the cross of Saint Brigit, though most are rarely seen nowadays. These crosses, in all their forms, were once likely more than mere craft items—for they are remarkably reminiscent of solar wheels.

The Celtic scholar Miranda Jane Green, in "Celtic Myths," writes about the pagan Celts from a period covering approximately 600 BC to 400 AD. During this period, the Celtic world extended from Ireland and parts of Spain in the west to Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the east (including Galatia in Asia Minor) and from northern Scotland to northern Italy, including the former Yugoslavia (7). She turns primarily to archaeological evidence across the region to examine the basis for a Celtic solar religion. Green says, “Archaeological evidence suggests that, of all natural phenomena, the sun was especially invoked as a life-force, as a promoter of fertility and healing and as a comfort to the dead” (43). One of the primary forms of evidence Green cites is the solar wheel, depicted in association
with the god Jupiter. The symbol is usually a six-spoked wheel, ostensibly chosen for its round shape and the parallel function of movement that it was believed to share with the sun (45). Green notes that the swastika-like form of the sun symbol is also found in the Pyrenees of south-west Gaul (49).

In *Celtic Goddesses*, Green tells of a group of 'Venus' figurines found near Rennes in Brittany and in the Allier region of Central Gaul, one bearing “. . .intense sun symbolism concentrated on the breasts, belly and thighs, as if to emphasize a link between the sun and fertility ” (de Bretagne qtd. in Green 115). As in the Celtic sovereignty myths, the author speculates that the figure, found buried in graves, may represent “. . .the marriage between the celestial god and the mother-goddess, the sky and the earth” (115). This, she says, is a characteristic of mythologies and religious traditions, from Egypt and the Classical world (115).

In 1912, James Ffrench wrote an article about the prehistoric sun cults, which he cites as the main religious “system” to compete with the rise of Christianity in the early centuries AD. At the turn of the twentieth century, this idea was widely held as evidenced by a profusion of articles from this time period. Perhaps Ffrench and other early twentieth-century authors found support for their theories in the Old Testament. The author of Deuteronomy would have us understand that while the rest of the ancient world might worship celestial bodies, the Israelites were separate and apart from those other people:
And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the
stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them
and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the
peoples everywhere under heaven. Deuteronomy 4:19 (NRSV).

While the implication is that people in the vicinity of the Israelites might be
“worshipping” celestial bodies, a footnote for this passage in the New Oxford
Annotated Bible 3rd edition says that this idea is a distortion of ancient Near
Eastern religion. Celestial bodies were, rather, perceived as manifestations of the
deity (Coogan 250).

Symbols suggestive of the sun are clearly very ancient and can be found
throughout the prehistoric world. Writing in 1912, Ffrench mentions and depicts
several four-pronged sun symbols in his article: the Reask Cross in Co. Kerry;
crosses at Inismurray and Dowth; St. Fechin’s Cross at Fore; and a cross at
Killaghter Churchyard in County Donegal. In addition, he shows an Assyrian
cross much like the others (44-45). Ffrench explains his thoughts concerning the
ubiquity of ancient sun veneration with the following anecdote:

  We have an excellent example of how readily the untaught man turns to the
heavenly host as the representative of God in the case of a deaf mute who
had never been instructed, and yet who was often seen engaged in prayer.
After he was instructed he was asked to whom did he pray, and he replied,
to the heavenly host (the stars). The worship of the sun symbol had
undoubtedly a great hold on the world, and it remains in existence still among the descendants of the ancient Persians. It was the only cult that was able to make a stand against Christianity when it became the religion of the Roman Empire (46-47).

Scholars today might consider Ffrench’s statements naïve, and indeed the notion of worshipping sun symbols and imagining a widespread and homogeneous sun cult takes imaginative license. At the same time, symbols are a kind of visual language from which we can derive meaning, albeit of a type that is not scientifically verifiable. Brigit’s cross provides an example of how both forms and meanings can evolve over time.

In a July 2009 visit with Mary Minehan, the Brigidine sister who leads the community at Kildare, I asked about Brigit’s Triskele, the form of Brigit’s cross most prominently displayed in the sanctuary where we met to talk. Though Mary and I did not conduct a formal interview, she explained the difference between the three-pronged Brigit’s cross and the four-pronged cross this way: The triskele represents the tripartite goddess—and the more common four-pronged cross represents the four Irish provinces: Munster, Leinster, Ulster, and Connaught. I was fascinated with the triskele, mainly because I sensed its symbolic associations with the notion of trinity. Later, I could not easily locate this form of Brigit’s cross whereas the four-pronged form seemed to be readily available in souvenir shops. Research revealed that the three-pronged cross was made to be displayed in cattle
barns (Stiver). This is not unusual nor did it seem denigrating since Brigit is strongly associated with cows and cows with the goddess. What I did find surprising is that the triskele is the earliest version of Brigit's cross and was never blessed by the Catholic church (Stiver).

The practice of making rush and straw crosses is most often associated with *Imbolc*, Brigit's festival which takes place on February 1, or the time of harvest, *Lughnasa*, roughly August 1. Though most crosses are made of rushes, the fact that some are made of straw suggests a link to harvest traditions and a possible connection to the role of the *Calliagh*, harvest knots commonly made at the *Lughnasa Festival* time (Paterson 19).

The tales of Brigit are unsurpassed in imagery and mystique. Between the lines of these Christian stories, penned by monks, there are references that suggest pre-Christian oral histories and practices. For those of us who yearn for feminine heroes, Brigit looms large as a figure of veneration in either goddess or saint form. The values she represents center on peace and justice. Her symbol is a reminder of not only her ancient origins but also of her continuing relevance. Like all myths and mythic figures, her power is meant to endure and speak to humans through time. We leave this section with another selection from the *Carmina Gadelica*; this verse beautifully illustrates the conflation of the pre-Christian and Christian in a single figure:
The Genealogy of Bride

The genealogy of the holy maiden Bride,

Radiant flame of gold, noble foster-mother of Christ.

Bride, the daughter of Dugall, the broion, Son of Aodh, son of Art, son of Conn,

Son of Crearar, son of Ois, son of Carmac, son of Carruin.

Every day and every night

That I say the genealogy of Bride,

I shall not be killed, I shall not be harried,

I shall not be put in cell, I shall not be wounded,

Neither shall Christ leave me in forgetfulness.

No fire, no sun, no moon shall burn me,

No lake, no water, nor sea shall drown me,

No arrow of fairy nor dart of fay shall wound me,

And I under the protection of my Holy Mary,

And my gentle foster-mother is my beloved Bride.

(Carmichael : Carmina Gadelica, I, 175)
Chapter 6
Kingship, Sovereignty, and the Sun

Brigid is not the only powerful feminine symbol associated with the sun in Celtic mythology. The land of Ireland itself, a mythical embodiment of the sovereignty queen is, in one of her manifestations, wife of the sun god, Lugh. This chapter will look at myth and folklore related to Irish kingship, and the sovereignty queen, an integral part of kingship rites. A particular focus is the figure of the Cailleach Bhéarra, a mythical figure identified with Ireland's southwestern coast, and associated through folklore with all of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland (MacCana 94). Descriptions of her harken back to Dara Ó Maoildhia's portrayal, in chapter two, of the body of Ireland and the sun, her lover. The bean feasa is the human counterpart of the Cailleach. She performs traditional feminine roles in Irish culture and is in contact with the Otherworld. Through the stories associated with Cailleach Bhéarra and the bean feasa it is possible to see how women's traditional roles shifted with the coming of Christianity.

The land of Ireland is often imagined as the body of a woman. Legend says when the Gaels (the Sons of Míl) first came to Irish shores they were met by three divine females: Banbha, Fódba, and Ériu. Amarhairghin, the poet of the Gaels promised Ériu that if the Gaels should triumph, her name would be the principal one in Ireland for all time. Later in the myth, when Amarhairghin calls upon the body of Ireland as the Sons of Míl strive to overtake the Tuatha Dé Dannan, the
cry is heard, and the Gaels become the new rulers of the land. This story parallels the kingship ritual in which the rightful ruler of Ireland must join with the sovereignty queen, who personifies the body of Ireland (MacCana 64).

*Cailleach Bhéarra* is the mysterious *Otherworld* feminine presence that Gearóid Ó Crualaoich describes thus:

Cailleach Bhéarra it was, and is, whose power and activities have resulted in the shapes of the hills, the courses of lakes and rivers, the locations of islands, and the presence in the landscape of numerous other natural features. Thunder storms, tides, wind and wave power, all attest to the energy of her abiding presence in the physical realm.

Cailleach Bhéarra it was, and is—along with other local cailleacha—who underwrites and legitimizes the performances and activities of a range of female roles that are filled, on occasion, by flesh-and-blood women whose confidence, authority, and actual power in the performance of their services derive not from the indulgence of a largely patriarchal social order, but from an issuing forth into that order of an imperative grounded in the popular sensibility of a primarily female origin and order of being (and well-being) for human existence (29-30).

The *Cailleach* is a figure told to have inhabited the earth for thousands of years—
and one whose nature works in harmony with nature. She is Dara Ó Maoildhia's personification of the land itself, a manifestation of the sovereignty queen. MacCana says, “She was also known as Buí (or Boí), and under this name she is described as the wife of the god Lugh, who is elsewhere represented as a model of kingship, . . .” (94). Ó Crualaoich says that in her Scottish form, in particular, she embodies the wild forces of nature—the North Sea and all of its unpredictable winter offerings. He says, “. . . in Scottish tradition, Cailleach Bheurr is frequently said to have originated in Norway, from where she allegedly carried the rocks out of which she formed the coasts and mountains of the Scottish mainland and of the Western Isles” (83).

Many stories exist about the Cailleach and her demise at the hands of a Christian cleric or priest. Usually she has achieved an advanced age and has seen miraculous things, otherworldly things—for like Brigit, as will be seen, she is a boundary crosser. One of the stories related in The Book of the Cailleach is entitled “Ana ní Áine.” A wealthy man of the McCarthys had one beautiful daughter whose name was Ana McCarthy—Ana ní Áine. Many young men wished to marry her, but she waited till she was quite mature to marry a man from Ulster. This traveling man (perhaps her husband) went into the house after about a dozen years, and she prepared a meal for him. This man had second sight and told her that she would never die until Friar Seán Ó C'nuchúir would prepare her to do so. Ana got so old that her daughter's daughter's daughter had to rock her in
One day a young priest, new to the area, was “seized with thirst,” and stopped by for a visit. He found a middle-aged woman alone in the house, rocking a cradle. He asked the woman for a drink, and when she went to get it for him, he moved toward the cradle. “Well, indeed,” said Ana, “there is no need for you to have any of the trouble of me” (Ó Cruílaigh 151). The priest, expecting a child to be in the cradle was terribly shocked and inquired of Ana what caused her to be in this condition. At his query, she explained the prophecy, only to find that the priest before her was none other than Seán Ó C’nuchúir. The priest then began to ask Ana many questions about wonders she had seen, and she related the following story, a kind of story within a story:

When I was a young woman, lots of strangers used to come to our house. My father had a pleasure boat and they would often sail in her to one place or another. One fine autumn day myself and another girl got ourselves ready to go with them. There was a young priest in the boat along with us. We had a try at sailing to the Skellig but before we made landfall there was a terrible darkness gathered in the west. My father said it would be best to turn the boat around, but the others wouldn't be satisfied. The dark black cloud was heading for us together with a gust of wind. The priest looked towards it “There is some sort of opening in that cloud,” he said. It was heading for us until it was very close to the boat. As soon as it had come alongside the boat
what was [to be seen] in the cloud only was a woman! The priest stood up quickly, put the stole around his neck and reached for his missal. Then he spoke and he asked her what had made an evil spirit of her. “I killed someone”, she said. “That is not what caused your damnation,” said the priest. “I killed two people”. “Nor that either” said the priest. “I killed a child that wasn't baptised in my desire to become a priest's spouse.” “That is precisely what damned you,” said the priest. Then he began to read his missal and after a short time she rose up out of the water in a flash of matter and she left our sight. . . (Ó Crualaoich 152).

The following day, Friar Seán returned to prepare the way for Ana's passing, and “Ever since when someone lives to a great age it is a saying of the people, 'She is as old as Ana Ní Áine’” (152).

This fascinating little story within a story is loaded with symbolic content suggesting much about the transition of power in Ireland following the coming of Christianity. One story seems to mirror the other with the priest acting as a kind of agent in both cases. While Ana is quite old, the priest is young. Though Ana is released from life, we do not know what has happened to the damned woman in the cloud,” though we know it is her desire for a priest that has brought about her downfall. Ana says that this is the greatest wonder she ever witnessed in her supernaturally long life, implying perhaps that the transition to a Christian

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17 Donald Mackenzie tells of a hag or storm goddess who arrives on a cloud from which she throws fire balls. This motif is an aspect of the Cailleach in the Scottish highlands.
Ireland is indeed a tumultuous thing in the Irish psyche. The woman in the cloud flees from the west, the direction associated with the Irish Otherworld (Brenneman 26) and the direction of sunset. The stories of the Cailleach also make it quite clear, though, that something feminine is being displaced; something masculine is gaining prominence.

The bean feasa, likewise is an interesting and closely related figure. As the wise woman healer, she is of human manifestation and intercedes in the community at times of sickness and distress. She is midwife, healer, keener—a woman who is in contact with the Otherworld. Vernacular tales abound of these women working as herbalists, being in contact with the fairies, of possessing esoteric knowledge (Ó Crualaoích 72-73).

In the case of the bean feasa, especially we can, I believe, see how a transformation of the goddess figure is represented as being actively available to the community in times of affliction as a kind of oracle who may be consulted in order to discover the true meaning of things and the appropriate course of action to be pursued in order to restore cosmic, social and psychic harmony (74-75).

Not at all surprisingly, the legends of the bean feasa incorporate the view that church leaders associated their activities with witchcraft. In an article entitled “Witchcraft in the Aran Islands,” a cailleach plays this role; she is accused of
using “disease transference,” a spell consisting of a combination of plant knowledge and the evil eye to pass illness from one person to another (Colgan 84). From 1895, this story demonstrates the negative view that came to be associated with both women and their “powers” in remote areas of Ireland before the turn of the twentieth century. Often though, the wise woman healer is seen to best the priest in these stories, displaying the superior knowledge. She is not portrayed as evil or wicked but rather as one who possesses a natural intelligence of the Otherworld (75). A brief example, and one that stands out for its amusing qualities, is the story of “Máire Ní Mhurchú and the priest,” which goes like this:

It was true, because I heard that a priest said it was: that the hat was taken off his own head one time when he was coming from Ardgroom, making for Eyeries, where he was living. The hat was taken off his head twice over in a place that they call Droichead na mBarr. He saw no one but his hat was put back onto his head and Máire Ní Mhurchú said it to him afterwards that it was she herself who put his hat on his head. He hadn't ever said anything to her about the hat. Instead, he used to be talking against her and trying to stop her from doing the things she used to be at, and that was the time then that he gave in to her (Ó Crualaoich 181).

The cailleacha and the bean feasa are female figures of considerable agency in the Celtic worldview. Cailleach Bhearra is one face of the mythical feminine aspect associated with kingship. She represents the “sovereignty queen,” mate to
the high king who makes the sunwise circuit upon his inauguration to the throne (Brenneman 33). Miranda Green tells us, “Central to the Irish sovereignty-myth was the sacred marriage, the ritual union of the goddess of the land, spirit of Ireland itself, with the mortal king. . . . The focus of the marriage itself was the sacred goblet of red liquor (presumably wine) which was handed to the king by the goddess” (Goddesses 73). Green further says that some have interpreted this goblet of wine as symbolic of the sun (73). Proinsias MacCana describes the wedding ritual similarly but as comprising two key elements: an intoxicating libation offered by the bride (in a golden goblet) and the coition (120). There is a tradition whereby the female figure in this union is transformed from hideous hag to beautiful woman. MacCana says,

    Just as the land lies barren and desolate in the absence of its destined ruler and is quickly restored to life by his coming, so the goddess who personifies the kingdom often appears ugly, unkempt and destitute until united with her rightful lord, when suddenly she is changed into a woman of shining beauty (120).

The Cailleach represents nature in all of its aspects, gentle and wild, and thus has both positive and negative attributes. Aspects of her live on in the bean feasa or wise woman, sometimes also called “witch.” In a ninth-century poem called “The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare” we see a wonderful example of a woman

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18 This is likely what Tírechán refers to, in the seventh century, as “the circuit of kings.”
bemoaning the passing of her youth, approaching death. The ebb and flood of the earth's tides conjures imagery of the Irish *Otherworld*, overlaid with the ambiguous comfort of the Christian afterlife. This poem articulates the ambivalence, from a woman's point-of-view, of the transition from the old ways to the new:

Ebb-tide to me as to the sea; old age causes me to sallow; although I may grieve therat, it comes to its food joyfully.

I am the Old Woman of Beare, from Dursey; I used to wear a smock that was always new. Today I am become so thin that I would not wear out even a cast-off smock.

Bitterly does my body seek to go to a dwelling where it is known; when the Son of God deems it time, let Him come to carry off His deposit.

When my arms are seen all bony and thin!—in fondest fashion they acted, once: they used to be around glorious kings.

When my arms are seen, all bony and thin, they are not, I declare, worth raising up over handsome boys.

The girls are joyful when they approach Maytime: grief is more fitting for me: I am not only miserable, I am an old woman.

Woe is me indeed—every acorn is doomed to decay—to be in the darkness of an oratory after feasting by bright candles!

I have had my time with kings, drinking mead and wine; today I drink whey and water among shrivelled old women.
My flood has guarded well that which was deposited with me; Jesus, Son of Mary, has redeemed it so that I am not sad up to ebb.

Happy the island of the great sea: flood comes to it after ebb; as for me, I expect no flood after ebb to come to me.

Today there is scarcely an abode I would recognize; what was in flood is all ebbing (Ó Cruilaoich 50).

The sovereignty queen, in her many forms, including that of the *Cailleach*, held political power in Ireland; she granted power to the true king. In medieval Ireland, the growing church excised this power, though it lived on in the Irish imagination. The *bean beasa* also lived on and in time, too, would be rejected by the political and religious authorities, labeled as witch, and described by her opponents as one who went against the sun—withershins.
Chapter 7

Witches & Withershins

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Exodus 22:18

The notion of *withershins* or doing something in opposition to the sun seems to contribute to the history of the persecution of women as witches. This chapter will examine aspects of the history of witchcraft and consider how, in Celtic culture, one accounts for the malevolence associated with movement in opposition to the sun—for it is apparent that this motion is difficult to characterize and that nature itself provides examples of movement that would be described as *tuaithiul* or *withershins*. In chapter four we saw that Brigit, a highly revered figure in Ireland, was, in the seventh century, associated with this counterclockwise motion.

What may have happened is that as Christianity expanded its influence in Northern Europe, polytheism and monotheism met, but the new monotheistic mold ill fit Ireland and other parts of the Celtic world. The transformation was incomplete, yielding a unique amalgamation of pre-Christian and more recent Christian traditions. In areas where Protestantism triumphed, traditions that had long held sway were not integrated but rather denigrated. These would be the areas where the church took a tougher stand against its detractors, many of whom proved to be women.

W. G. Wood-Martin seems to have reached the same conclusion in 1902:
Widdershins or withershins, which may be paraphrased as “contrariwise,” perhaps points to a step in the struggle between Christianity and Paganism, when, having obtained the upper hand, the former seated herself in her adversary’s place and appropriated the most paying tricks of her opponent. Then to do anything opposed to the Church was to make oneself an enemy of the Church; to go the holy round against the Church-way (i.e. the adopted pagan way) was to indulge in magic: in later times the same train of reasoning originated the idea that the devil appeared to anyone who recited the Paternoster backward (56).\(^1\)

The *Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database* is available online through the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. According to this database, about 3,837 people were accused of the practice of witchcraft in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scotland at the height of the Protestant Reformation in that country. Of this number, 3,212 are named. The database is not considered complete, though it is thought to be close to an accurate number of those who were persecuted (Goodare). Alisone Nesbit (4/8/1632) is one case in point. Accused of healing gone wrong, midwifery, adultery, and scheming to murder a neighbor's husband, the following charges were levered against her, listed under the heading “folk notes”:

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\(^{1}\) Perhaps this accounts for Tirechan’s seventh century statement regarding Brigit's *withershins* journey around Ireland. Though, not yet conceived as “evil”, this journey associated Brigit with magic.
Scratching used against her! She walked withershins, southwards, and three times, involved in helping relieve the pain of childbirth. She tried to cure her brother using South running water and by burning his things. She was seen walking on Samuelstone's land and therefore being a part of Lady Samuelston's plot to kill her husband. She was accused of doing a midwifery ritual that got her into trouble. To ease the pain after childbirth she brought in a big pan of water, threw salt on a fire and rubbed the patient. She then dipped her fingers in the water and sprinkled it over the patient three times while uttering words. The words spoken were 'banes to the fyre and soule to the Devill' (Survey Database).

The evidence as presented is fascinating and slim indeed. Alisone Nesbit walked withershins, and that is bad enough, but to help in relieving the pain of childbirth! Well, that sounds like direct interference in Yahweh's plan for the suffering of all women everywhere. And in the case of Mareon Cumlaquoy (5/4/1643):

Accused of going to someone's house at sunrise, then went three times withershins round the fire. It was claimed this act caused a neighbour's bear (meal) to go rotten and his oats did not grow. Accused of hitting a cow three times with the skirt of her coat(?) (Survey Database).

It is difficult not to smile at the lunacy of it, but, of course, it only takes a moment
to wonder what punishment befell these wretched women, and that is a detail not shared in the database. There are many more examples that could be brought forth, but these two demonstrate the weight that moving *widdershins* could carry and the types of behaviors with which it was associated.\(^\text{20}\)

Nachman Ben Yehuda has written an enlightening article on the nature of the European witch craze in the fourteenth-seventeenth centuries. For the purpose of this discussion, his comments on the starkly oppositional emphasis Dominicans placed on Christianity and witchcraft is of particular interest. First, it must be noted that prior to the fourteenth century, the practice of witchcraft was understood as a kind of everyday technology associated with love potions, weather, and various ways of influencing the actions of the gods (3). Witches were seen as allied, in effect, with the gods. Michael Bailey says that in the early centuries A.D., “The most basic purpose for magical rites, items, and spells was to heal—unsurprising in a world fraught with injury and disease but lacking many effective means to treat these problems” (80). Not only was the health of human beings a key concern but also the well-being of domestic animals and crops.

Early on, common magic could be practiced by anyone, but this gradually gave way to a tradition whereby those of long experience or having some special mark

\(^{20}\) In *The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*, Anne Ross says the “...most famous witch story of the western Highlands concerns the hero MacGille Chaluim Ratharsaidh,...” who was drowned at sea, the result of a spell cast by his foster mother using small vessels floating in milk made to go *widdershins* (75).
or association such as being “born with a veil” or caul (the fetal membrane) still intact would be thought of as having greater insight (Bailey 90). Dominican theologian Johannes Nider (ca. 1380-1438), in his treatise entitled *Formicarius (The Anthill, symbolic of a well-ordered society)*, becomes the first to explain why most witches are female:

He maintained based on sound biblical and Aristotelian knowledge, that women were inferior to men physically, mentally, and spiritually. Thus they were more prone to demonic temptations. In particular, they were more vain than men and more carnal, so demons could easily seduce them with blandishments and the promise of sexual pleasure. They were also quicker to anger and so sought power to strike out at their perceived enemies. Moreover, they were prone to gossip, so that once one woman attained access to demonic power, she would soon spread this knowledge to others (Bailey 132).

Over the course of a few centuries, the use of magic went from an accepted part of religious culture to an aspect of the culture that was looked at askance even as it was practiced by church clerics and other men of learning. In particular, practices like astrology were deemed threatening to church authorities since as a form of divination, this practice undermined the Christian tenet of free will (Bailey 96-98). By the late fifteenth century, the notorious *Malleus Maleficarium (The Witches' Hammer)* had been published—again dwelling on the gendered nature
of the witch. This text and approximately fifteen others that preceded it cemented the notion of witchcraft as a truly diabolical enterprise (Ben-Yehuda 10).

Following are examples of how extremely the imagery of good versus evil was portrayed:

The Dominicans’ theories concerning witchcraft were widely accepted at the time. They based their beliefs on a dualistic assumption which viewed the world as a battlefield in which a struggle between the godly sons of light and the satanic sons of darkness was being played out. The stories and myth of the witches can be regarded as the exact qualitative opposite of the conception of Christ, and witchcraft as the exact opposite of what was supposed to be the true faith, Christianity (Ben-Yehuda 94-99).

Perhaps in one of the earliest examples of a bizarro universe, the Dominicans took the notion of duality to excess, vilifying women (and some men) and using the very oppositional structure they created as “proof” of evil intent.

In opposition to the idea of the holy birth of Jesus, the Dominicans tell us of a perverse and barren sexual intercourse between the devil and the witch. . . . Contrary to the day when Christians meet to pray—Sunday morning—the devil and his legions prefer the night between Friday and Saturday. Christians meet in a holy church; the devil and his legions in weird places such as cemeteries. . . .
In church, people kiss the cross; at the Sabbath, they [witches] kiss the he-goat’s posterior. The symbols and objects used at the ceremony in the church (wine, wafers, water) are mocked at the Sabbath. In contrast to the holy baptism, the devil had his own—a mark imprinted on the witch, while filthy water was sprinkled throughout the ceremony by stinking toads. Music was also played during the satanic ceremonies; however, in contrast to the music played in church, this music was macabre, played with strange instruments like horses’ skulls, oak logs, human bones, and the like. In church, people tasted the holy symbols (wafers and wine); at the Sabbath they feasted on the roasted flesh of unbaptized babies. All in all, the overwhelming evidence indicates that the witch beliefs were a negative mirror image of the so-called true faith (Ben-Yehuda 5-6).

Ben-Yehuda’s article examines why those who were persecuted were in countries where the Catholic Church was weak and why women were 85% of those who were vilified and often executed. His theories may indeed shed light on why Irish witches could have practiced their craft with a measure of impunity while Scottish witch trials are well documented.

Jumping ahead to the sixteenth century, a rather fascinating anecdote comes to light concerning Johannes Kepler, successor to Copernicus who said in his De

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21 Citation within text is as follows: MacKay [1841] 1932; Trevor-Roper 1967.
Kepler believed that magnetic forces emanating from astral bodies affected human life. A believer in astrology, he ironically was forced to defend his mother, Katerina, in 1620 when he was Germany's imperial astronomer and she was tried as a witch (203-4). Interestingly, Copernicus's theory regarding the centrality (never mind the deification) of the sun was not challenged in his lifetime, though Galileo would be tried for heresy six decades later for following in his footsteps.

Not surprisingly, the persecution of women as witches would be carried forward into the New World, as is clearly indicated in this footnote from a history of witchcraft in North Carolina:

That the colonists brought with them the fundamental doctrines of the witchcraft creed instead of borrowing from the Indians or African slaves or of developing their system independently under the weird influence of their natural surroundings, is easy of demonstration. P. A. Bruce (Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, New York and London, (1910), 280) cites the case of one Captain Bennett, an Englishman engaged in trade with Virginia, who was summoned before the General
Court at Jamestown because in 1659 he had hanged at sea an old woman named Katherine Grady who was suspected of witchcraft. On October 5th of the same year Governor Fendall of Maryland, on the complaint of John Washington of Westmoreland County, Virginia, ordered the arrest of Edward Prescott, the charge being that "ye s'd Prescott hanged a witch on his ship as hee was outward bound from England hither, the last yeare."

Pending the hearing of the case by the Provincial Court, Prescott gave bond in the sum of 4,000 pounds of tobacco. On being brought to trial, the defendant admitted that a woman named Elizabeth Richardson was hanged on board his ship, but protested that, although he was both merchant and owner of the vessel, the captain (John Greene) and the crew threatened to mutiny when he opposed their action, and that consequently he was forced to permit the hanging (E. D. Neill qtd. in Cross 219-220).

At this point, there are three things to keep in mind. First, it is women who are primarily persecuted as witches, and this persecution takes place over several centuries in areas where the church must assert itself as it becomes an ever more dominant power. Second, one of the methods of practice for witches becomes

22 The footnote quoted in the text continues with the following information that may be useful to interested readers: “That the witchcraft prosecutions in New England during the late seventeenth century were the outcome of beliefs imported from the mother country is shown by Kittredge, Proc. Am. Ant. Soc., xviii, p. 4, n. 1; p. 49, n. 130; The Old Farmer and his Almanack, Boston, 1904, p. 110. 7 See especially The Writings of "Colonel William Byrd of Westover in Virginia, Esqr.," ed., J. S. Bassett, N. Y., 1901, Introdn., p. x f., and Stephen B. Weeks, Hist. Rev. of the Col. and State Records of North Carolina, [Raleigh, 1914], p. 4."(Cross) 219-220).
reversal—acting somehow in opposition to established Christian doctrines or simply saying or doing something backwards. This notion seems to correspond to the concept of *withershins* or in Gaelic, * tuaithiul*. Third, the question naturally arises whether women, and particularly those with special designation as “healers” or “witches” truly practiced their craft in opposition to the sun (or in opposition to Christianity) or whether, as Wood-Martin suggests, the sunwise way was co-opted from paganism and then the sinistral or counterclockwise way falsely attributed to all things pre-Christian—so great was Christian antipathy to the old ways.
Chapter 8
Healing Traditions & the Sun: Past & Present

Having examined aspects of Ireland’s sun-related mythology and agricultural traditions, explored feminine associations with the sun as having first positive and later negative consequences; and articulated how some Christian groups, like the Dominicans, denigrated women during the centuries of the European witch trials, we now turn to the nature of healing traditions that specifically reference sun orientation. Some of these examples are from personal interviews, others from folkloric sources. In Ireland, these healing practices have survived to the present day. The healers themselves may well have forgotten the pre-Christian aspects of these practices, for in Ireland, Christianity and folkways are deeply intertwined.

Many folk healing traditions in Ireland are closely associated with the holy wells and even those that do not have a well connection may, in some fashion, relate to sun orientation. The directional flow of water, the turning of stones, and the reversal of actions are three relevant examples. These will be discussed in the following two chapters, but before proceeding further, I will also share another unusual type of healing power that I learned of during my 2009 visit to Ireland.

Patricia Clancy is a traditional healer with two specific gifts—that of healing the burn and healing the sprain. The way one attains the gift of healing the burn is to
catch a small salamander with a white belly, known as the Mankeeper. By licking the salamander's belly, the healer attains the gift, and can then lick the fire from a burn victim's skin. Patricia's brother-in-law by marriage also has this gift, and at a family gathering I heard stories whereby the gift was successfully employed by both family members. The association I make with this tradition is that the salamander is both a water and land dwelling creature, a boundary crosser so to speak—like the eel and the salmon, two other venerated animals in Irish folklore who have the ability to move from saline to fresh water—and like Brigit. (Brenneman 78). Mythologically, the salamander is a lizard-like monster whose cold body enables it to thrive in fire (Coitir).

The gift of healing sprains is a ritual practice connected with a particular place—Kileery Cemetery in County Sligo—very near where Patricia lives. The ritual that takes place here is significant for its connection to the sunwise turn, deiseal. In Kileery Cemetery there is a triangular-shaped configuration of seven round stones, at the head of which stands a tall stone with delicate strings tied around it. Patricia explained that she would rotate each stone this way, demonstrating a clockwise motion with her hand, as she repeated the Hail Mary and the Our Father for each of seven turns. Her brother, Frankie Kelly, commented that should she turn the stones the opposite direction she would possibly instead be issuing a curse. This information seemed to come as a surprise to Patricia for in the modern healing context, the Catholic overlay has become so strong as to
overshadow the ancient pagan aspects of these traditions (Clancy and Kelly, interview).

Once the seven rotations were made and the correct words spoken, Patricia removed a string from the tall standing stone, replacing it with one she had brought. The “blessed” string (incidentally, a red string) would go around her daughter's sprained ankle when we returned to the house, and when it wore off or broke, the sprain would be healed.

W. G. Wood-Martin, in his *Traces of the Elder Faiths, vol.2*, writes of the “straining strings” to be found at *Kileery Cemetery* in County Sligo and their long history of use in that county. He recounts stories from the Sligo County Infirmary of patients coming in to be healed sporting red threads, for apparently red was at one time a significant part of this healing charm, and he records the following verse in conjunction with the ritual: “Roan tree and red thread put the witches to their speed” (72). Somewhat contradictorily, he also notes that Irish and highland women used the color red to keep witches at bay (275).
The healing ritual at *Kileery Cemetery* struck me as remarkably like what I had experienced at the holy wells I had thus far visited—for I already knew that the well must be circumnavigated sunwise, north to south, left to right and that the ritual pattern was often to make seven rotations. With each round, a pebble would be placed at the mouth of the well. This ritual is performed in silent meditation, and one may think of a particular individual or need as the rounds are made. At the end of seven rounds, the supplicant kneels at the well and can either bless himself or herself with the water, drink the water, or take water away for future use.
Visiting with Patricia and her extended family yielded much more delightful information regarding the folklore associated with healing. For instance, the “Seventh Son of the Seventh Son” is one who has the power to heal many types of afflictions, and as anyone could imagine, is a rare individual indeed. Patricia and Frankie's brother-in-law is a blood-stopper, a gift I am familiar with as I know it to be practiced in the Appalachian mountains. Like many healing arts it is passed from male to female or from female to male. Whooping cough in children is cured with a variation of the passing through ritual; the Kellys say that in Ireland, a child is passed under the belly of a donkey three times.

In addition to citing the very example the Kellys shared with me, Wood-Martin gives many more, often alluding to particular words that must be spoken or protocols adhered to that could only be known by those participating in the rituals. What follows is a very descriptive example of a passing through ritual from North Carolina—linking it to a similar rite in the British Isles:

North Carolina curative ritual, for example, involves the child's eating, not only bread which the donkey has tasted, but hairs clipped from the animal itself: A father was observed passing his little son under a donkey and lifting him over its back a certain number of times, with as much solemnity and precision as if engaged in the performance of a sacred duty. This done, the father took a piece of bread cut from an untasted loaf which he offered the animal to bite at. The donkey took hold of the bread with his teeth, and the
father severed the outer portion of the slice from that in the donkey's mouth. He
next clipped some hairs from the neck of the animal and cut them up and
mixed them with the bread, which he crumbled. He offered this food to the
boy who had been passed around the donkey and he now ate it while the
animal was removed. The process is varied somewhat in the British Isles, or
actually reversed, by the fact that the donkey eats food from the child's lap
after the passing-under ritual (Hand “Passing Through” 394).23

Perhaps one of the most intriguing forms of passing through involved the ritual
use of fire. The book of Deuteronomy explicitly decries this practice of passing
one's children through the fire:

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you
must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one
shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through
fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a
sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts and spirits, or
seeks oracles from the dead (Deuteronomy 18:9-11).

In Ireland, this rite persisted for some time, late enough that James Ffrench is
told of it first-hand:

A gentleman who was standing by these fires in the County Cork told the

23 This example comes from the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore 6
p.67 no 421.
writer that on the night of celebration he saw little children and cattle passed through the fires. The little children, very sparsely clothed, were made to draw up their legs under them, and two young men would each catch the child by an arm, and whisk it so briskly through the flames that the fire would not rest upon it or the child be in any way injured. The young people of both sexes also jumped through the fire (53).

As will be seen in the following chapter, passing through rituals found their way to the southern and Appalachian regions of the United States. Appalachia’s Celtic connections are well known, though it is uncertain exactly how so many commonalities could exist between the lands of Ireland and say, Tennessee and North Carolina. These lands were settled by the Scotch-Irish, English, and Germans—people who certainly shared a Gallic connection with Ireland—though not a direct link. Most interestingly, these passing through rituals often do directly reference the sun.
Chapter 9
Sun Orientation in Southern & Appalachian Folklore

This chapter will look at several examples of healing traditions and practices, on this side of the Atlantic (many in the Appalachian region of the United States) that reference sun orientation. To some extent, it also addresses whether the Scotch-Irish, those Lowland Scots who in the sixteenth century were brought into Northern Ireland to settle Ulster, dividing Ireland between the Protestant north and the Catholic south, could have been partly responsible for bringing traditions relating to sun orientation to Appalachia. Ireland certainly retained much of its pre-Christian past, which became integrated into its Christian rites, traditions, and stories—whether Catholic or Protestant. This unique blending of the ancient pagan world and the more recent Christian one are what make Irish culture so mysterious, so rich, and so singular.

Scholars have speculated on what the real relationship may have been between the Irish and the Lowland Scots who the English brought in to settle the Ulster region. Certainly there was animosity, but were there also shared traditions? Were the Ulster Scots, later to call themselves the Scotch-Irish, eager to rekindle their ancient religious practices, including those at holy wells, having been likely persecuted in Scotland?

In a text entitled *Ulster and North America: Transatlantic Perspectives on the*
Scotch-Irish, S. J. Connolly references Scotch-Irish superstitions as practiced in Ulster. She says,

In the early nineteenth century, Ulster Presbyterians continued to live as if in a universe of unseen forces that some could manipulate either for good or for evil. But references to their regard for fairy bushes and even holy wells make clear that the magical beliefs of Lowland Scotland had by now become inextricably intermingled with those of Catholic Ulster (32).

Clearly, closely related forms of superstitious healing practices, common in Ireland, are recorded in folkloric archives in North Carolina—an area of this country where many Scotch Irish settled. Among these are examples of passing through and examples of conjury and witchcraft where words are stated backwards, unfortunate occurrences force the necessity to walk backwards, and clothes must be worn inside out to protect the wearer. The following passage would indicate that these practices came from a variety of European and African sources:

The negroes of central Georgia say that if a rabbit crosses the road ahead of you, you should not only cross yourself, at the same time making a cross on the ground and spitting in it, but also walk backwards over the spot where the rabbit’s path intersects your own. A similar tradition prevails among the negroes of Virginia and Maryland. Unless soft soap and baking mixtures are stirred continually in the same direction, they will not be
successful. It may be added that the direction, even when not indicated (as in a case from North Carolina), is probably not a matter of indifference. In versions of the superstition current in several other states the proper direction is "with the sun" perhaps a survival of the dextral, or sunwise, circuit so common in certain savage rites.²⁴

In some cases merely turning an article of clothing inside out serves to avert the witch's spell, the popular notion apparently being that the changed appearance prevents the witch from recognizing her victim. In western North Carolina those disturbed by nightmare drive away the troublesome visitor by getting out of bed and turning their shoes over.²⁵ It is a matter of common knowledge that turning the stockings inside out before retiring prevents disturbance from witches. In central Georgia negroes keep away spirits and witches by wearing their coats inside out (J.A. F.-L. XII qtd. in Cross 276).²⁶

Some of these examples clearly point to African traditions, perhaps of the Gullah people who have retained many West African nature-based religious ideas into

²⁴ Cross footnotes this section extensively with personal commentary and examples and counterexamples from Journal of American Folklore and other sources.
²⁵ Cross's footnote for this item reads as follows: J. A. F.-L., v (1892), 115. In the vicinity of Zionville, North Carolina, putting on a garment wrong side out in the morning is regarded as a portent of ill luck for the day. If a woman unwittingly puts on her dress inside out, she will have good luck inside of twelve hours (Karl Knortz, Zur amerikanischen Volkskunde, Tiubingen, 1905, p. 5). So in some sections of the Carolina mountains (J. A. F.-L., ia, 101).
²⁶ Wayland D. Hand provides many more examples in an article entitled, “Folk Curing: The Magical Component.” This article also cites many instances of healing practices reported in North Carolina that involve reversals and sun orientation. See pp. 44-49.
this century. Compare these to traditions of some Appalachian German settlers, keeping in mind that the word *widdershins* is of German origin: A West Virginia woman named Dovie Lambert is interviewed at length about witchcraft in the West Virginia mountains in Gerald Milnes' *Signs, Cures, and Witchery*. Dovie's world view is, in this 2007 book, colored by an understanding of good and evil that can only be explained in terms of the presence of black and white magic. She claims to be able to detect a witch and has mechanisms of defense that have long been part of her German heritage. Dovie uses an elaborate system of ticket writing, related to the *Himmelsbrief*, which translates as “letter from heaven,” a tradition brought to Germany by an Irish monk in the seventh century, as a way of warding off evil and misfortune (79). If a ticket is placed over the door of a home, a witch will be forced to enter backward. Dovie says, “Witches represent the other, something different from normal, and as such, they may be forced to do things in the reverse—or backward” (80).

Further, Dovie discusses an ancient text that witches in her area use. She calls this book the “Black Bible,” and while she does not own one, she claims to have seen a copy that a cousin possesses. Again, it is a type of reversal—a darkly conceived version of a holy Christian book, understood as the antithesis of Christianity. In frontier times, pacts with the devil became a common motif, and many notions of witches as maleficent beings were created during this time. Interestingly, vestiges of early sun veneration are still evident in Dovie's
explanation of how to become a witch. Dovie says,

Take that little [Black] Bible and go to a spring where it's a-running from
the sun. . . not towards the sun, away from the sun. Now, this one in here is
running away from the sun. And that one up yonder in the Godwin holler is
running direct toward the sun.

Take that little Black Bible and go to that stream, strip off, and wash in
there. . . and tell God you're as free from him as the water on your body. . . .
(162).

Dovie's description is remarkably similar to that described in a book called the
Key of Solomon, which Milnes says Grillot de Givry traces to the twelfth century
and even suggests may be the work of King Solomon himself—and mentioned by
the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus (162). Michael Bailey says this was a
well-known book of necromancy allegedly refuted and burned during the Middle
Ages—one of many books used by learned men such as clerics, lower-ranking
church officials (103). Ironically, the passage in question seems to be a baptismal
ritual. Milnes says, “. . . the candidate goes through a cleansing ritual of the body
in order to achieve station in the magical arts as a sorcerer” (163). Seemingly, a
different type of reversal has taken place here, one in which the participant,
possibly one of low status in the Christian hierarchy can actually gain status in the
world of necromancy—quite a threat on many levels to the status quo.

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Though doing things backwards does seem rather akin to doing things *widdershins* or *tuaithiul*, and clearly this notion has had a long association with the history of witchcraft, it is confounding how sometimes the inversion is a negative one and other times it is unquestionably interpreted as positive.

Interestingly, a North Carolina friend of mine recently shared an unusual good luck superstition from her childhood. On the first morning of every month she must get out of bed and say “rabbit, rabbit” first thing before walking down the stairs backwards. She was raised in Morocco by her Irish father. In Ireland and surrounding lands, rabbits are often associated with witches.²⁷ Likewise, in the following examples, it is not necessarily so that backwards is malevolent, but that the reversal itself provides a positive result. As Cross explains,

> A considerable number of witch-spells and counter-charms are justified by the wide-spread popular belief that reversal in process involves reversal in result; if doing a thing one way works good, doing it the opposite way produces evil. Thus Christian symbols and formulae, so often employed against witchcraft,²⁸ are used in reverse order by the witches themselves. For example, in Alabama witches conjure by saying the Lord's Prayer backwards.²⁹ On the Eastern Shore of Maryland reading the Bible forwards, very properly prevents injury from ghosts after they have got into the house,

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²⁷ William George Black provides several examples of this type of folklore on pp 86-87 of his article “The Hare in Folk-Lore,” from 1883.
²⁸ Cross provides several footnoted examples from past *Journals of American Folklore*.
²⁹ Cross quotes F.D.Bergen's, *Animal and Plant Lore*. Many additional examples are provided in the author’s footnotes.
but, strange to say, reading it backwards prevents them from entering (Cross 274-76).  

In the case of *passing through*, one can find specific practices that could be linked to the Celtic concepts of *deiseal* and *tuaithuil* or *withershins*, for the direction in which these practices are observed in regard to the sun seems to matter. For example, a cure for an enlarged navel in North Carolina contains a wealth of detail:

> When a baby has an enlarged navel, wedge open a white oak tree and pull him through. If the tree goes back together and lives, the baby will live. If it doesn't, the baby will die, too. On putting a child through a tree, first observe that it must be early in the spring before the tree begins to vegetate; secondly, that the tree must be split as near east and west as it can. Thirdly, it must be done as the sun is rising. Fourthly, the child must be stripped quite naked; fifthly, it must be put through the tree feet foremost; sixthly, it must be turned around with the sun, and observe that it must be put through three times; and next that you must be careful to close the tree in a proper manner and bind it up close (Hand 383).  

In yet another example, “. . . rheumatism and lumbago, were treated in the

Pennsylvania German country by having the patient crawl through a warm horse collar three times in succession towards the sun” (Brendle and Unger qtd. in Hand, “Passing Through” 395).

Traditional healing practices on this side of the Atlantic mirror those of ancient Europe, though, as might be expected, people once added their own colloquial twists to the rites. That the sun and our orientation to it has for so long continued to play a role in traditional beliefs is what makes this information relevant. One might think that our orientation to the sun really no longer matters; scientifically speaking it will not heal a child to be passed through an opening in the direction of the sun, though it may indeed have a “placebo” effect. However, one’s right relation to the sun does matter, and now in the twenty-first century we certainly know this intellectually, whereas our ancestors understood it viscerally. We turn to heated homes and offices, modern hospitals, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, well-stocked grocery stores, and electronic amusements. Our ancestors turned to the hearth or the communal fire, and hoped, even more than we do, for the return of spring.
Chapter 10

A Relationship Hangs in the Balance

There are scholars who see little evidence of an ancient Irish sun cult, among them Proinsias McCana, a highly regarded expert on Celtic mythology (Celtic Myths 32). Indeed, language matters here, for sun-worship differs from sun veneration, and Dara Molloy, too, would say that the Irish did not “worship” the sun but rather “associated” with it (interview). Having begun my own journey with a contemplative walk, deiseal, around the holy well at Glendalough, I am inclined to think that veneration most aptly describes the Irish attitude toward the sun. Folkloric references manifesting in living traditions, archaeological evidence and that which comes from the interpretation of visual symbols, paired with what we can ascertain from historical sources who wrote of the ancient Celts and their myths, lend credence to this understanding of the Irish worldview.

Evidence also suggests that Ireland was by no means an isolated nation, and sun veneration may have been widely practiced in the ancient world, though in chapter one, we found that orientation to the sun was understood differently even by European cultures existing in the same hemisphere. Despite this apparent confusion, the Celtic sunwise way is well documented, though it is difficult to ascertain just how long the ritual has been practiced. In chapter two, we looked at the myth of Lugh and Balor, two Irish sun gods, one benevolent, one malevolent whose mythic battle at Moytura was once marked each year at the harvest festival
of Lughnasa. Many holy wells and sacred high places are associated with
Lughnasa, and in chapter three, several of these are discussed. Chapters four and
five focus on one of Ireland's most revered Christian saints, Brigit, also thought by
some to have been a pre-Christian goddess. These two chapters discuss Brigit's
miracles, her association with the sun and the possibility that her cross may also
be a sun symbol. Chapter six looks at Irish kingship rituals and the figure of
Cailleach Bhéarra, one manifestation of the sovereignty queen. In the seventh
century, Tírechán implied that the “circuit of kings” was deiseal, but in chapter
seven, we saw that Christianity possibly adopted this sunwise way, and its
opposite, tuaithiul or withershins, became associated with pre-Christian ways—as
would the notion of evil and witchcraft. With the rise of Christianity, many
traditions associated with old ways became viewed as sinister. This trend sadly
captured thousands of women in its flood, often positioning them in opposition to
God as they practice their time-honored skills, usually associated with healing.
Rituals once closely aligned with deities were flipped to become the antithesis of
alignment with the Deity.

Chapter eight looked at the various ways folk healing, particularly examples
connected to sun orientation, survived in Ireland despite the associations with
witchcraft that came to be associated with the old ways, and chapter nine
addressed how some of these same practices have manifested on this side of the
Atlantic, primarily in the Appalachian region.
The relationship between human well-being and the sun is scientifically indisputable. Small wonder, then, that sun veneration is so ubiquitous across continents and cultures, that rituals developed to affirm the appropriate connection to the heavenly sphere. Small wonder that heavenly bodies became associated with divinity and that as Christianity rose in prominence, a battle ensued between old beliefs and new—pagan and Christian—feminine and masculine. As strict dichotomies were established, as this new religion grew institutionalized (even though in its earliest forms, evidence suggests it was refreshingly egalitarian), Christianity seems to have set itself historically in an oppositional stance to the feminine half of humanity. And yet, in Celtic Christianity, a singular blending of the ancient pagan traditions and the new Christian ones blossomed into something quite unique.

In Ireland, more so than in many other places, the pre-Christian rites, including many vestiges of sun veneration, were absorbed into the Christian traditions, creating a unique type of religiosity known as Celtic Christianity. And, though in modern Ireland today many people, particularly the young, eschew the teachings of the Irish Catholic church, pilgrimages to holy wells, holy mountains, and shrines and regular observance of pattern or patron days at these sites still continue, bearing remnants of the ancient past right into the twenty-first century. Some modern Irish Christians, Protestant and Catholic, view these practices as quaint, old fashioned—even improper in current times, for the connection to the
pagan past is recognized and devalued. Modern scientific beings have no use for ancient beliefs, myths, and stories. Or do they?

Ironically, as our relationship to our sun falls increasingly out of balance and scientists provide us with more and more shocking evidence of extreme climate change, United States Representative John Shimkus, who recently sought to head our House Energy and Commerce Committee, is quoted as saying, “God won’t allow global warming” (Dolan). Shimkus based his entire argument on the book of Genesis where God says he will never again destroy the earth with a flood. Shimkus follows in the footsteps of now deceased Liberty University founder, Jerry Falwell, who famously bragged in 2002 about his family's two SUVs and encouraged all listeners to Pat Robertson’s 700 Club to buy an SUV, too. In this particular instance, Falwell, in his inimitable style, attacked the EEN, Evangelical Environmental Network, a group of his fellow Evangelical Christians advocating for responsible stewardship of God’s creation. He accused their founder of being an “earth worshipper” (Corn).

The tension between this notion of Christian and pagan has persisted into the twenty-first century and found its way into what many regard as one of the most pressing issues of the present day, climate change. For example:

Dr. James Wanliss, Associate Professor of Physics at Presbyterian College, has written The Green Dragon, a book about how environmentalism is
actually committed to “the reconstruction of a pagan world order” and “rejection of Christian spirituality.” Wanliss argues that the environmental movement “is a religion with a vision of sin and repentance, heaven and hell. It even has a special vocabulary, with words like ‘sustainability’ and ‘carbon neutral.’ Its communion is organic food. Its sacraments are sex, abortion, and when all else fails, sterilization. Its saints are Al Gore and the InterGovernmental Panel on Climate Change” (*Climate: The New God*).

Granted that this is an extreme point-of-view, but notice how the language, “Its communion is organic food. Its sacraments are sex, abortion, and when all else fails, sterilization,” seems to mimic the attitude of those who would vilify women as witches centuries ago. The language is that of opposition, suggesting that what is presented here is the reverse of what is right and proper. The conflation of environmentalism and paganism is clearly demonstrated. Many more examples could certainly be cited, but Falwell epitomized the religious right’s opposition to the issue. He believed that climate change was nothing short of a vast political conspiracy to take the Christian focus off of their single platform: the highly fraught issue of abortion.

Zooming across the Atlantic to County Kildare, Ireland, Sisters Mary Minehan and Phil Ó Shea have recently celebrated *Imbolc*, a time when the lighting of fires and care of the hearth are of special import. Mary and Phil are part of the *Solas*
Bhríde community and an outreach group called Cáirde Bhríde (Friends of Brigid), who work to promote peace, justice, and reconciliation (Minehan 14). At Solas Bhríde, the sisters are keepers of Brigit's flame, once a perpetual fire thought to have burned until the sixteenth century. Though hard times have fallen on people across the world, particularly many in Ireland, Mary and Phil have a dream of expanding the modest scale of Solas Bhríde into a center worthy of honoring Brigit and the values she represents. Here, they hope, the perpetual flame can be rekindled.

Celtic tradition holds the fire sacred—in temple and hearth—and somehow in its symbolic manifestations seems to feel no tension between what is Christian and what is pre-Christian. Both are invoked and seemingly needed for dealing with the many hardships that life can bring to bear on humans. This is deeply and lovingly expressed in turn of the century hearth rhymes, the first of which is from the Carmina Gadelica and would begin the Celtic day:

I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven . . .
God, kindle thou my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbour,
To my foe, to my friend, to my knave, to the thrall,
O son of the loveliest Mary,
From the lowliest thing that liveth
To the Name that is highest of all (Minehan 27).

And, the day would end thus:

As I save this fire tonight
Even so may Christ save me.

On the top of the house let Mary,

Let Bride in its middle be,

Let eight of the mightiest angels

Round the throne of the Trinity

Protect this house and its people

Till the dawn of the day shall be. (Minehan 27).

Yes, the sun is our life force—no matter where we reside on this planet and regardless of the particulars of our religious beliefs. No wonder it has been always associated with our deities. It is surely a mistake to understand this relationship between the heavens and earth as anything other than as it should be—a balance that must be maintained—as must that between the light and the darkness, feminine and masculine, self and other. To lose sight of this is to be lost, out of kilter, and out of control. Appalachian author, essayist, and poet Wendell Berry also understands this essential balance, and expresses so simply how it is to be achieved in his poem from 1998, simply entitled, “Grace”:
Grace

for Gurney Norman, quoting him

The woods is shining this morning.
Red, gold and green, the leaves
lie on the ground, or fall,
or hang full of light in the air still.
Perfect in its rise and in its fall, it takes
the place it has been coming to forever.
It has not hastened here, or lagged.
See how surely it has sought itself,
its roots passing lordly through the earth.
See how without confusion it is
all that it is, and how flawless
its grace is. Running or walking, the way
is the same. Be still. Be still.
“He moves your bones, and the way is clear”.
Figure 16 The Burren
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Vitae

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Education
• Wake Forest University: Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, Spring 2004-present
• Clemson University: MFA Sculpture, May 1990
• Appalachian State University: BS Art Education, July 1978-May 1985, Magna Cum Laude, NC Teacher Certification
• UNC-Greensboro: August 1977-May 1978

Professional Experience
• Artist:
  • Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County: Regional Artist Grant, 2000-2001

Weatherspoon Art Museum, UNCG, Greensboro, NC
• Associate Curator of Education: part-time, October 2009-present.
• Assistant Curator of Education: part-time: February 2008-October 2009

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC
• Project Director: Contemporary Art Classroom: November 2007-May 2008

• Curator of Education: February 1994-November 2007
  • Co-administrate SECCA’s Programs Department with responsibility for oversight of the education programs.
  • Work with curators to develop interpretive strategies for SECCA exhibitions
  • Develop educational programs for diverse audiences, including adults, university students, teachers, families, and children
  • Plan and present artist lectures, symposia, performances, panel
discussions, and film/video series as budgets allow
• Organize artist residencies
• Organize community and school-based exhibitions for SECCA’s
  Community Gallery
• Curate exhibitions that enhance the educational mission of the museum
• Foster collaboration with other arts and community venues
• Write grants
• Write and design educational materials
• Train docents and mentor interns
• Evaluate programs and the work of program staff
• Administer the education budget

• **Education Coordinator:** May 1991 - February 1994
  Education Department head with responsibility for oversight of education,
  performance, and film programs.

• **Assistant Education Coordinator:** June 1990 - May 1991
  Focus on developing a relationship between SECCA and the Winston-
  Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WS/FCS)

**Clemson University**
• **Teaching Assistant:** August 1988 - May 1990
  Design projects for sculpture and beginning design classes; Conduct
  classroom presentations, slide lectures, and oral critiques; Grade and
  complete written evaluations of student work

**Watauga High School**
• **Art Teacher:** August 1987 - June 1988
  Teach Art I and Art II classes, part-time; Grade and evaluate student work

**Mountain Pathways School**
• **Arts Coordinator:** August 1987 - June 1988.
  Develop K-6 art program for a small private school in its first year of
  operation; Organize school displays, exhibitions and special events

**Kinderhaus School of Boone**
• **Teacher:** Summer 1984, 1985, and 1986
  Arts program
• **Teacher:** September 1985 - May 1986.
  Private art class
S.H.A.P.E.S. Montessori School  
• **Art Instructor and Teacher:** Part time and Summer 1978 - 1981.

**Selected Exhibitions, Workshops, Presentations, and Programs**

• *Residency with artist Stacy Lynn Waddell:* This program included an artist lecture; teacher workshop and week-long residency for Bessemer Elementary School 4th and 5th grade students. Funded by the United Arts Council of Greensboro. February 2011.

• *WAM Teen Art Guides:* developed to introduce teens to museum careers, offer meaningful volunteer opportunities, and teach about modern and contemporary art. The program is ongoing on a semester-long basis and began February 2011.

• *Art After Dark:* co-designed a series of evening workshops for adults focusing on ways to discover works in the Weatherspoon’s gallerys via interdisciplinary activities such as writing, movement, drawing and theatrical experiences. Programs began in March of 2010, funded by the North Carolina Arts Council, and are now ongoing.

• *Contemporary Art Classroom (CAC):* created to introduce high school art students and art teachers to the work of contemporary artists while teaching them how to view, question, and evaluate works in a museum or gallery setting. The pilot program took place in winter 2007. The project continued through Spring 2008 with funding from RJ Reynolds, The Winston-Salem Foundation, The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, and the WS/FC Schools. Outcomes included a theme-based contemporary art curriculum and a series of residencies in four high schools with artists James Esber and Bill Fick.

• *Susan Jamison: Tatting Tales:* organized this one-person exhibition in SECCA’s Overlook Gallery, Fall 2007.

• *The Winston-Salem Chapter of The Black Panthers:* co-curated this local exhibition for SECCA’s Community Gallery in conjunction with Black Panther Rank and File, a national traveling exhibition, Fall 2007.

• *Gwen Bigham: Coil:* organized this one-person exhibition in SECCA’s Balcony Gallery, October 2006.

• *Barnstormers “Storm” East:* designed, organized and secured funding for a weeklong project with David Ellis and Kenji Hirata, two members of the Brooklyn-based collective Barnstormers, who worked with students from East
Forsyth High School, and art teachers in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School system. The project culminated in a 10 minute long “motion painting” on DVD, March-May 2006.

- **Homegrown Artist Forum**: organized this day-long symposium in conjunction with **Homegrown: Southeast**. Summer 2005.

- **Homegrown: Southeast**: co-curated this exhibition comprising the work of twenty-seven southeastern artists and one artist collective, summer, 2005.

- **Drawn and Quartered**: co-curated this seven artist exhibition, 2003.


- **Artist and the Community: Lesley Dill**: co-organized and guided 16 month-long community residency for the **Tongues On Fire: Visions and Ecstasy** project, culminating in an exhibition of new artworks derived from community stories, a series of public billboards and a “Spiritual Sing,” with the Emmanuel Baptist Church Spiritual Choir, 2000-2001.

- **Art of Our Time**: taught an 8 hour course offered through the Salem College Continuing Studies Program, April 1999.

- **Artists As Catalysts for Museums and Communities**: participated in a dialogue organized by Jennifer Dowley, Director, Museums and Visual Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, for the American Association of Museums Conference, Cleveland, Ohio, April 1999.

- **Urban Oases: Public Places**: designed and organized a public art symposium in conjunction with the SECCA exhibition “Maya Lin: Topologies,” March 1998.

- **Winston Lake Park Youth Landscape Project**: designed, implemented, and secured funding for a six week project with community youth (ages 13-17) to develop landscaping for the entrance to Winston Lake Park. This program is an outreach component of SECCA’s public art project with artist/architect Maya Lin. Spring 1997 – 2000.

- **Community Through Childrens’ Eyes**: organized and moderated a panel for the

• Interpretation/Working Group: with SECCA’s Executive Director, presented a session discussing the Artist and the Community program and Fred Wilson’s installation at Old Salem for the AAM Conference: Presenting Ourselves: Interpretation of Community Issues and Local Culture, Cincinnati, OH, January 1997.

• Artist and the Community: Willie Birch: organized a six week residency with artist, Willie Birch, culminating in two highly visible public art projects designed by 4th, 5th and 6th grade students, included staff development for area teachers, September - October 1995.

• Art and the Environment: Initiated and designed a five-week summer collaboration with the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School’s Summer Enrichment program. SECCA initially directed a satellite program for 20 children, 4th-6th grades in 1995-1996. From 1996-2007 Art and the Environment was administered solely by SECCA, with 10 sessions each summer, serving approximately 120 children, ages 5-14.

• Tying It Together: A Fiber Forum: designed and organized a one-day conference addressing traditional and contemporary expression in fiber media, January 1995.

• Forgotten Spaces: organized and secured funding for a two week residency program pairing community dancers with the Demetrius Klein Dance Company, culminating in two public performances in a historically and culturally significant community site: Atkins Middle School’s old gymnasium. Program included staff development for dance educators. Spring 1994.

• ReVisioning History: designed and organized this symposium as part of Artist and the Community: Fred Wilson, October 1994.

• Artist and the Community: Tim Rollins: organized staff development and residency with the artist and at-risk students in two public schools. The program focused on the creation of a collaborative artwork based on Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage, March 1994.

• Lift Off: co-designed and secured funding for a 60 hour series of “train the trainer” workshops and practicum with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, in
collaboration with Children’s Theatre Board. Program carried 6 hours of renewal certification credit, October 1993 - June 1994.

• Art in Collaboration with Nature: co-presented a week-long workshop at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT), Cullowhee, N.C., October 1992.

Published Essays
• “Contemporary Voices From the American Southeast” in Homegrown: Southeast 2005, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 2005.

• “Singing Forth the Spirit” in Lesley Dill: Tongues On Fire: Visions and Ecstasy, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 2001

• “Artist and the Community” in Artist and the Community: Mr. Imagination, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1999


• “And Be Together” in Willie Birch: From Bertrandville to Brooklyn, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1995


Personal and Professional Grants and Awards
• Richter Grant, Wake Forest University. Awarded for international study in Ireland, Summer 2009.
• Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County: Regional Artist Grant, 2000-2001
• North Carolina Art Education Association: Museum Art Educator of the Year, 1994 - 1995
• North Carolina Arts Council: Project Grant, 1994-1995
**Personal Exhibitions**

- *Meeting of Minds: Claudia Moore Clark & Terri Dowell-Dennis*, Salem College Fine Art Center, August-October 2010.

  *Acts of Creation*: Two month project with eight cognitively disabled adults at the Winston-Salem Enrichment Center resulting in an exhibition at the Enrichment Center’s Gateway Gallery, Summer, 2010.


- *Blurring Racial Barriers*, Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University, January-March 2006; Salem College Fine Art Center Gallery, March-April 2006

- ADA Gallery, Richmond, Virginia, November 2004

- *New Realism*, ADA Gallery, Richmond, Virginia, Summer 2004

- Thirty-second Annual Competition for NC Artists, juror: Herb Parker, Fayetteville Museum of Art, March -May, 2004

- *Thresholds: Expressions of Art and Spiritual Life*, Curator: Eleanor Heartney, exhibition opened at City Gallery at Waterfront Park, Charleston, SC, December 4, 2003-February 1, 2004 (Exhibition traveled to museums and galleries in five Southeastern states through December, 2006.)

- *Symbolic Objects (Religion, Spirituality and the Object)*: Indianapolis Art Center, Indianapolis, Indiana, December 2003-January 2004 (cancelled due to budget shortfall)

- * Taken from Life*: Theatre Art Galleries, High Point, NC, Summer 2003


- *Woman’s Work*: Davidson College, Davidson, N.C., January-March 2003
• *Come Closer*, Salem College Fine Art Center, Winston-Salem, N.C., November 2001-January 2002

• Regional Artist Grant Award Exhibition, Sawtooth Center for Visual Art, Winston-Salem, N.C., November 2001-January 2002


• Appalachian State University Alumni Exhibition, October-November, 1995.

• Clemson University Alumni Exhibition, October-November, 1995

• Cedar Creek Gallery Sculpture Invitational, Juror: Sherry Edwards, 1st Place Merit Award, Creedmore, N.C., March-May 1995.

• The 10th Annual Women’s Center Art Show, Chapel Hill, N.C., February - March 1994.

• Carlton Gallery Fall Exhibition, Foscoe, N.C., October - November. 1993.
• Eighth Annual Caldwell Arts Council Sculpture Competition, Juror: Dr. Murry N. DePillars, 1st Place Merit Award, Lenoir, N.C., August 1993.


• Faculty Choice Alumni Exhibition, Catherine Smith Gallery, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C., April 1991.


• Virginia Intermont College Gallery, Bristol, Virginia, February 1991.

• Dimensions 90, Juror: Jerald Melberg, 1st Place 3-D Excellence Award, Sawtooth Center for the Visual Arts, 1990.

• 5th Annual Indoor Outdoor Sculpture Competition, Juror: Bob Doster, 1st Place Merit Award, Lenoir, N.C., 1990.

• LaGrange National, Juror: Kathleen Gauss, Juror's Merit Award, Lamar Dodd Art Center, LaGrange, Georgia, 1990.

• Thesis Exhibition, Rudolph E. Lee Gallery, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, May 1990.


• Clemson University MFA Gallery: invitational print show, 1989.


• Blue Mountain Art Gallery, Boone, N.C., August 1986.

• Blue Mountain Gallery, June 1985.

**Recent Community / Professional Service**

• Guest curator: Undergraduate Student exhibition: High Point University, April 2010.

• Juror: Undergraduate Art Awards: East Carolina University, April 2009.

• Juror: *Art Expo*: Appalachian State University, March 2009.

• Juror: Weaver Academy Fine Arts and Technology Magnet High School, Greensboro, NC, February 2009.

• Juror: Scholastic Art Awards, January 2008

• Exhibition Committee, Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, 2007

• Juror: Artisphere, Greenville, SC, 2007

• Board member, Hispanic Arts Initiative, 2004-2006