

SAINT PATRICK'S WORLD

THE CHRISTIAN CULTURE OF
IRELAND'S APOSTOLIC AGE



Translations and Commentaries by

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Women Founders of Churches

St Patrick in his writings twice refers to "monks and virgins of Christ" among his converts. What does he mean by this? The circumstances of the fifth century in Ireland, when bishops were being appointed to Christian communities which must have been islands in a pagan sea, were hardly conducive to the establishment of such monasteries as we know of in later times. Patrick himself was clearly (at the time of which he wrote) an active and vigorous evangelist, converting whole pagan communities, and it may—just—have been possible for him to found small communities of monks or nuns. But we know of no monastic communities which go back to the fifth century. A possible exception is Kildare; but virtually all the famous monasteries we know of in early Ireland, either were founded later (usually considerably later) than AD 500, or were founded as bishops' churches and only became monastic establishments, governed by abbots, at some subsequent date. This applies, for example, to Armagh, to Emlý, to Ardmore, to Sleaty.

But the monastic movement was already an active and powerful influence on the Western church as well as on the Eastern, by the early fifth century. St Ambrose had encouraged it. St Martin of Tours (whose Life had a wide circulation in Ireland) was a pioneer in the West both in monasticism and in evangelizing missions to the rural pagans. St Jerome not only greatly encouraged monasticism but devised rules of life for those who wished to withdraw from the world and live chaste lives dedicated to the salvation of their souls within Roman society. In particular he provided rules of life for well-to-do women who wished to withdraw within their own households. There are hints in St Patrick's writings of a somewhat similar approach to the spiritual direction of high-born women, in a barbarian society very different from the urban world of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Yet he knew of that world, and thought of it as his own. It is plain from his words that he was conscious of, and valued, his Roman citizenship.

The Life of St Darerca printed here (there are other versions) would appear—if we prune away a comparatively small accrescence of folk

miracle-tales and a few diplomatic insertions (such as the obligatory appearance of St Patrick in the story)—to give us a plausible outline of the career of a female founder of the period. She is represented as a pious woman directed by a (male) spiritual counsellor; first of all to lead a regulated life, under vows, in her own home; then to gather some kindred spirits around her; then to undergo a test, or trial, as an anchoress; then to become superior of a large community of nuns.

There are some parallels with the Life of St Brigid by Cogitosus (pp. 207-224.) This is the earliest Life of an Irish saint we possess, and it is possibly the first written—as Muirchú seems to tell us, The Life of Columba written by his successor Adomnán towards the end of the seventh century appears to quote from an earlier book on Columba written by Cumméne Ailbe, abbot of Iona from 657 to 669, which must have been close in date to Cogitosus's work. But it has not survived. Cogitosus, round the middle of the seventh century, tells us nothing that can give us reliable information about the founder of Kildare, whoever she was. What he has gathered together is a collection of folk tales, many of them not particularly Christian in form or content—probably retellings of old stories of pagan times. Aware of this to some extent, he links his little anecdotes with short commentaries, or "morals", in which what he is saying, each time, is that this or that extraordinary suspension of the laws of nature is due to the power of God working through St Brigid. Since many of the stories told about her are to be found in the Lives of the handful of other female saints who attracted the attention of the hagiographers, we are almost forced to conclude that these are stories told originally about the goddess, or goddesses, of whom the most widespread name is Brig[íd], but who is known by different names in different localities.

"Brigid" the church foundress certainly existed. The nature and importance of Kildare for many centuries are indisputable testimony to the foundation (probably close to the year 500) of a major episcopal church under female governance. The Old Irish Life of St Brigid—which is not as old as that by Cogitosus and is not given here—retains a tradition that St Brigid, "by mistake", was herself consecrated a bishop. Cogitosus is careful to avoid this story, but his awareness of it is shown in his introductory section, where what he says, in effect, is that Brigid was bishop in all but name. We know nothing for certain about her, therefore, although, along with Patrick and Columba, she was regarded as one of the three patrons of Ireland. Her foundation at Kildare, as is plain from Cogitosus's Life, was in later times a dual monastery (for men and women, who lived in separate but associated establishments) and was presided over by an abbess, who had a bishop as her coadjutor. Brigid is said to have lived in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. According to one tradition, she stemmed from a population group called *Fotharta*, apparently from a branch which occupied lands to the east of Bri

Éile; that is, on the western edge of the Bog of Allen. Other legend has it that she was born in Faughart, Co. Louth, in the "Gap of the North", one of the chief strategic passes into Ulster. The similarity of the two names probably gave rise to a misreading at some time. Cogitosus (our earliest witness, for what that is worth—which is not much, in this kind of testimony) says that she was of the *Uí Eachach*, of whom there were several groups in the Louth, Armagh, Down area; that is, the country around Faughart.

In the stories she is associated with other saints, of whom, inevitably, St Patrick is one. But she is also connected with two of the so-called "pre-Patrician" saints of the south. One is Ibar, who founded a bishop's church on Becc Ériu in Wexford Harbour. The other is Ailbe of Emly. An Ibarus appears as the second name in the medieval lists of the bishops of Kildare. The name of *Conláedh*—said in the *Life* to have been her co-founder—does not appear first in the succession list, as might have been expected, but third.

She is said to have received the veil either at *Uisnech* (the navel of Ireland, a place with ancient mythological associations) or on Croghan Hill in Offaly (*Brí Éile*, another place of mythological significance) at the hands of the bishop Mac Caille or of bishop Mel of Ardagh. Mac Caille (whose name means "man of the veil") is a double of Mel.

The *Life* translated here was written in Latin, probably in Kildare, by a cleric of that place who calls himself Cogitosus. We get no sense from his work of the learning and discipline that are evident in the writings of Columbanus, about two generations earlier, or, for example, in the extant letter on the Easter question written by Cummian a generation or half a generation before Cogitosus's time. This is not unconnected with the genre in which Cogitosus wrote; for, by and large, Saints' Lives were popular writing and catered for the pilgrims to the monastic shrines: a form of promotional literature directed partly at early medieval tourists. They also served, however, and it was an important part of their function, as evidence for the rights, rents and dues of the churches and of the relationships in primacy and property between churches.

Cogitosus plainly had little or no real information on St Brigit, for whatever reason. His narrative consists of a string of little legendary anecdotes relating miracles performed by her during her life or after her death. Her true life was already forgotten when he wrote, but the wonder-tales (which had probably been in circulation long before her time) were remembered and re-told. And that is what we have in his account.

The *Life* of St Darerca from the *Salamanca Codex*, on the other hand—if we leave aside a few standard miracles of the type borrowed by the hagiographers from one *Life* to another—is a plausible account of the life of a monastic foundress of the beginning of the sixth century.

It may be reading too much into one name, but the statement that her father was called "Mocteus" suggests that in the original version of the

Life, or in whatever records, oral or written, the hagiographer drew upon, she was stated to be a convert, disciple, pupil or "fosterling" of St Mochta of Louth; and it is as certain as anything can be in this most obscure of periods that Mochta was a British disciple of Patrick. The introduction of St Patrick himself into Darerca's story may be discounted. Once the various churches founded throughout the country in the Apostolic age came to accept the primacy of Armagh (and, by the logic of hagiography, the consequent priority of Patrick) it became a standard assumption that the earliest Irish Christian founders of churches were Patrick's disciples.

St Ibar appears to have been in some sense St Patrick's main rival in posthumous claims to priority. (See the *Life* of Ailbe, pp. 227–243.) His connection with her must also be looked upon with some scepticism. But the other historical settings in the *Life* of Darerca are mutually consistent and plausible. And the account of how she came to govern a monastery of women is equally plausible: St Mochta (if it was he who was her spiritual guide) may well have been following—allowing for very different circumstances—the example of St Jerome. Of all the Saints' Lives, this is the one that seems to give the best—if very dim—glimpse of the Apostolic age, including in the comparison the work of Cogitosus, Muirchú and Tirechán.

There is an aspect of the early female foundations which is worth noticing. We have almost no good evidence of the existence of a male monastery before about 535–540. The early church organization was governed by bishops. This may be why there is the notion of a kind of ghost episcopacy of St Brigit (whose church at Kildare would seem to have been founded hardly much later than 500). But—even allowing for the remote possibility of an aberrant development at Kildare for a short period—female bishops could certainly not be accommodated by the Western church of that time. It may well be, then, that the great Irish monastic movement, which was to dominate the ecclesiastical history of the country from the seventh century through to the twelfth, was pioneered by communities of women from as early, perhaps, as the fifth century.

The records fail us here. The evidence for these female foundations in their earliest phase comes almost exclusively from hagiography—and this documentation, interesting in itself and for the light it sheds on the time and mind of its composers, is of very small value for understanding the period in which its heroes and heroines—the early church founders—lived. Irish hagiography is in the general pattern found in the early Church, with, of course, some local peculiarities arising from Irish culture of the early Middle Ages. The first accounts we have of Christian heroic virtue are the brief reports of the answers given by the martyrs to their interrogators during the persecutions of the Church, and of their bearing as they went to death. These are generally simple and convincing, and are often moving. Their most urgent function, probably, was to sustain the

courage of those Christian communities to whom persecution had not yet come. This purpose—edification—was retained in the Saints' Lives which developed somewhat later as a form of Christian popular literature; but when the Irish began to create their own hagiography, other intentions governed the form to a large extent. So, the saint's Life became a kind of code, to exalt its hero or heroine in competition with others, to impress (and entertain) by marvels, to define the rights and claims of the church to which the saint (usually as founder) belonged and its relationship with other churches, and, sometimes, to extol the power and virtue of the saint's relics, held in the church shrines.

The collection of texts relating to St Patrick in the Book of Armagh is quite avowedly and explicitly intended to sustain the very extensive claims of the church of Armagh to jurisdiction and rents; and the widespread recognition of the primacy of Armagh by the eighth and ninth centuries required wholesale revision of the hagiographical tradition so that Patrick, Armagh's founder, could in some sense replace or supplant or be placed in a superior relationship to the various local founders of churches throughout the country. The accounts given by Muirchú and Tirechán—different as they are from each other in purpose, method and style—are somewhat distinct therefore from the later hagiography, not only because of their comparatively early date. The later work is represented here (apart from the Life of St Darcra) by Lives of three of the four traditionally "pre-Patrician" founders—all bishops. A Life of the fourth (St Ibar) does not survive, although there was one, and there are some extant fragments. St Patrick is introduced, as it were artificially, into all three, by formulas which allow the writers both to retain a claim to the independence of their saints from Patrick, and at the same time to acknowledge his precedence. In fact it is probably safe to assume that all the late accounts of St Patrick's activities in any part of the south are fictitious.

Yet this material contains some information, mostly in the background about early centuries; although it is very difficult to tease out. The passages references to quite numerous female foundations in the early period are tantalizingly vague, but combine to indicate an aspect of the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland which has yet to receive adequate attention.

Cogitosus's Life of St Brigid *the Virgin*

[Prologue]

Brothers, you press me to begin an account of the miracles and works of the virgin Brigid, of blessed memory. I am to take heed of the example of men of learning and to consult written documents as well as people's memories.

This task which you have imposed on me involves a difficult and delicate subject, and I am poorly equipped for it because of my inadequacy, my ignorance and my lack of capacity to express myself. However, God has the power to make much of little, as when he filled the poor widow's house from a drop of oil and a handful of meal.

I must therefore be content to do as I am told, since I undertake this at your bidding. So—to avoid the fault of disobedience—I propose to try to rescue from obscurity and ambiguity some small part of that extensive tradition which has been passed down by people who are greater and more learned than I am.

In this way, all eyes may see clearly the great qualities of that virgin, who flourished in virtue. Not that my memory, my indifferent talent and my rustic style of writing are adequate for the performance of so great a task; but your cheerful faith and sustained prayer can help to make good the author's deficiencies.

The woman of whom I tell, then, grew in virtue, remarkably, and the fame of her good deeds attracted innumerable people of both sexes to come from all the territories of Ireland and gather to her, willingly making their votive offerings. Because of this, she established a monastery—on the firm foundation of the faith—in the open expanses of the plain of Life [*north Ca. Kildare*]. It is the head of virtually all the Irish churches and occupies the first place, excelling all the monasteries of the Irish. Its jurisdiction extends over the whole land of Ireland from sea to sea.

Her interest was to provide in all matters for the orderly direction of souls, and she was concerned about the churches which adhered to her in many territories. Taking thought, she decided that she could not make her foundation without a high priest who could consecrate churches and confer orders on the clergy. She called on a famous hermit, distinguished in every way, a man through whom God made much goodness manifest, to leave his hermitage and his solitary life and to come and join her in that place, so that he might rule the church with her in episcopal dignity, and so ensure that nothing of the priestly office would be lacking in her establishments.

And afterwards, this anointed principal of all the bishops, and Brigid, most blessed head of all the women, built their church in happy partnership, guided by virtue. Their episcopal and feminine see, like a fertile vine expanding everywhere in growing branches, spread throughout the whole island of Ireland.

She continues to rule (through a happy line of succession and a perpetual ceremonial) venerated by the archbishop of the Irish and by the abbess, as well as by all the Irish abbesses. In conclusion, therefore (under pressure from the brothers, as I have said) I shall try to tell of this virgin Brigid; both what she accomplished before she came to her princely office and what were her marvellous attainments afterwards. I shall make every effort to be succinct, even though my brevity may lead to some confusion in the order in which I narrate her wonderful works.

THE LIFE OF ST BRIGID

• [Her parentage]

The holy Brigid, whom God knew beforehand and whom he predestined to be moulded in his image, was born in Ireland of noble Christian parents stemming from the good and most accomplished tribe of Eochu.¹ Her father was Dubtach, her mother Broicsech. From her childhood she was dedicated to goodness. Chosen by God, the girl was of sober manners, modest and womanly, constantly improving her habit of life.

Who could give a full account of the works she performed at an early age? From the innumerable instances I shall select a few and offer them by way of example.

• [A wonderful supply of butter]

In course of time, when she came of suitable age, her mother sent her to the dairy, to churn and make butter from cows' milk, so that she too would serve in the same way as the women who were accustomed to engage in this work.² For a period she and the other women were left to themselves. At the end of the period they were required to have produced a plentiful return of milk and

Cogitonus's Life of St Brigid the Virgin

curds, and measures of churned butter. But this beautiful maiden, with generous nature, chose to obey God rather than men. She gave the milk to the poor and to wayfarers, and also handed out the butter. At the end of the period the time came for all to make a return of their dairy production: it duly came to her turn. Her co-workers could show that they had fulfilled their quota. The blessed virgin Brigid was asked if she too could present result of her labour. She had nothing to show, having given all away to the poor. She was not allowed any extension of time, and she trembled with of her mother. Burning with the fire of an inextinguishable faith, she turned to God in prayer. The Lord heard the voice of the maiden raised in prayer and responded without delay. Through the bounty of the divine will who is our help in adversity answered her faith in him by providing a plentiful supply of butter. Marvellous to behold, at the very moment of the maiden's prayer, not only was her quota seen to be filled, but her production found to be much greater than that of her fellow workers.

And they, seeing with their own eyes such a mighty marvel, praised Lord, who had done this, and thought it wonderful that such faith should have its base in Brigid's virginal heart.

• [She takes the veil]

Not long afterwards, her parents, in the ordinary way of the world, went to betrothe her to a man. But heaven inspired her to decide otherwise: she presented herself as a chaste virgin to God. She sought out the very holy bishop Mac Caille, of blessed memory. He was impressed by her heavenly long her modesty and her virginal love of chastity, and he veiled her saintly hair in a white cloth. She went down on her knees in the presence of God the bishop, and she touched the wooden base that supported the altar. The wood retains to the present day the wonderful effect of that gesture long ago: it is as green as if the sap still flowed from the roots of a flourished tree, and as if the tree had not long ago been felled and stripped of bark. Even today it cures infirmities and diseases of the faithful.

• [A wonderful supply of pork]

It seems right not to pass over another marvel which this outstanding handmaid in the divine service is said to have worked.

Once, when she was cooking pork in the boiling trough, a dog came fawning and begging, and she gave him the food out of pity. But when the pork was taken from the trough and divided among the guests (judging if its quantity had not been reduced), the amount in the trough was found to be still undiminished. Those who saw this marvelled at the girl, so of merit, so outstanding in her devotion to the faith, and they rightly spread abroad fitting praise of her wonderful works.

[Her crops remain dry in a rainstorm]

Once she gathered reapers and other workers to glean her crops, but as they assembled, a storm of rain came on the harvest. The rain poured down in torrents all over the surrounding territory, and streams of water gushed through the gulleys and ditches. Her crops alone remained dry, undisturbed by rain or storm. While all the reapers throughout the surrounding region were unable to work because of the day's downpour, her harvesters, unaffected by cloud or shadow of rain, carried on their work from dawn to dusk, through the power of God.

• [A wonderful supply of milk from one cow]

Among her other achievements, this one seems a cause for wonder.

It so happened that some bishops were coming as her guests, and she had not the wherewithal to feed them. But the manifold grace of God gave her abundant help when she needed it. She milked a cow three times in one day, contrary to what is normal. And the amount of milk she would normally obtain from three of the best cows, she drew on this extraordinary occasion from the one cow.

• [She hangs her cloak on a sunbeam]

I retail here another episode which demonstrates her sanctity; one in which what her hand did corresponded to the quality of her pure virginal mind. It happened that she was pasturing her sheep on a grassy spot on the plain when she was drenched by heavy rain, and she returned home in wet clothes. The sun shining through an aperture in the building cast a beam inside which, at a casual glance, seemed to her to be a solid wooden joist set across the house. She placed her wet cloak on it as if it were indeed solid, and the cloak hung safely from the immaterial sunbeam. When the inhabitants of the house spread the word of this great miracle among the neighbours, they extolled the incomparable Brigid with fitting praise.

• [Stolen sheep are miraculously replaced]

And this next work must not be passed over in silence.

St Brigid was in the fields with a flock of grazing sheep and was absorbed in her pastoral care, when a certain evil youth, who knew her reputation for giving away her charges to the poor, skilfully and surreptitiously stole and carried off seven wethers in the course of one day, and hid them away. But towards evening, when the flock was driven as usual to the sheepfold and was counted most carefully three or four times, marvellous to relate, the number was found to be whole and complete, without deficiency. Those who were in the know were overwhelmed at the goodness of God made

manifest through the maiden, and they returned the seven wether to their flock. But the number in the flock was then neither greater nor than before, but was restored exactly to the original tally.

The most renowned handmaid of God was, not surprisingly, famous everywhere for these and innumerable other wonders: she was seen to be worthy of the highest praise.

• [She turns water into beer]

On another extraordinary occasion, this venerable Brigid was asked to give some lepers for beer, but had none. She noticed water that had been prepared for baths. She blessed it, in the goodness of her abiding faith, and transfused it into the best beer, which she drew copiously for the thirsty. It was indeed He Who turned water into wine in Cana of Galilee Who turned water into beer here, through this most blessed woman's faith.

• [She miraculously ends a pregnancy]

When, however, this miracle is told, it provides a wonderful example.

A certain woman who had taken the vow of chastity fell, through youthful desire of pleasure, and her womb swelled with child. Brigid, exercising most potent strength of her ineffable faith, blessed her, causing the foetus to disappear, without coming to birth, and without pain. She faithfully returned the woman to health and to penance.

[She makes salt from rock]

And afterwards, since all things are possible for those who believe, even things that are outside the range of ordinary everyday possibility, she performed innumerable miracles.

One day, when a certain person came asking for salt, just as other poor and destitute people in countless numbers were accustomed to come to her seeking their needs, the most blessed Brigid supplied an ample amount. She made it from a rock, which she blessed at that moment in order that she might be able to give the alms. And the suppliant went home joyfully for her, carrying the salt.

• [She miraculously cures blindness]

And it seems to me that this further, most divine, wonder-work of hers should be added to the list. For, following the example of the Saviour, she worked in God's name a superlative marvel.

Following the Lord's example, she opened the eyes of a person who was born blind. The Lord gave His followers licence to imitate Him: works sinners as He said, "I am the light of the world". He also said to His apostles, "Ye

the light of the world", and, speaking to them, He also affirmed, "The works that I shall do they do also; and greater works than these shall they do".³

Brigid's faith, like the grain of mustard seed, worked on the one born blind and, just like the Lord, she produced by a great miracle eyes with normal sight. By such remarkable works, through the humility of her heart and the purity of her mind, and through her temperate ways and spiritual grace, she earned the great authority that came to her, and the fame which exalted her name above the virgins of her time.

[She cures a child of dumbness]

And, on another day, a woman from outside the community came to visit, bringing along her twelve-year-old daughter, who was dumb from birth. With the great veneration and reverence that all were accustomed to show to Brigid, the woman bowed down and bent her neck to Brigid's kiss of peace. Brigid, friendly and cheerful, spoke to her in words of salvation based on divine goodness. And, following the example of the Saviour who bade the little children come to Him, she took the daughter's hand in hers and—not knowing that the child was mute—she proceeded to ask the girl's intentions: whether she wished to take the veil and remain a virgin or whether she preferred to be given in marriage. The mother intervened to point out that there would be no response, at which Brigid replied that she would not relinquish the daughter's hand until the girl had answered. And when she put the question to the girl the second time, the daughter responded to her, saying: "I wish to do nothing but what you wish." And, after her mouth had been freed of the impediment to her speech, the girl, released from her chain of dumbness, spoke quite normally.

[A dog guards meat for her]

And this further work of hers, of which everyone has heard: who is left wholly unmoved by it?

Once, when she went into a trance, as was her custom, her soul in celestial meditation, sending up her thoughts from earth to heaven, she left down by a dog, not a small amount but a large quantity of bacon. After a month, the meat was looked for and was found just where the dog was—intact. Not only had the dog not dared to eat what the blessed virgin had put down; but, as docile guardian of the bacon, he was tamed by divine power and was seen to act against his nature.

[Her mantle is not stained by raw meat]

The number of her miracles grew daily, so that it is almost impossible to count them, so much did she devote herself to the duty of pity and to ministering to the poor people's need of alms, in and out of season.

Cogitosus's Life of St Brigid the Virgin

For example, when a certain indigent person asked her for some from the food supply set aside for the poor, she hastened to those who could get the meat so that she could obtain something for alms. One poorish set among the meat-cooks slopped uncooked meat into the fold of her garment. She carried the meat to the poor man and gave it to him, but his mantle was neither ruffled nor discoloured.

[A cow accepts another cow's calf at her behest]

Nor indeed is this particularly remarkable among her holy acts.

Among the poor and the strangers from every quarter who thronged her, drawn by the reputation of her great deeds and the excess of her generosity, there came a certain wretched leper, who asked that the cow of the herd, with the best of all the calves, be given to him. Far spurning this request, she soon willingly gave the best possible cow of the herd, along with another cow's calf that had been chosen as the best to this importunate afflicted person. From pity, she sent her chariot with him, so that in his long weary journey across the wide plain he would not be troubled with concern about the cow. She directed that the cow be placed beside him in the chariot. And so the cow followed, licking the ground with her tongue as if he were her own, and attending to him, without drover, until they reached their destination.

See, dearest brothers, how brute beasts obeyed her, even contrary to nature.

[A river rises up against cattle rustlers]

After some time had passed, some wicked thieves, who had regard for neither God nor man, came on a robbing expedition from a certain territory. They crossed the wide bed of a stream on foot, and they stole her. But, as they returned by the way they had come, a sudden flood crept up the great river, whose onrush overwhelmed them. That river, however, still like a wall, and allowed the blessed Brigid's cow to cross back over it. It bowled over the thieves and carried them along with its flood, free of other stolen cattle from their possession. These returned, with the thieves hanging loosely from their horns, to their proper pastures.

[Her chariot is drawn by one horse]

See how the power of God is revealed.

One day certain business required that the most holy Brigid attend an assembly of the people. She sat in her chariot, which was drawn by horses. As was her custom, she meditated while in her vehicle, practising here on earth the way of life of heaven, and she prayed to her Lord.

of the horses stumbled, and the other, in the alarm of a dumb beast, sprang from the chariot and, extricating itself from the harness and from the yoke, ran away in fright across the plain. But God's hand held up the yoke and kept it suspended without falling. Brigid sat praying in the vehicle drawn by one horse, and arrived safely at the assembly in full view of the crowd, who followed along after this display of divine power. And when she addressed the gathering with words of salvation, her teaching was reinforced by these marvels and by the signs of the divine protection she enjoyed.

[A hunted wild boar joins her herd]

And it seems to me that this work of hers is particularly worth considering. Once a solitary wild boar which was being hunted ran out from the woods, and in its wild flight was brought suddenly into the most blessed Brigid's herd of swine. She observed its arrival among her pigs and blessed it. Thereupon it lost its fear and settled down among the herd. See, brothers, how brute beasts and animals could withstand neither her bidding nor her wish, but served her tamely and humbly.

[Wolves act as swineherds for her]

Among the many people who offered her gifts was a man who came once from a distant territory. He said that he would give her fat pigs, but asked that she send some of her people with him back to his farm to collect the pigs. The farm was far away, situated at the space of three or four days' journey. She sent some of her workers with him as travelling companions; but they had in fact gone barely a day's journey (as far as the mountain known as Grabor, which forms a territorial boundary) [*not known; possibly a mistranscription: there was a Sliab Gabrail in the plain of Liffey; possibly Gabur Life*] when they saw his pigs, which they had thought to be in distant parts, coming towards them on the road, driven by wolves which had carried them off. As soon as he realized what had happened, the man recognized them as his pigs. Truly, the wild wolves, because of their enormous reverence for the blessed Brigid, had left the great forests and the wide plains to work at herding and protecting the pigs. Now, on the arrival of the people she had sent—who were astonished to see such swineherds—the wolves, leaving the pigs there, gave up their unnatural activity. The next day, those who had been sent to collect the pigs gave an account of the marvellous event and returned to their homes.

• [A wild fox takes the place of a king's pet]

It seems to me that this should be the last of her miraculous deeds to be passed over.

On another day, a certain person, not knowing the circumstances, the king's fox walking into the royal palace, and ignorantly thought to be a wild animal. He did not know that it was a pet, familiar with the king's hall, which entertained the king and his companions with various tricks that it had learned—requiring both intelligence and nimbleness of body. He killed the fox in the view of a large crowd. Immediately, he was seen by the people who had seen the deed. He was accused and brought before the king. When the king heard the story he was angry. He ordered that unless the man could produce a fox with all the tricks that his fox had done, he and his wife and sons should be executed and all his household committed to servitude.

When the venerable Brigid heard this story, she was moved to such pity and tenderness that she ordered her chariot to be yoked. Grieving in the depths of her heart for the unhappy man who had been so unjustly judged and offering prayers to the Lord, she travelled across the plain and the road which led to the royal palace. And the Lord, instantly, heard her prayers and poured prayers. He directed one of his wild foxes to come to her immediately made all speed, and when it arrived at the most blessed Brigid's chariot it sprang aboard and sat quietly beside Brigid under her mantle.

As soon as she arrived in the king's presence, she began imploring the unfortunate man, who had not understood the situation and was imprisoned as a victim of his own ignorance, should be set free and released from his chains. But the king would not heed her prayers. He affirmed that he would not release the man unless he could produce another fox with the same tricks as his, that had been killed. In the middle of this conversation the fox, and, in the presence of the king and of the crowd, went through all the tricks that the other fox had performed, and amply satisfied the crowd in exactly the same way. The king was satisfied. His nobles, the great applauding crowd wondered at the marvel that had been worked. The king ordered that the man who had been under sentence of death should be set free. Not long after St Brigid had procured that man's release and had returned home, the same fox, bothered by the crowds, skillfully contrived a safe escape. It was pursued by large numbers of riders on hounds, but made fools of them, fled through the plains and went into the waste and wooded places and so to its den.

And all venerated St Brigid, who excelled more and more in her good works. They marvelled at what had been achieved through the excellence of her virtue and through the prerogative of so many gifts of grace.

• [Wild ducks come to her]

On another day the blessed Brigid felt a tenderness for some duck that she saw swimming on the water and occasionally taking wing. She commanded them to come to her. And, as if they were humans un-

obedience, a great flock of them flew on feathered wings to her, without any fear. Having touched them with her hand and caressed them, she let them go and fly away through the air. She praised highly the Creator of all things, to whom all life is subject, and for whose service—as has been said—all life is given.⁴

And from these examples it is plain that the whole order of beasts, flocks and herds was subject to her rule.

⁴ [A band of murderers is deceived by a miracle of glamour]

Now this miracle of hers, one to be celebrated in all ages, must be told to the ears of the faithful.

Once, as was her custom, she was spreading abroad among everyone the seed of the Lord's word, when she observed nine men belonging to a certain peculiarly vain and diabolical cult. They were deceived and corrupted in mind and soul, and at the instigation of the ancient Enemy who ruled among them, they had bound themselves—since they thirsted for the spilling of blood—and resolved with evil vows and oaths to commit murder before the beginning of the forthcoming month of July. The most revered and kindly Brigid preached to them in many gentle phrases, urging them to abandon their mortal errors, to humble their hearts and through true penance to renounce their sinfulness. But they were profane of mind, they had not fulfilled their wicked vow, and they continued their ways, resisting her appeal, and in spite of the abundant prayers which the virgin had poured out to God in her desire (following her Lord) that all should be saved and know the truth.

The criminals went on their way, and met with what they thought was the man they had to kill. They pierced him with their spears and beheaded him with their swords, and were seen by many to return with bloody weapons, as if they had destroyed their adversary. Here was the miracle: they had killed nobody—although it seemed to them that they had fulfilled their vows. When, however, no person was missing in that territory in which they thought they had triumphed, the fulness of the divine favour granted through the most holy Brigid became known to all. And they who had formerly been murderers were now turned back to God through penance.

[She cures a man of overeating]

Words cannot adequately describe St Brigid's devotion to God, through which the divine power of holy religion was shown in the following work.

There was a certain man called Luguidam, a strong man for sure, and one of the bravest. When he was of a mind, he did the work of twelve men in a single day all by himself. At the same time, he ate enough food to feed twelve men (as he could do the work singlehanded, so could he consume

the rations). He implored Brigid to pray to almighty God to moderate appetite, which caused him to eat to such excess, but he asked that she should not lose his former strength along with his appetite. Brigid blessed him and prayed to God for him. Afterwards, he was content with sustenance of one man, but, just as before, when he worked he could do the labour of twelve. He had all his former strength.

[The miraculous transport of a huge tree]

Among all her famous works we should recount the following to all—which is extraordinary and is well verified.

A huge and magnificent tree, which was to be used for certain purposes was cut down and trimmed with axes by skilful craftsmen. Its great size caused such difficulty in manoeuvring it that a gathering of strong men was summoned to transport the tree with its awkward branches through difficult places. Aided by the craftsmen's tackle, they proposed to haul it with many oxen to the place where it was to be dealt with. But in spite of the large number of men, the strength of the oxen, and the skill of the craftsmen, they were unable to budge the tree; so they drew back from it. But the Master teaches through the medium of the heavenly Gospel that it is possible for faith to move mountains; and—through Brigid's stalwart faith (like the grain of mustard seed)—they carried this weightiest of things without the slightest difficulty, through the divine mystery of the power of the Gospel and without any mortal aid, to the place designated by Brigid. This display of the excellence of God's power was made known through all the territories.

* [Through the miraculous recovery of a brooch she vindicates a woman accused of theft]

And it comes to mind that we should not omit the following manifestation, which, among innumerable other miracles, was worked by the venerable Brigid.

There was a certain nobleman, with the deviousness of a man of the world, who lusted after a particular woman. He exercised his cunning ways to seduce her. He entrusted a silver brooch to her safe-keeping; then he deviously filched it from her without her knowledge and threw it into the sea. This meant that, when she was unable to produce it on demand, she would be forfeit to him as his slave, and so must submit to his embraces as he wished. He contrived this evil for no other reason than to be in a position to demand this ransom. If the silver brooch were not returned to the woman herself must be given to him instead in servitude, because of her failure, to be subject to his wicked lust.

This chaste woman fled in fear to St Brigid, as she would fly to the safe

city of refuge. When Brigid learned what had happened, and how and why, almost before she had heard the story out she summoned a certain person who had fish that had been caught in the river. The fishes' bellies were cut and opened, and there in the middle of one of them was revealed the silver brooch which that most cruel man had thrown into the sea.

Then, easy in her mind, she took along the silver brooch and went with that infamous man to the assembly of the people for the case to be heard. She showed the assembly the brooch, and many witnesses gave testimony, people who were able to identify the brooch as the same one that was concerned in this accusation. Brigid took the chaste woman into her own company, and freed her from the clutches of that most cruel tyrant. Indeed he afterwards confessed his fault to St Brigid and submissively prostrated himself before her. Everyone admired her for the performance of this great miracle, and she gave thanks to God (for whose glory she had done everything) and went home.

[She miraculously replaces a calf and a loom]

In the telling of these wonders, we may compare to her hospitality that of another woman.

For St Brigid came to her dwelling while making a journey on God's business across the wide plain of Brega [*mainly in Co. Meath*]. She arrived as the day was declining into evening, and she spent the night with this woman, who received her joyfully with outstretched hands and gave thanks to God for the happy arrival of the most revered Brigid, Christ's virgin.

The woman was too poor to have ready the wherewithal to entertain such guests, but she broke up the loom on which she had been weaving cloth, for firewood. Then she killed her calf, placed it on the heap of kindling and, with a good will, lit the fire. Dinner was eaten, and the night was passed with the customary vigils. The hostess (who had taken the calf from her cow in order that nothing should be lacking in the reception and entertainment of St Brigid) rose early. The cow had discovered another calf, in the same form exactly as the calf she had previously loved. And a loom was to be seen, exactly in the same shape and form as the other.

So, having accomplished this marvel, and having bidden farewell to the people of the house, St Brigid continued on her pontifical way and went cheerfully on her journey.

[She divides a silver dish exactly into three]

Her miracles are great, but this one is especially admired.

Three lepers came, asking for alms of any kind, and she gave them a silver dish. So that this would not cause discord and contention among them when they came to share it out, she spoke to a certain person expert in

the weighing of gold and silver, and asked him to divide it among them three parts of equal weight. When he began to excuse himself, pointing out that there was no way he could divide it up so that the three parts would weigh exactly the same, the most blessed Brigid herself took the silver dish and struck it against a stone, breaking it into three parts as she had wished Marvellous to tell, when the three parts were tested on the scales, not one part was found to be heavier or lighter by a breath than any other. So the three poor people left with their gift and there was no cause for envy or grudging between them.

- [She receives a bishop's vestments from Christ in place of those she had given to the poor]

She followed the example of the most blessed Job and never allowed poor person to leave empty-handed. Indeed, she gave away to the poor the foreign and exotic robes of the illustrious bishop Conláeth, vestments he wore in the course of the liturgy of the Lord and the apostolic vigil. When in due course the time for these solemnities came round, the high priest of the people wished to change into his vestments. It was then Christ—in the form of a poor person—that St Brigid had given the bishop clothing. Now she handed the bishop another set of vestments, similar in all details of texture and colour, which she had received at that very moment (draped over a two-wheeled chariot) from Christ, whom, as a beggar, she had clad. She had freely given the other clothes to the poor. Now, at the right moment, she received these instead. For, as she was the living and most blessed instrument of the sublime, she had power to do what she wished.

• [She divines a supply of honey]

After this, a certain man, finding himself in particular need, came to her to ask for a sixth of a measure of honey. She was distressed in her mind, because she had no honey ready that she might give to the person who was asking for it, when the humming of bees was heard underneath the paved floor of the building in which she was. And when that spot from which the buzzing of the bees was heard, was excavated and examined, there was found a sufficient quantity to meet the man's requirements. And he, receiving the gift of enough honey for his needs, returned joyfully to his village.

[She miraculously moves a river]

In the following episode too she performed a miracle.

The king of her country (the region in which she lived) issued a decree for all the tribes and places under his rule. All the people were to come together from his territories to build a wide road. It was to be solidified with tree branches and stones in the foundation, it was to have very strong

banks and deep impassable ditches, and it was to run through soggy ground and through a swamp in which a full river flowed. When built it should be able to carry four-wheeled cars, horsemen, chariots, wagon-wheels, and the traffic of people as well as that of forces to assault enemies on all sides.

When the people had gathered in from every quarter, they divided up the road they had to build into sections, by sept and families, so that each tribe or family would build the section assigned to it. The most difficult and laborious section was that with the river, and it was assigned to a certain tribe. These people decided to avoid the heavy work, so they used their strength to force a weaker tribe (that to which St Brigid belonged) to labour on the difficult section. Choosing an easier section for themselves, this cruel tribe could do their construction without facing the hazard of the river.

St Brigid's blood-relations came and prostrated themselves at her feet. It is reliably reported that she told them: "Go. God has the will and the power to move the river from the location where you are oppressed by hard labour to the section that they have chosen."

And, when at the dawn of that day the people rose to work, the river which had been complained of was found to have left its former valley and the two banks between which it had flowed. It had transferred from the section in which St Brigid's tribe had been forced to labour to the section of those powerful and proud people who had unjustly compelled the smaller and weaker tribe to work there. In proof of the miracle, the traces of the river which transferred to a different place, and the empty channel through which it flowed in past time; these may still be seen, dry and without any trickle of water.

[She continues working miracles after her death]

Many miracles were performed in her lifetime, before she laid down the burden of her flesh; many later. The bounty of the gift of God never ceased working wonders in her monastery, where her venerable body lies. We have not only heard tell of these marvels; we have seen them with our own eyes.

[A millstone is miraculously brought to the mill]

For example, the prior of the great and famous monastery of St Brigid (of the beginnings of which we have made brief mention in this little work) sent masons and stonecutters to look in suitable places for a rock fit for making a millstone. They made no provision for transport, but went up a steep and difficult road, reached the top of a rocky mountain and chose a great stone at the summit of the tallest peak. And they carved it all over to a round shape and perforated it to make a millstone. When the prior arrived, in response to their message, with an ox-team, he was unable to drive the

oxen up to pull the stone; he was barely able to ascend the very difficult track with a few of them following him.

He and all his workers pondered this problem: by what means could they remove the millstone from the highest ridge of the mountain where there was no way in which the oxen could be yoked and burdened in the high and precipitous place? They came to the despairing conclusion (some of them even giving up and descending the mountain) that they should abandon the stone and regard as waste the labour they had put into fashioning it. The prior, however, taking prudent thought and consulting his workers said confidently: "By no means let it be so; but manfully lift this millstone and cast it down from the high peak of the mountain in the name—calling on the power—of the most revered St Brigid. For we have neither equipment nor strength to move the millstone through this rocky place unless Brigid, to whom nothing is impossible (all things are possible to the believer), will carry it to a place from which the oxen can pull it." So, with firm faith, they first gradually raised it from the mountain top and then cast it into the valley. When they flung it down, it found its way; sometimes avoiding rocks, sometimes springing over them, rolling through damp places high on the mountain in which neither men nor cattle could stand and, with marvellous noise, it arrived quite unbroken at the level spot where the oxen were. From there it was transported by the ox-team as far as the millhouse, where it was skilfully matched with the other stone.

• [The millstone refuses to grind a pagan's corn]

There is another, previously untold but quite outstanding, miracle to add to the story (now known to everyone) of the millstone that was moved in the name of St Brigid. A certain pagan, living near the millhouse, sent some grain from his house to the mill, employing a simple and ignorant man so that the miller who did the work there did not know that the grain was his. And when that grain was spread between the millstones, nothing could budge them—not the power of the water, and no exercise of strength or skill. When the people who observed this sought its cause, they were quite perplexed. Then, when they learned that the grain belonged to a druid, they had no doubt at all that the millstone upon which St Brigid had performed the divine miracle had refused to grind the pagan man's grain into flour. And immediately they removed the heathen's grain and placed their own grain, from the monastery, under the millstone. Straightaway the mill machinery resumed its normal course without any impediment.

[Her millstone remains intact in a fire]

And after an interval of time it happened that this very millhouse caught fire. It was no small miracle that, when the fire consumed the whole building,

including the other stone which was matched to St Brigid's millstone, the flames did not dare to touch or scorch her stone. It remained unaffected by the fire in the conflagration that destroyed the millhouse.

And afterwards, since note was taken of this miracle, the stone was brought to the monastery and placed near the gate, inside the cashel that encloses the church where many come to venerate St Brigid. It was given a place of honour in that gate, and it cures diseases of the faithful who touch it.

[The miraculously rebuilt church]

Nor must one be silent about the miracle of the rebuilding of the church in which the bodies of that glorious pair, the bishop Conlaeth and this holy virgin Brigid, lie right and left of the ornamented altar, placed in shrines decorated with a variegation of gold, silver, gems and precious stones, with gold and silver crowns hanging above them.

In fact, to accommodate the increasing number of the faithful, of both sexes, the church is spacious in its floor area, and it rises to an extreme height. It is adorned with painted boards and has on the inside three wide chapels, all under the roof of the large building and separated by wooden partitions. One partition, which is decorated with painted images and is covered with linen, stretches transversely in the eastern part of the church from one wall to the other and has two entrances, at its ends. By one entrance, placed in the external part, the supreme pontiff enters the sanctuary and approaches the altar with his retinue of monks. To these consecrated ministers are entrusted the sacred vessels for Sunday use and the offering of the sacrifice. And by the other entrance, placed on the left side of the above-mentioned transverse partition, the abbess, with her faithful virgins and widows, equally enters to enjoy the banquet of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

And another partition, dividing the floor of the church into two equal parts, extends from the east in length as far as the transverse wall. The church has many windows, and an ornamented door on the right side through which the priests and the faithful of male sex enter the building. There is another door on the left through which the virgins and the congregation of the female faithful are accustomed to enter. And so, in one great basilica, a large number of people, arranged by rank and sex, in orderly division separated by partitions, offers prayers with a single spirit to the almighty Lord.

When the ancient door of the left-hand entrance, through which St Brigid was accustomed to enter the church, was set on its hinges by the craftsmen, it did not fill the new entrance of the rebuilt church. In fact, a quarter of the opening was left unclosed and agape. If a fourth part, by height, were added, then the door could be restored to fit the opening.

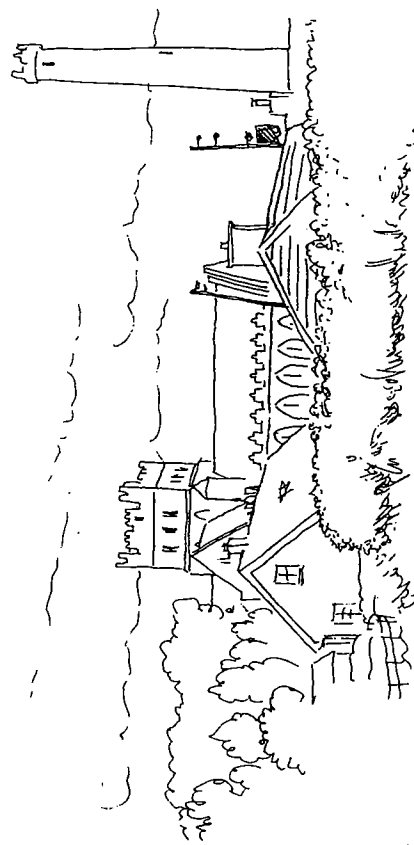
The artificers deliberated and discussed whether they should make completely new, and larger, door which would fill the opening, or whether they should make a timber piece to attach to the old door, to bring it to the required size. The gifted master, who was in all these matters the leading craftsman of the Irish, gave wise advice. "We ought"—he said—"in this coming night, alongside St Brigid, to pray faithfully to the Lord so that she may indicate in the morning what we should do." And so he spent the whole night praying before St Brigid's shrine.

And, having sent on his prayer, he rose in the morning and brought the old door and placed it on its hinges. It closed the opening completely. There was no gap, no overlap. And so St Brigid extended the height of the door so that it filled the opening, and no aperture could be seen except when the door was pushed back to allow entry to the church. And this miracle of the Lord's power is plain to the eyes of all who see this doorway and door.

• [Brigid's city]

But who could convey in words the supreme beauty of her church and the countless wonders of her city, of which we would speak? "City" is the right word for it: that so many people are living there justifies the title. It is a great metropolis, within whose outskirts—which St Brigid marked out with a clearly defined boundary—no earthly adversary is feared, nor any incursion of enemies. For the city is the safest place of refuge among all the towns of the whole land of the Irish, with all their fugitives. It is a place where the treasures of kings are looked after, and it is reckoned to be supreme in good order.

And who could number the varied crowds and countless people who gather in from all territories? Some come for the abundance of festivals; others come to watch the crowds go by; others come with great gifts to



the celebration of the birth into heaven of St Brigid who, on the First of February, falling asleep, safely laid down the burden of her flesh and followed the Lamb of God into the heavenly mansions.

[Epilogue]

I beg the indulgence of the brothers and of readers of these episodes, since I had no pretension to knowledge but was compelled by obedience to skim over the great sea of St Brigid's wonderful works—something to be feared by the bravest—and to offer in rustic language these few narratives of the greatest miracles.

Pray for me *Cogitosus Ua hAedha*, who am worthy of blame. I urge you to commend me to the good Lord in your prayers; and may God grant you the peace of the Gospel.

Here ends the life of St Brigid the virgin.