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[Book review]

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Book Review

Séamas Ó Catháin: *The Festival of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman*. Dublin: Phaeton Publishing, 2023 (2nd edition), 296 pp.

Séamas Ó Catháin's 'Festival of Brigit' from 1995 has been republished, with a new introduction in which he highlights the history of the folklore archives held at the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin, from which he derives most of his material on Brigit. At the end of this introduction he defines the book's aim as an attempt 'to uncover (in a wider international context) aspects of the motivation of previous generations in sustaining and preserving ancient practices and beliefs, and at least vouch the hope that I may have succeeded in promoting a wider appreciation of the important role of folk culture as an essential component of seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the past' (p. xvii). Further on in the book he completely omits the questions of methodology and the possible survival of ancient beliefs and practices in the folklore collected in the last few centuries. As this question never surfaces in the book, it allows Ó Catháin to adopt a somewhat ahistorical view of the past, in which source materials more than a thousand years apart from each other can be thrown together to illuminate the nature of Brigit and her festivities. In the original introduction he briefly explains his methodology, stating that to understand the

deeper meaning of the folkloristic materials, one must adopt a wider comparative view that also includes literary and archaeological sources, as well as etymological analysis, and extend the analysis to non-Celtic materials, including not only Greek and Roman counterparts to Celtic deities but also Scandinavian and Finno-Ugric materials. He does not really further explain his methodology, but when reading the book it is evident that this is exactly what he sets out to do to find a deeper stratum of meaning buried within the folkloristic traditions pertaining to Brigit.

In the first chapter Ó Catháin focuses on the aspect of Brigit's cult that points to her role as a fertility figure. He states that he aims 'to isolate and highlight certain hitherto largely ignored or, at best, badly understood aspects of the cult of Brigit which feature prominently in Irish folklore' (p. 3). He starts with interesting examples of traditions pertaining to Brigit in the folklore collections, but when he ventures into the comparative materials the evidence is less compelling. Many of these comparisons seem quite far-fetched, as in the comparison of a curvilinear decoration above the cross on a stone slab associated with one of Brigit's holy wells, the horned Cernunnos figure, the headgear worn by St Lucia in the Swedish tradition, and the Akkas in the shamanic drums of the Sámi, for example. The aim of this wild

speculation is to reveal the true nature of Brigit and her festival, which seems to hark back to an ancient cult of fertility. Furthermore, when discussing the symbolism of the cross, Ó Catháin completely disregards Christian symbolism, associating it instead with fertility imagery such as the tree of life and *axis mundi*.

The second chapter opens with a lengthy discussion of the etymology of terms referring to bears and bear symbolism in Sámi, Finno-Ugric, and Scandinavian traditions with no apparent connection with the figure of Brigit. Later in the chapter Ó Catháin finds some tenuous links between bears and folklore concerning Brigit's festivities. This connection with bears appears especially to interest him, as he sporadically returns to the topic throughout the book. The connection between the two seems to have something to do with the coming of the spring, as Brigit's feast day is celebrated on 1 February, and the awaking of bears from hibernation can also be seen as marking the beginning of the spring, which in the Nordic countries starts considerably later than the beginning of February.

Chapter 3 continues by throwing various traditions together. It opens with a discussion of fire symbolism but then proceeds to bees and birds such as oystercatchers and cranes and further to shellfish and acorns and stones. In Chapter 4 the discussion focuses on a folktale type concerning a clever girl avoiding an attempted kidnap found in various regions of Northern Europe.

How this folktale and the various materials discussed in the previous chapter are connected with Brigit is a little unclear, but it seems that in Ó Catháin's mind they all help illuminate the ancient associations of Brigit, the goddess, vestiges of which have somehow survived in the Irish folk traditions.

Chapter 5 opens with a discussion of the Irish Saint Colum Cille and his association with various female figures representing wisdom, chastity, and so on. The exploration then widens to Old Norse and Sámi mythology and the veneration of holy wells, ending with Brigit and her cow and customs related to childbirth, with a discussion of hallucinogenic mushrooms thrown in at the end. The book ends very abruptly with Chapter 5, without any conclusions to draw it all together.

As will be clear by now, Ó Catháin's exploration of the feast of Brigit has led him in many surprising directions. His comparative method seems to rely on the assumption that by throwing together various legends and traditions from different places and ages, we can tease out allusions and connections perhaps lost in the Irish material, thus getting closer to the original meaning of Brigit's cult. As the name of the book itself indicates, Ó Catháin is not interested in Brigit the saint but in the Celtic goddess and the holy woman of folklore. He only alludes to the hagiographical sources that relate the Life of Saint Brigit, even though they are our ear-

liest extensive sources pertaining to Brigit. According to Ó Catháin the sexual imagery he sees as central for Brigit's cult reveals its *raison d'être* as the wish to secure fertility for humans and livestock, as well as crops. In his mind this is the true meaning of Brigit, as his comparative method has revealed. Towards the end of the book (on page 210) he briefly ponders the question of possible cultural-historical links – or their lack – between the various traditions from different linguistic and physical environments adverted to in the book. He does not, however, go more deeply into this question, which to me appears central for his methodology. Ó Catháin merely concludes that there is an interesting parallelism between all these traditions, without saying whether he sees them as originating in an ancient mythological stratum shared by all these cultures or in borrowing, or being of independent origin due to the cognitive capacities of humans which result in similar patterns of thinking, regardless of the environment.

This is truly a baffling book by someone who is clearly very well versed in Irish folklore, and who is convinced that we can find vestiges of much more ancient traditions in folklore. It seems that at least some of the chapters have previously been published as articles, which may explain a certain lack of coherence and the book's abrupt ending. It would, however, have been good if Ó Catháin had further illuminated the thinking behind his methodol-

ogy and drawn everything together at the end to give a fuller image of Brigit and her cult over time.

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