

## *Imbolc Traditions and History*

Imbolc is one of the four principal festivals of the Irish calendar, celebrated either at the beginning of February or at the first local signs of Spring. Originally dedicated to the goddess Brigid, in the Christian period it was adopted as St Brigid's Day. In Scotland the festival is also known as Latha Fhèill Brìghde, in Ireland as Lá Fhéile Bríde, and in Wales as Gwyl Ffraed. Imbolc is conventionally celebrated on 1 February. Imbolc is traditionally a time of weather prognostication, and the old tradition of watching to see if serpents or badgers came from their winter dens is perhaps a precursor to Groundhog Day.

*Thig an nathair as an toll  
La donn Bride,  
Ged robh tri traighean dh' an  
Air leachd an lair.*

*"The serpent will come from the hole  
On the brown Day of Bride,  
Though there should be three feet of snow  
On the flat surface of the ground."*

Imbolc is often defined as a cross-quarter day midway between the winter solstice (Yule) and the spring equinox (Ostara), and the precise midpoint is half way through, or fifteen degrees of, Aquarius. Fire and purification is considered by many to be an important aspect of this festival. Brigid (also known as Brighid, Bríde, Brigit, Brìd) is the Goddess of poetry, healing and smithcraft. As both goddess and saint she is also associated with holy wells, sacred flames, and healing. To some, the lighting of candles and fires represents the return of warmth and the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months.

Among agrarian peoples, the festival was traditionally associated with the onset of lactation of ewes, soon to give birth to the spring lambs. This could vary by as much as two weeks before or after the start of February. In Irish, Imbolc means "in the belly" (i mbolg), referring to the pregnancy of ewes, and is also a Celtic term for spring. Another name is Oimelc, meaning "ewe's milk". Some Celts and Neopagans shorten the name to Brigid, referring to the Celtic goddess of healing, poetry and smithcraft, to whom the day is sacred.

That Imbolc was an important time to the ancient inhabitants of Ireland can be seen at a number of Megalithic and Neolithic sites, such as at the Loughcrew burial mounds and the Mound of the Hostages in Tara, Ireland. Here, the inner chamber of the passage tombs are perfectly aligned with the rising sun of both Imbolc and Samhain. Similar to the phenomena seen at Newgrange, the rising Imbolc sun shines down the long passageway and illuminates the inner chamber of the tomb.

The holiday is a festival of the hearth and home, and a celebration of the lengthening days and the early signs of spring. Rituals often involve hearthfires, special foods, divination or simply watching for omens (whether performed in all seriousness or as children's games), a great deal of candles, and perhaps an outdoor bonfire if the weather permits.[8]

In the modern Irish Calendar, Imbolc is variously known as the Feast of Saint Brigid (Secondary Patron of Ireland), Lá Fhéile Bríde, and Lá Feabhra - the first day of Spring. Christians may call the day "Candlemas" or "the feast of the Purification of the Virgin". Since Brigid represents the light half of the year, and the power that will bring people from the dark season of winter into spring, her presence is very important at this time of year.

One folk tradition that continues in both Christian and Pagan homes on St. Brigid's Day (or Imbolc) is that of the Brigid's Bed. The girls and young, unmarried women of the household or village create a corn dolly to represent Brigid, called the Brideog ("little Brigid" or "young Brigid"), adorning it with ribbons and baubles like shells or stones. They make a bed for the Brideog to lay in. On St. Brigid's Eve (Jan. 31), the girls and young women gather together in one house to stay up all night with the Brideog, and are later visited by all the young men of the community who must ask permission to enter the home, and then treat them and the corn dolly with respect.

Brigid is said to walk the earth on Imbolc eve. Before going to bed, each member of the household may leave a piece of clothing or strip of cloth outside for Brigid to bless. The head of the household will smoothe the fire and rake the ashes smooth. In the morning, they look for some kind of mark on the ashes, a sign that Brigid has passed that way in the night or morning. The clothes or strips of cloth are brought inside, and believed to now have powers of healing and protection. On the following day, the girls carry the Brideog through the village or neighborhood, from house to house, where this representation of the Saint/goddess is welcomed with great honor. Adult women - those who are married or who run a household - stay home to welcome the Brigid procession, perhaps with an offering of coins or a snack.