

St. Brigid of Ireland.

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St. Brigid of Ireland (born c. 450, according to tradition, Fochart [now Faughart], near Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland—died c. 525, Kildare, Ireland; feast day February 1) was an abbess who founded an important monastic community at Kildare in the 5th century and is revered as one of the three patron saints of Ireland, along with St. Patrick and St. Columba (Colmcille).

Little is known of Brigid's life but from legend, myth, and folklore. According to these, she was born in the province of Leinster to a noble father and an enslaved mother and was sold along with her mother to a Druid, whom she later converted to Christianity. On being set free, she returned to her father, who tried to marry her to the king of Ulster. Impressed by her piety, the king removed her from parental control. According to the Liber hymnorum (11th century), the Curragh, a plain in County Kildare, was granted by the king of Leinster to St. Brigid. At Kildare she founded the first nunnery in Ireland. The community became a double abbey for monks and nuns, with the abbess ranking above the abbot. Her friend St. Conleth became, at Brigid's beckoning, bishop of her people. She is said to have been active in founding other communities of nuns.

St. Brigid appears in a wealth of literature, notably the Book of Lismore, the Breviarium Aberdonense, and Bethada Náem n-Érenn. One of the loveliest and most profound legends of Brigid is the story of Dara, a blind nun for whom Brigid prayed for the restoration of her eyesight. When the miracle was granted, Dara realized that the clarity of sight blurred God in the eye of the soul, whereupon she asked Brigid to return her to the beauty of darkness. Brigid is also said to have miraculously changed water into beer for a leper colony and provided enough beer for 18 churches from a single barrel; she is sometimes considered to be one of the patron saints of beer. She is also regarded as the patron saint of dairy farmers, cattle, midwives, babies, computers, and blacksmiths.

Quick Facts

Also called: Brigid of Kildare, Bride, or Mary of the Gael

Brigid also spelled: Brigit or Bridget

Irish: Bríd

Born: c. 450, according to tradition, Fochart [now Faughart], near Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland

Died: c. 525, Kildare, Ireland

Brigid's feast day is observed as far away from Ireland as Australia and New Zealand. In early times she was celebrated in parts of Scotland and England that had been converted by Celtic Christian missionaries. In modern Ireland her feast day is celebrated with many folk customs and traditions, notably the weaving of crosses out of rushes, reeds, or straw. The so-called St. Brigid's cross features four arms (though some feature only two or three) tied at the ends and a patterned square at the centre. The crosses are typically made on the evening before her feast day, blessed with holy water, and hung in houses or at the threshold of homes as a sign of welcome to Brigid. Even after her feast day, the crosses remain hanging in many Irish homes, offering the saint's protection throughout the year. In another tradition, mainly in western Ireland, girls honour Brigid's feast day by weaving small dolls known as brídeogs out of rushes or straw. Numerous wells are dedicated to Brigid throughout Ireland, including near Kildare and at her traditional birthplace, Faughart, and near Liscannor, a small village in County Clare in western Ireland. These wells and others dedicated to saints are known as "holy wells." Many of them likely originated as sites of worship associated with pre-Christian deities and were appropriated to venerate Christian saints who had links to the nearby communities. These wells are visited year-round by pilgrims, who typically leave rosaries, photographs, pieces of cloth, and other personal mementos as votive offerings. In addition, special masses are celebrated in churches and at other pilgrimage sites on Brigid's feast day.

By The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.