

A New Year – A New Brush

A field survey of Kilbrogan Cemetery and adjacent Bandon Town
Park's Holy Wells, Dec 31st 2022

By Ted Cook

The author dedicates this event summary to Ireland's newest National Holiday in honour of our "Matron Saint" Brigid, scheduled for 6th February 2023.

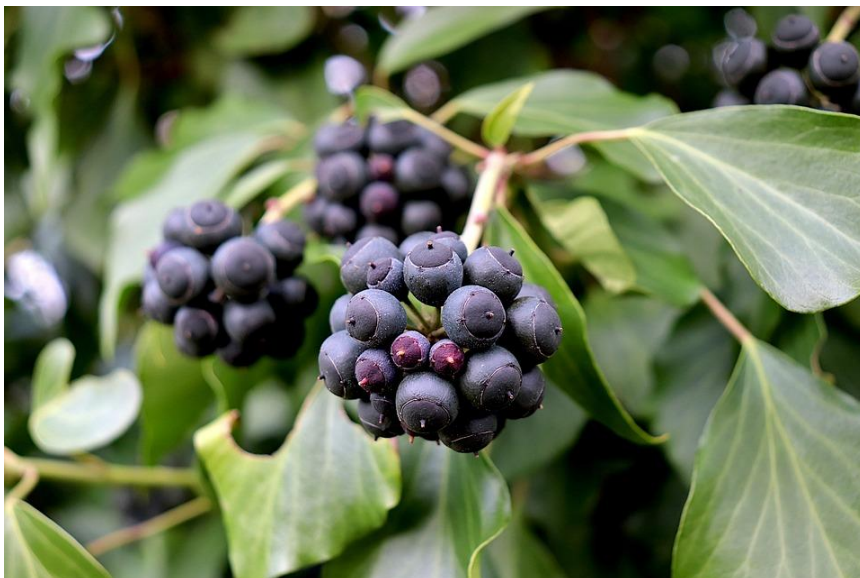
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Participants gathered at the fine ashlar trimmed stone pillared Burial Ground entrance at 11am. Of equal note is the exceptional stonework of Kilbrogan retaining wall, roadside, draped in full fruited native Ivy curtains. Like many of our oldest Burial Enclosures, Kilbrogan is a mixed cemetery, a 'resting place' for a broad spectrum of Christian persuasions and none. Earlier, Marguerite (Creative Bandon) introduced the author to a gravestone inscribed 1623 whose inscription records:

HERE LIETH THE BODY
OF ANN DYKE, ALIAS
HERRISON , A VIRGIN
ANNO DOM. 1623
AND THOUGH AFTER
MY SKINNE, WORMES
DESTROY THIS BODY
YET SHALL I SEE GOD
IN MY FLESH.

Ann Dyke was a native of Bristol, who came to Bandon with Phane Beecher who as Elizabethan Undertaker brought the first settlers from England to west Munster, towards close of 16th century. Historians have passed down that Ann Dyke died of a contagious disease, contracted while ministering unselfishly to some of her fellow planters, who suffered at the time from a plague, causing many deaths among them.

Ivy



A sprig of Ivy was passed round - Ireland's sole member of ever-green climbing shrub that flowers from late September to November as do its c.200 African cousins (Botanical Family - Araliaceae). On a still, sunny Autumn day take time to observe the diversity of insect species on Ivy's abundantly rich nectar flowers.

A “Bee Guardian” in our group (keepers are associated with slavery), shared that Ivy Pollen was the last and most potent protein of the Honey Season. Because Ivy foliage and flowers are sought after by browsing livestock, this plant flowers above the browse line.

Kilbrogan’s full matured Ivy berries on the last day of the year is a first for the author – back west in Muskerry, the setting of Ivy’s protein enriched berries fruit far later. The list of wild bird species that rest in Ivy’s deep shelter would necessitate a stand-alone article. Additionally, Ireland hosts an “endemic” subspecies “Atlantic Ivy” (*Hedera helvix atlantica*), which we described.

Yew

Kilbrogan’s rank of Irish Yew trees is full reason enough to visit the Burial Ground, in addition to its share of Common Yews. First discovered in the wilds of Lough Erne’s shores in 1780, all ‘Fermanagh Yew trees’ are clones of this yet extant *Taxus Baccatta Fastaiata* (Hibernica).

Botanically, Irish Yews are “endemic” subspecies of the Taxus Family but occur in only the female gender – no male has yet been identified. Our native Common Yew (true species) occurs in either male or female individuals (Botanical term – dioecious).



Irish Yews are pollinated by the male Common Yew. Pay attention next Autumn and scrutinise for the festoon of “tiny crimson red apples” on these upright Columnar Yews. And if planning to propagate from seed, one in fact will be growing the Common Yew. Only from “cuttings” of Irish Yew can one obtain the same.



Wild birds and wood mice gorge on these “arils” (Yew fruits), unaffected by their toxins due to the speed that their digestive tracts emit their “pips.” Yew bark, aril and foliage are/can be lethal for domesticated livestock, not so our Wild Herbivores. We shared the backstory of the discovery of “Taxol” in the Taxus family by the U.S Botanist, which gives us Chemical Taxol Therapy (chemotherapy).

The deep, if sometimes sombre shade cast by our Yews make them (in addition to the ultimate ornament), so appropriate to our Burial Grounds.

Early Church

Examples were given of adjacent or surrounding Yew groves long predating the erection of our earliest Churches in England dating 8th Century. Dr Rackham (RIP) in 2000 queried their absence in Irish Churches. Since earliest Church times the ash oils applied to the foreheads on Ash Wednesday were manufactured from the previous year’s Palm Sunday – in middle and old Irish “Domnach an Iúr”- Yew Sunday.

In contemporary Gaeltacht Irish, the Yew is named “Crann Bile” (Sacred Tree). St. Colmcille built his “Cill” (Kil) in a Yew grove within Doire Colmcoille.

We reconvened within the four walls of a two-storey roofless ruin that runs east-west and contains a Holy Water (possible Baptismal) font.

Perhaps there is a “Chancel” beneath the thicket of briar. Traditionally, the Priest or his curate resided in the Church Tower – perhaps the upper storey here was his quarters. Little knowledge of “Brogan” could be gleaned – but the prefix “Kil” (Cill) offers some key to both the man and approximate period within the “Early Church” Centuries.

That the “organisation of the Irish Church differed so substantially from the normal episcopal hierarchy of the Western Church” has baffled academics and researchers for many centuries (Sources recited post note). The Roman model took root without difficulty elsewhere. In contrast, the C9th Skellig (ascetic) model founded e.g in Kildare, Derry, Kells etc, flowered in Ireland and the Northern Provinces of Lindisfarne and Iona.



Ordnance Survey Map of Kilbrogan 1846 National Monuments service records shown in red

St. Patrick, born c. 387 AD, son of a (British) Roman Deacon and Magistrate (himself a baptised Christian, as had the bulk of the Roman Legions converted since the “Toleration” by edict 284 AD), is attributed with establishing the Metropolitan See at Armagh – based on the (Imperial) Roman models in Gaul and Italy. Academics refer to “*Ecclasia Romani.*” The Roman Empire pulled its British Colony home in 417 AD – whereupon a vast influx of Germanic tribes (Jutes; Saxons; Angles etc) filled the vacuum.

Following the Edict of 337 AD, there was universal agreement that the Christian Sabbath fell on Sunday and demanded “Solemn Observance.” From early, our Christian Festivals coincided with the Solar Year – Christmas at Winter Solstice; St Johnstide (Feast of the Enlightenment of Christ) at Summer Solstice’ Easter; at Spring Equinox (based on the first full moon after Equinox) and Michaelmas with our Autumn Equinox.

“At the feast of Christmas 10,000 Anglanders (English) have been baptised” so wrote Pope Gregory 598 AD. By 604 AD the Sees of Canterbury and Rochester had been

firmly established, the former would lead the charge against the “Filth” of Pantheism within Irish Ascetism.

We ask why the Irish Church by 598 AD had not yet any “regular diocesan structure”, under the Armagh Metropolitan (Archbishop). And we must examine why the British, Scots and Irish early Christian Communities, in following the Abbots of Lindisfarne and Iona, celebrated Eastertide up to 663 AD on a different date to that prescribed by Rome. “*Ecclasia Celtica*” was issuing its own “Decretals” (Encyclicals) from Iona.

As author understands it, the issue of Eastertide’s precise placement concerned the phases of the Moon on the night of the “Last Supper” – which night was the Jewish Passover. The Passover ritual evening meal marks the sunset on the eve of the Full Moon – i.e. The first Full Moon following Spring Equinox.

Colmán, as Bishop and Abbott of Lindisfarne conceded his Bishopric under threat of a “Decree of Anathema” (meaning Heresy). He resigned his “Cathedra” of Lindisfarne after the Whitby Synods of 663 AD where it was decided to calculate Easter using the method of the First Ecumenical Council instead of his preferred Celtic method. This change to the Roman Method led Colmán to leave and travel back to Scotland and eventually, back to Iona and Inishbofin where he died.

Celtic Spirituality characterised by a monastic based structure such as Cille Brogan was governed by Abbots (and Abbesses). The Imperial Roman Church on the other hand (*Ecclasia Romani*) evolved an Episcopal structure that reflected the organisation of the Empire and based on the hierarchy of Archbishop; Diocesan Bishop; Parish Priest, Deacon. Appointed to their parishes by the Bishop, and their supporting network of Deans. *Ecclastic Romani* was not finally settled in Ireland until the Synod of Ráth Breasail near the Rock of Cashel 1111. Thereafter, the Abbott was secondary to the Bishops.

Henceforth, Easter Sunday follows the Equinoctial Full moon which determines the beginning of Lent and Pentecost. Episcopalian Christians yet follow the astronomical timing of Easter with Passover.

The influence of the peculiar un-Roman character of native Irish society, and an especially enthusiastic response to the ascetic/hermitic traditions finding their way by trade routes from Eastern Mediterranean, characterises “*Ecclasia Celtica*” (also *Hibernesis*). The monks and nuns lived either communally or in cells, living off the land and (therefore land-centred), maintained strong links with pre-Christian beliefs e.g. Holy Wells located at previously holy sites. *Ecclasia Celtica* represented an organic and indigenous movement that celebrated Nature and Creation as a gift of God, the creative spark rather than ‘original sin’. Its contemporary equivalent being the remote mountainous Ethiopian Coptic Christian Coenobitical Culture. As a result, *Ecclasia Romani* gravely suspected Gnosticism. Approved missionaries alone were allowed the official voice. Hence since Whitby, one notes a militant intolerance of

what was considered the Vernacular Spirituality, antithetical to the newly settled Teutonic and Christianised Tribes in England with their innate penchant for homogenisation.

Likely every of County Cork's 119 Parishes contain a Townland with the prefix "Kil" (Cill) – from Latin Cilla – A Hermits Cell or Solitary Oratory – where our earliest Christian converts "lived a life of rigorous ascetism." Monasteries and hermitages, such as Brogan's were often founded in astonishingly beautiful places. Brogan's "Kil" may have formed the nucleus of a Monastic Community of like-minded early converts.

Additional placenames that abound the length of Ireland and indicate our first Christian Settlements include the prefix "Cros" (Crosshaven, Cross Mahon etc). "Domnach" (Sunday) gives us "Donaghmore" suggesting an established Community with a Bell; Baptisimal Font and consecrated Burial Ground. In author's Townland of Kilbarry there remains an outline of the "Cill" in a roadside ditch – with a Holy Well nearby named "Tobereendomnaigh" (Well of the Sunday People) which is believed to have been the Cill's "Baptisimal Font" – as many of Co Cork's 375 Holy Wells may well have been.

Bandon Town's Park

Our leisurely stroll from Kilbrogan to the nearby Town Park (bequeathed to the people of the town of Bandon by Lord Arnott in 1896) passes under a continuous vaulted overarch of mature Sycamore Trees – themselves perfect examples of the "Copse." We took time to observe the mighty "Sprigs" (regrowths on coppiced stools – French – Couper to cut). To echo the late Dr Oliver Rackham "if properly managed, trees provide an infinitely renewable resource."

We shared a medieval Woodlanders term Sluven (bad woodmanship). Noting the absence of a single "sluvenly" mark the length of this avenue, "we encountered no "Ash Dieback" (Chalara) the whole length of our field tour.

By 1.30pm we reached the two "Holy Wells." One "Lady's Well" (Folklore Comm, Vol, 313 Page 6) and the second "Brigids Well". The Duchas Folklore Collection holds entries that assert that the "People's Park is regarded as the site of what is said to have been the Monastery of Kilbrogan, and a mound immediately north of the Holy Wells us pointed out as the exact spot." (Duchas Parish Volume 314 Page 273)



The field group stopped at this spot, directly above the still-visible Holy Wells.

There once was a passageway between the wells, which thankfully the Football Club have preserved by installing supporting beams.

The author records our enduring gratitude to Amanda Clarke – who shared freely her prodigious research. Consulting the 1st Edition O.S Map (1842) and the current County Archaeological Inventory, we learn that our County’s 7,457 square kilometres lists 375 Holy Wells. Of the 375, Amanda has visited 355 and shares an arresting truth – “One third of all Holy Wells have gone. One third of all wells are still to be found but long abandoned and one third are active, of which 68 are still visited regularly.”

Amanda’s Blog: holywellscorkandkerry.com is truly deserving of a visit. Also keep an eye for her soon to be published *Holy Wells of County Cork*, for which she plans a GO FUND ME app to aid her publication on the subject.



This second photograph shows the area immediately north of the wells (the dip where Duchas stories say the monastery was originally located)

With “contrived rapidification” baffling the hearts of communities and the rolling out of our National Development Plan; and Forestry scheduled to expand to 17% national territory, Amanda’s research cries out for support.

In conclusion, in our over-caffeinated world, sacred spaces both within ourselves and across our landscapes endure “Men and Machines looking for something to do” and Planners obsessed with the “Cult of Appearance.”

In his “*Heritage in Schools*” work, the author encourages both staff and scholars (and especially Groundsmen) don’t “just do something – sit there.”

Our great festivals, like our Rituals, build in us a strong impulse of the “Cosmic-Earthly” connection. Visiting a Holy Well helps us to use our powers of feeling and thinking – that we become more conscious, to orient the self. 2023 marks for the first time a National Feast day of a “Matron Saint, and though not listed on the Roman Pantheon of Saints, Brigid is Ireland’s. Brigid spans Pagan Ireland’s worship of water and the Christian Ritual of Baptism.

Brigid’s intimate association with dairying and the wellbeing of Cattle (Earth); her presence by our hearths (Fire); her veneration and love of the Oakwood’s of Kildare (Air) but she is primarily venerated through the Element of Water.

Her Festival coincides with Candlemas, one of Christendom’s earliest Feast days. Thanksgiving for the “Bees” and “*Bees Wax* whereby the “Duirteach” (Cill) is lit up and Master’s message recited for eager seekers. It is no coincidence that Candlemas is celebrated in early February – Bee Guardians well know that hives are in gravest danger of dying off at this time in the Temperate Hemisphere.

Because Spring Equinox 2023 falls on March Monday 20th and the first Full Moon (Shabboutz – Aramaic for Sabbath and Full Moon) occurs thereafter on April, Thursday 6th, Easter Day will be April 9th.

Jewish Passover commences Sunset April, Wednesday 5th, the eve of Full Moon, in Thanksgiving for the *Passing Over* of the Angel of Death and Grace to know and discern Truth.



This mature Silver Birch festooned with “Witches Brooms,” regularly described as a tree disease. The author loudly but humbly rejects this – “*Taphrina Betulina*” is a harmless obligate fungus with no where to incarnate and fine Alder hanging heavy with tiny cones, reminding us of the coniferous origins of our Broadleaves.

Creative Bandon thanks participants for their contribution of €5 which will be donated to Bandon Food Bank.

Prayer of the Tree

Ted read this poem on the walk, dedicating it to Richard St. Barbe Baker who founded the International Tree Foundation 100 years ago in December 1922.

To the Wayfarer:

*Ye who pass by and would raise your hand against me.
Harken ere you harm me !
I am the heat of your hearth on the cold winter nights,
The friendly shade screening you from the summer sun
My fruits are refreshing draughts,
Quenching your thirst as you journey on,
I am the beam that holds your house,
The board of your table,
The bed on which you lie,
And the timber that builds your boat,*

*I am the handle of your hoe,
The door of your homestead,
The wood of your cradle,
And the shell of your coffin.
I am the bread of kindness, and the flower of beauty.
Ye who pass by, listen to my prayer : harm me not.*

ANONYMOUS

Postscript

St Adamnan, 9th Abbot of Iona wrote the biography of Colmcille (Columba), he will be remembered as the author of “Lex Innocentium” published at Iona circa 607 AD. The “Law of Innocents” prohibited violence against Women; Children; Clerics and all non-arms bearing people. It was republished 2020 with valuable commentary by J.W. Houlihan (Four Courts Press).

St Brigid, born 455 AD near Dundalk, opted for deep seclusion under a “Great Oak Tree” in Kildare (Kill-dara), when very young and seems to have practiced as a Gnostic Christian, our earliest expression of Christian Mysticism, which long pre-dates the arrival in Ireland in 409 AD of Bishop St Patrick, from Rome.

Gnostics were concerned with the “deep knowing” (Gnosis – knowledge) and search for “the Kingdom of Light Within”, which pre-occupied Agnostic Christians. This “esoteric” Gnosticism was early prohibited by Rome. Thankfully our present Pontiff in “Laudato Si Encyclical”, in proclaiming the centrality of “Deep Inner Ecological Conversion” may bring us back to our senses.

“Kildare” became the greatest and most famous Nunnery ever established in Ireland. Can we divine Brigid’s prompts from the higher realms - ***“Rise to the Challenge, demonstrate mastery not over Nature, but of the Self.”***

Sources

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Ted Cook is a Heritage Specialist with the Heritage Council's Heritage in Schools Programme. He has been working with schools for 30 years, inspiring insight to our native woodlands and shining a light down history through our built environment.

He is a Co Founder and educator with the Woodland League. www.woodlandleague.org.

His talks focus on Heritage and Conservation, ecological restoration, trees and aquatic systems, and wildlife corridors. A winner of Cork Environmental Forum Lifetime Achievement award for sharing his vast knowledge of trees and heritage and engaging so many people in being active in planting trees and becoming more informed about the environment.