



**Dolores Whelan** had taught Biochemistry for 11 years when in 1983 she decided to study with Fr. Mathew Fox, a Dominican priest, to take a Masters in Creation Centred Spirituality in Oakland, California. During the programme she studied deep ecology with Joanna Macy, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. This course caused her to question every aspect of her life, including her professional work and her spirituality. She resigned her teaching post and began to explore a spirituality that would unite the scientist, the social activist and the spiritual seeker. Eventually her journey led her to her own spiritual roots in Irish tradition.

Returning to Ireland in 1985, Dolores developed and ran the Iomlanu Centre for Healing and Creative Living in Dundalk for 11 years; she now offers courses and pilgrimages through Iomlanu Education.

**We first met a long time ago around the Sellafield anti-nuclear campaign in Dundalk when you were teaching at the Dundalk Institute. In fact we met before your transformative experience in America. For both of us the important shrine of St. Brigit at Faughart was a sacred place. It has become a centre of your pilgrimage work, so can you tell me more about that?**

Pilgrimage was central to early Irish Christianity and it took various forms. Holy places were visited at certain times of the year, holy wells were venerated and the earliest saints in the fifth and sixth centuries followed signs and animal guides to find their place of resurrection, where they built their cells in the wilderness, which later became monastic centres and places of pilgrimage.

Such a place is the shrine of St. Brigit at Faughart, which has a holy well, a sacred stream amazing old beech trees, certain holy stones at which simple yet powerful healing rituals are performed by pilgrims. Faughart is visited both at Lá Fhéile Bríde, St. Brigit's day, and at her pattern day in July which celebrates the abundance of Brigit reflected in the many stories told about her.

Places of pilgrimage varied from old monastic sites to wells or holy mountains such as Cough Patrick. People usually went on pilgrimage with a purpose, such as healing for themselves or a family member, or freedom from difficulties. Offerings were made in the form of prayer rags or other personal items which were hung on holy trees and with which the person sought to rid themselves of negativity and oppression of various kinds. While the custom is fading now, it is still very alive at Faughart and in Kileevy where the Brigidine pilgrimages are still strong.

Early Celtic Christian saints lived their lives closely aligned to the seasonal cycle of the year. Ecological awareness and sensitivities was the essence of who they were. The festival of Brigit celebrates the return of light and Brigit's symbols are sun and fire. I think of Brigit as keeper of the flame or the fire of inspiration and compassion and action. Brigit lit the flame in the monastery in Kildare which stayed alight for 800 years until the monasteries were

suppressed. The Brigidine sisters relit the flame at Solas Bhríde in Kildare when they moved there in 1993 to reconnect with their ancient roots.

The Cycle of the year was very important. One Irish myth speaks about how Bres, the Fomorian king, offered the people two harvests in the year but the people said no, we will go with the rhythm of the year because spring is for sowing; summer is for ripening; autumn is for harvest and winter is for eating and storytelling.

This rhythm was seen as essential not only for the land but also for the blueprint for the people who lived on it. Shirley Toulson writes in *The Celtic Alternative*: "after the Synod of Whitby we lost a form of individual Christianity which, though its druidic links, was linked to the perennial philosophy".

A teaching story from her book tells about St. Neot, a British saint who had a pool in which there were three fishes. Every day he took one out which was cooked for his meal and every night three were still there. Once when he became ill, his brothers, to encourage him to eat, took the three fishes out and cooked them in three different ways. He was horrified by the wastefulness of this act and told them to return the fish to the pool or there would be no fish in the future. So they were returned to the pool and were miraculously restored to life.

An important rhythm for activists is to allow periods of rest and reflection after times of busy activism. So many activists get burnt out because they don't go into that place of rest and receptivity, in the past I myself had many such experiences.

The Christian Mystic, Meister Eckhart, says that, for those in alignment with God, they are always in the right place whether activity or at rest. Tom Berry and Joanna Macy speak about the importance of seeing ourselves as integral aspects of our universe.

### ***You revived this ancient pilgrim path from Faughart to Kildare***

In 2012 we invited Anthony Murphy author of *Island of the Setting Sun* to talk about the constellation of Cygnus at the Brigit of Faughart Festival. He related that one of the stars in this constellation rises above Brigit's Well in Faughart at Imbolc, 1 February. He had discovered a line which started in Faughart and went through Slane and Tara and ended in a monument in the Curragh in Kildare. So we decided to follow this up. That summer I was asked to give a talk to a cross border group in the house of a woman called Sally Cox in the townland of Lisnawully which is on the outskirts of Dundalk. Sally told us that there is an old road that goes from Faughart through the lands of Lisnawully to Kildare. I could hardly believe it. The first piece of research we did was to go to her land, which had a little stream flowing through it. She believed this was part of Brigit of Faughart's stream.

Later on in our research we went to Kilcock and we checked out possible routes. We came across a small road which a stud had named Brideswell and a few metres further down the road a Brigit's well. So we decided to re-create the pilgrim path from Faughart to Kildare, the two places in Ireland most associated with devotion to Brigit.

We decided to begin the pilgrimage on 7 July 2013 because that was the pattern day in Faughart and so, after we mingled with local people who were at the shrine, the pilgrims set

off to walk over nine days to Kildare. Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, the traditional singer, joined us and led us singing as we went. The local parish priest invited me to speak in Brigit's Oratory and to ask those gathered to pray and to light a candle for us pilgrims. We arrived jubilant in Kildare and were welcomed exuberantly by the Brigidine Sisters and many other people. Sister Mary Minehan said: "You have blazed a trail in blazing sunshine". In 1995, Thomas Berry, author of *The Dream of the Earth*, visited St. Brigit's Well in Kildare where he planted an oak sapling and we honoured him also in this pilgrimage.

***I walked Croagh Patrick with friends and family on the Sunday after the Good Friday Agreement to celebrate the sense of renewal, redemption and joy we felt at the ending of the long war in Northern Ireland.***

Croagh Patrick is a Lughnasa mountain according to Máire MacNeill. Lughnasa is the Gaelic name for Lammastide Festival of First Fruits. Lugh is the God of Light and the festival is associated with hilltop foraging for blueberries, horse racing and horse fairs. Croagh Patrick was not established as the national Patrician pilgrimage until the railway came to Westport. Before that every locality had its own Lughnasa mountain, but that has mostly died out. Lugh was the God of Light and St. Patrick took over his symbols – the story is he had a huge fight with the black birds on Croagh Patrick.

That was a fight that the sun at midsummer had annually with the dark, which from then on gradually swallowed the sun until it was reborn at midwinter. But Patrick gave the people the light of Christ to sustain them. Nevertheless the sun continued to diminish from midsummer on.

The dazzling quartzite pyramid of Croagh Patrick (764m), which dominates the land south of Clew Bay in the west of Ireland, has been a holy mountain since before Christian times. The old name for the mountain is Croghan Aigle, Eagles Peak. According to Christian tradition, St. Patrick went up the sacred mountain at festival time in 441 AD. After fasting at the summit for 40 days, he battled with the devil's mother and demons in the form of birds.

Patrick banished all the demons from Ireland in the form of snakes, and the mountain became an important place of Christian pilgrimage. The summit settlement dates back to the bronze age, and there be the foundations of an early Christian oratory on the site.

Croagh Patrick is the most important pilgrimage in Ireland. Nearly one million visitors, most of them pilgrims, climb to the top every year. Almost 30,000 pilgrims make the trek on the last Sunday in July. The mountain was the focus of the pre Christian festival of Lughnasa, traditionally held around 1 August which celebrated the first fruits of summer. The holy mountain was especially important for women, who would sleep on the summit during Lughnasa if they wanted to bear a child. The holy mountain was approached from the east in ancient times, the pilgrim way beginning at the Abbey of Ballintubber.

***Did you ever do Lough Derg?***

I never did it ,although my family and many friends all went when we were young. Something in me had an aversion to the particular way in which Catholic theology understood penance and the focus on us humans being sinners. I understand that we humans have our imperfections and I understand that importance of going to a place apart

from our ordinary lives where we reflect and abstain from food and normal activities, but I see it more as a way to connect more fully with our spiritual nature than as a form of penance. Yet for many people Lough Derg is a very powerful experience and part of me does want to go. Some years ago I did a vision quest for ten days in Wicklow during which we made a four day fast, and were alone in our little tents searching for a vision for our life. I found this to be one of the most challenging and powerful experiences of my life.

***I myself found Lough Derg amazing. I liked that we all had to take our shoes off before putting foot on the island. If it was in India we would think it exotic, but because it is associated with Catholicism we don't recognise the transformative experience it can be. The basilica is not the cave, that was there before Cromwell destroyed it, but at night during the vigil it feels like a cave, and the sleep deprivation adds to that experience .It is like an experience of death and rebirth and going into the cave. It's tough but you do come out feeling renewed. The fasting is not bad, you get black tea and oatcakes, but the sleep deprivation is difficult.***

St. Patrick's Purgatory is an ancient pilgrimage on Station Island in Co. Donegal. According to legend, the site dates from the fifth century, when Christ showed St. Patrick a cave, sometimes referred to as a pit, on Station Island that was an entrance to Purgatory. While in a cave on the island, St. Patrick is said to have had a vision of the punishments of hell. Hence the place came to be known as St. Patrick's Purgatory.

It was an important medieval pilgrimage that it is mentioned in texts from as early as 1185 and shown on maps from all over Europe as early as the fifteenth century. The pilgrimage is a three day fast incorporating a 24 hour vigil. Pilgrims arrive on the island having fasted from the previous midnight. They have one meal of oatcakes and black tea on each of the days. The central prayer of the pilgrimage is called a 'station'. Each station involves the repeated praying aloud as pilgrims walk round the beds of the saints barefooted. The greater part of a station is made on the Penitential Beds (these are thought to be the remnants of cells used by the early monks). Three such stations are made on the first day. Four more stations are made in common in the Basilica during the night vigil and one is made on each of the second and third days.

There is no evidence that the pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory was ever interrupted for any period of time, even during the reformation although the cave was reputedly filled in by Cromwell. It continues today, after almost fifteen-hundred years. Every year the main pilgrimage season begins in late May/early June and ends on 15 August, the Feast of the Assumption. It is a three day pilgrimage open to pilgrims of all religions, or none.

Once on the island and barefoot, they begin a continuous cycle of prayer and liturgies carried out at designated 'stations' on the island, including six 'beds of the saints ' that are the remains of ancient cells. Pilgrims spend the first night in the island's basilica in prayer, and on the second night can sleep in the dormitory. On the third morning they are ferried back to the mainland, where they will continue their fast until midnight.

Although the cave has been closed since 1632, several descriptions by early pilgrims call it a cave or cellar or as an enclosed pit. The entrance, which was kept closed and locked, was

quite narrow: about 0.6 m (2 ft.) wide and 0.9 m (3 ft.) high. Once inside there was a short descent of about six steps. Since the site has never been excavated, we can only rely on these descriptions of the cave. However a plausible suggestion is that it was one of the ancient sweat houses, which were still in use in Ireland into the twentieth century. People would enter these small enclosed places to inhale medicinal smoke produced by burning various plants. The name "purgatories" could have been used here with its Latin meaning as a place for cleansing and purging, especially as the idea of purgatory as a place for punishment in the afterlife did not come into common use until the thirteenth century.

A saint's cell seems to have existed on the islands in Lough Derg from the fifth century and several hermits lived here in beehive cells – which may be preserved in the penitential beds that can still be seen on Station Island. Around 1130 the monastery was given to the Augustinian Friars. The monastery was dissolved in 1632, although the local landlord apparently allowed the monks to remain. By 1710 the Franciscans were present on the island in the summer to administer to the needs of the pilgrims. They built a church on Station Island in 1763. In 1785 the island came into the lands of the Diocese of Clogher. The Leslie family gave the island to the diocese in 1960.

<http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/landscape/initiatives/the-pilgrim-paths/>

<http://solasbhride.ie/> [www.brigidoffaughart.ie](http://www.brigidoffaughart.ie) [www.brigidsway.ie](http://www.brigidsway.ie)

The Festival of Lughnasa by Maire MacNeill (1962).