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# The FURROW

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## The Holy Well as a Window onto Irish Life – Pre-Christian, Christian and Post-Christian (Part 1)

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## INTRODUCTION

The modern human being who lives in a technologically advanced society no longer has an intuitive reverence for water. We take it for granted that it comes out of the tap at our command. We have no sense that its supply may be limited. Indeed, in Ireland households receive it free of charge.

This having been said, Irish people are less removed from their water supply than people in more heavily urbanized countries. In the countryside, people operate private wells or are part of community water schemes with small distribution networks. This means that the population remains more aware of where their water comes from – such as a spring in a hill overlooking the village. Disruptions are more frequent than in the city; to remedy them, one phones not a national ‘LoCall’ number, but the neighbour who has assumed the part-time job of operating the pumping station. Since the water supply is less mediated in the country than in urban areas – there are fewer steps from well or spring to tap – water is less taken for granted. The contemporary rural experience of water still shares some traits with the human experience which gave rise to holy wells: an intuitive gratitude and reverence.

There is one important exception to this claim. We no longer regard water as a miracle – the kind of miracle which occurred when the Israelites ran out of water in the desert and challenged Moses, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ (Exodus 17:3). When Moses despairs and asks God for assistance, the Lord instructs him to strike a rock with his staff; this makes the rock give water. Modern man is incredulous at such stories because we know too much about water. The spring that wells up in the field or emerges

\* The second part of this article will be published in next month’s issue.

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from the rocks of a mountain is no longer mysterious to us in its origins. We know exactly – or at least we know that geologists know exactly – why the spring appears where it does. It has to do with watersheds, rock formations, groundwater levels, rainfall, and many other factors which modern scientists study and for which they are able to account.

Before the rise of modern science, however, every spring – not just the water-giving rock in the desert – was a small miracle. Because man was not in a position to understand (and master) the mechanisms at work behind the appearance of the spring, he attributed its appearance to higher forces. This is why even such a sophisticated civilization as the Roman one – with its aqueducts and public toilets – worshipped Fons, the water god. Each year, the *fontinalia* were celebrated, a festival in honour of Fons, to acknowledge the god's gift of water.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, water worship appears to be a universal aspect of pre-historic and ancient religions.<sup>2</sup>

## HOLY WELLS IN PRE-CHRISTIAN IRELAND

In Ireland, too, holy wells predate the Christianization of the island. This does not mean that each and every well has Celtic origins, nor that the rituals which have come to be associated with holy wells all go back to the Iron Age. It does mean, in the words of Celeste Ray, that '[f]inds from the few excavated sites and the recurrent motif of supernatural wells in the early medieval literature describing pre-Christian Ireland affirm that the sacrality of springs and wells preceded the Iron Age to Christian era transition'.<sup>3</sup>

There is quite a bit of uncertainty regarding pre-Christian holy wells. This is because, on the one hand, archaeological evidence is scant: most of the offerings which could help the archaeologist understand how the wells functioned have perished, and the wells themselves have over the centuries undergone significant changes, having been cleaned, deepened, lined, or even moved. The literary evidence, on the other hand, is problematic because the sagas from pre-Christian Ireland were recorded retrospectively by Christian monks, and hence from a Christian perspective. The Maynooth scholar Kim McCone has described this operation as an 'ideological mixer', which produced the consequence that 'the modern scholar

1 See Claudius Vaillat, *Le culte des sources dans la Gaule antique* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1932), p. 10.

2 Janet and Colin Bord emphasize this point in *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland* (London: Granada, 1985), pp. 1–3. The authors' reflections on the role of technology in displacing reverence for water are incisive as well.

3 Celeste Ray, *The Origins of Ireland's Holy Wells* (Oxford: Archeopress, 2014), p. 9. Also cf. pp. 23 and 62.

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is hard put to separate pagan and Christian ingredients out of the resultant blend'.<sup>4</sup>

Still, what emerges from the literary evidence is fascinating. In many sagas, water from holy wells conveys supernatural knowledge. In one story, we hear of a fabulous creature called the Salmon of Knowledge, which was flushed from the holy well of Segais into the Boyne. Mere contact with the salmon bestows omniscience.<sup>5</sup> The reason why holy wells were seen as sources of wisdom is that their dark mouths connect this world to the otherworld. This origin bestows supernatural powers upon their waters: powers to convey omniscience and to heal, but also powers to wreak destruction. This is why holy wells had to be carefully guarded by holy men: druids. To be contained, they had to be covered with heavy rocks, lest they exploded and swallowed up their surrounding communities.

### THE CONVERSION OF HOLY WELLS TO CHRISTIAN USE

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus famously declares that he has not 'come to abolish the law or the prophets', but to 'fulfil' them. Thus, one of the major driving forces of the Christian faith, which we still see at work in the daily liturgy, is the way in which God's promises to the people of Israel are fully realized in his Son. The Old Testament, therefore, has to be read in the light of the New.

The idea of a Christian fulfilment can be extended to cultures outside ancient Israel. The Irish monastic writers of the early Middle Ages regarded the wisdom of their forefathers as already pointing to the truths more fully revealed in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>6</sup> On this reading, 'Patrick's fifth-century mission to Ireland' could, in the words of Kim McCone, be understood 'as a small-scale reenactment of Christ's appearance in the world to bring the Old Testament law and prophets, including history, to fulfilment in the New'.<sup>7</sup> This view entailed that the culture of pre-Christian Ireland did not have to be abolished in the course of the island's Christianization, but could be refined and appropriated for Christian purposes.

And so, despite the association of holy wells with pagan rituals, the arrival of the Christian faith in Ireland did not bring their destruction, but rather their conversion to Christian use. Early Irish literature contains many stories describing such conversions. They typically feature a saint – often St Patrick himself – who

4 Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), pp. 256–57.

5 Ray recounts this tale in *Origins*, p. 76.

6 This is McCone's argument in *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 73.

7 McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 256.

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breaks the spell of a pagan divinity believed to live in the well or to be associated with it. Thus, Bishop Tirechán's seventh-century *Collectanea* recount a story about St Patrick's conversion of the well of Findmag in Co. Mayo. Druids believed that the well harboured a god, hidden under a large rock. So Patrick miraculously moved the heavy rock, revealing nothing under it but water. The supernatural relocation of the rock, in turn, proved Patrick's own connection with the true God, the landscape itself becoming a memorial to God's power and the authority of his saints.<sup>8</sup> Other conversion stories involve wells whose dangerously cursed waters saintly action turns into waters of healing. Such transformations demonstrated God's power over the forces of evil. Finally, Tirechán has St Patrick call up new wells where there were none before, especially when a well was needed for the baptism of fresh converts.

What, essentially, is the difference between the pagan and the Christian understanding of holy wells? In pre-Christian times, the well water itself was regarded as possessing divine powers and venerated as such; a water-god or water-spirit was associated with it. From a Christian perspective, wells and their water are not divine; nor are there any water gods. This having been said, in the Eucharist bread and wine serve as the forms in which God unites us with himself; and in baptism, water in conjunction with the appropriate words performs a sacramental function, just as does oil in confirmation and in the anointing of the sick. In other words, in the Eucharist bread and wine literally become God, whereas water and oil (again, as part of a particular rite) confer divine grace. In yet other contexts, like the sprinkling of holy water on the congregation or the use of holy water in making the sign of the cross, water functions as a sacramental – a sign of God's grace which is not as such efficacious but, in the words of the Catechism, 'prepare[s] us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it'.<sup>9</sup> This means that there is a place in Christian practice for something like holy water. Yet the water from a holy well possesses no miraculous qualities; mechanically applying this water to a sick limb or a wound will produce no effect. Treating the water as a sign of God's grace while praying for healing is what sets Christian practice apart from superstition. Whereas the one who prays for God's grace acknowledges the freedom of the divine persons to act in inscrutable ways, water administered as a 'miracle cure' amounts to a vain and idolatrous attempt to subject transcendent forces to human control.

8 See Ray, *Origins*, pp. 79–80.

9 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), no. 1670.

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### STAGES IN THE HISTORY OF HOLY WELLS IN CHRISTIAN IRELAND

Before delving further into the theological significance of holy wells and of the practices associated with them in Christian Ireland, a caveat is necessary. Speaking about holy wells in general can be misleading, suggesting that throughout the history of Christian Ireland, holy wells functioned in the same way. This is not the case. Rather, the holy wells and their place in popular devotion underwent several stages of development.

Most importantly, recent scholarship has distinguished two ‘devotional revolutions’ in Irish history. The first such revolution occurred in the post-Reformation period, towards the beginning of the seventeenth century. This is when, according to Michael P. Carroll, ‘holy wells, rounding rituals, and patterns became central to the experience of “being Catholic”’ in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> There is – so to speak – negative testimony to this development in the fact that, in 1703, the British rulers of the country enacted a Penal Law punishing anyone who ‘attend[ed] or [was] present at any Pilgrimage, or meeting held at any Holy Well, or reputed Holy Well’. The punishment consisted in the payment of a fine of ten shillings or, for those unable to pay, a whipping.<sup>11</sup>

Carroll is not arguing that holy wells attracted no devotional practices before the seventeenth century. His point is that devotions at holy wells intensified and acquired a more formal structure. He is also convinced that ‘the great majority of holy well cults found in post-Reformation Ireland were new creations’; in other words, ‘that most of these cults sprang into existence in association with springs that had not previously been the focus of cultic rituals’.<sup>12</sup> The explanation Carroll offers is that in the post-Tridentine period, Catholic clergy and lay people in the heart of Ireland renewed and reinvigorated the Church by combining indigenous Irish traditions with aspects of post-Reformation Catholicism which were imported from the European Continent. This fusion led to an upsurge in traditional devotions, but such that these devotions now followed the more standardized patterns promoted by the Roman hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> This is the time when Stations of the Cross appeared at holy wells and when priests started guiding the devotions by saying Mass, giving sermons, or leading the people in prayer.<sup>14</sup>

10 Michael P. Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 135.

11 The relevant statute is quoted, with commentary, in Denys Scully, *Statement of the Penal Laws, Which Aggrieve the Catholics of Ireland: With Commentaries* (Dublin: H. Fitzpatrick, 1812), pp. 253–56.

12 Carroll, *Pilgrimage*, p. 102.

13 See Carroll, *Pilgrimage*, p. 105.

14 See Carroll, *Pilgrimage*, p. 114.

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What is interesting is that, in this first devotional revolution, the more affluent people from the towns acted in concert with the poorer peasant population.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, there was no tension between popular devotional practices and orthodoxy, the latter being ensured by the frequent presence of priests.

This situation changed in the course of a second devotional revolution, this one occurring in the early nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> At this point, the organized Church left the countryside, so to speak, and moved into the villages and towns – that is to say, into the local parish churches. It is in the parish, led by the clergy, that ‘proper’ rituals like confession and Mass were performed, while holy wells began to be regarded with a measure of suspicion for the disorderly religious and non-religious practices associated with them. We will return to this point later. One can regard the second devotional revolution as a continuation of the first – or at least an aspect of the first, namely, the standardization of religious practice in an effort on the part of the Church hierarchy to ensure orthodoxy as defined by the Roman ‘centre’.

The objectives of the second devotional revolution were complicated by yet a third ‘revolution’, or at least development in Irish history: namely, the nationalist revival of the end of the nineteenth century. The renewed appreciation of Ireland’s Gaelic past, together with the elements of popular culture associated with it, changed attitudes towards the wells once again as pilgrimages, patterns, and circumambulations came to be regarded as expressions of an authentically Irish spirituality.<sup>17</sup> Yet what happened in the course of this rediscovery of the past was not a simple return to pre-nineteenth-century practices. Many wells underwent significant iconographic modifications in that statues of the Virgin Mary were added to them, so that devotion to local or national saints found itself taken up into devotional practices of the universal Church. In this way, the wells could function as symbols both of a locally rooted spirituality and of its place within the universal Church.<sup>18</sup>

15 See Carroll, *Pilgrimage*, p. 115.

16 This devotional revolution was first described by Emmet Larkin, ‘The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75’, *American Historical Review*, 77:3 (1972), 625–52.

17 On this point, see Lawrence J. Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 64–65.

18 The shift towards dedicating wells to the Blessed Virgin is one of the main points which the Brennemans argue in Walter L. Brenneman, Jr., and Mary G. Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), esp. chap. 5: ‘From Brigid to Mary’ (pp. 88–109).