



MÚSAEM CATHRACH NA GAILLIMHE
GALWAY CITY MUSEUM

Saint Brigid's Day Traditions

Many of the customs and traditions associated with Saint Brigid took place on St Brigid's Eve, 31 January, rather than on St Brigid's Day, 1 February.

Food

Every household had a festive meal, often with a sweet treat, on St Brigid's Eve. In 1791, one French visitor to Galway saw fruit cakes (*bairíní breac*) been eaten on St Brigid's Eve.

Bridget's Cross / Cros Bríde

It was customary to make a St Brigid's cross out of rushes or straw on St Brigid's Eve. There were many varieties of cross – some were very simple and easily made, while others were more intricate and required great skill and patience. Crosses were hung up in houses, and sometimes in cowsheds and stables, to honour the saint and to gain her protection.

Biddy / Brídeóg

On Brigid's Eve, groups of young people carried a homemade effigy of the saint from house to house, looking for pennies. Known as the 'Biddy' or *Brídeóg* ('little Bríd), the figure was often made using a broom handle or churn-dash, dressed in rags, which were stuffed with straw to make a doll-like figure.

Bridget's Cloak / Brat Bríde

A piece of cloth – *Brat* or *Bratóg Bríde* – was left outside on the windowsill on St Brigid's Eve. It was believed that St Brigid, when travelling the country on the eve of her feast day, would touch the cloth and in doing so would give it healing powers. Afterwards, the blessed

cloth would be worn for protection from illness or accident, especially by fishermen. It was also used to cure pains, especially pains of the head – headache, toothache, earache and sore throat.

Bridget's Belt / Crios Bríde

On St Brigid's Eve, groups of young people carried a large belt, made of woven straw rope and with a number of plaited straw crosses attached to it, from house to house. At each house, the residents were expected to pass through the *crios* three times. They would then gain the protection of St Brigid and be free from illness during the following year.

Work and Transport

On St Brigid's Day people avoided any work that required the turning of wheels, such as milling or spinning. In some places, ploughing and metalwork were also forbidden. And often, people walked rather than using wheeled transport – carts or bicycles.

Weather

By the end of January people began to anticipate an improvement in the weather; for St Brigid had promised:

“Every second day fine
from my day onward
and half of my own day”

The farmers hoped for improved weather for ploughing and digging, and fishermen expected fewer storms and rough seas. In the past, when people relied on candles for light, the lengthening days were also welcome.

Further Reading:

- Kevin Danaher (1972) *The Year in Ireland: Irish Calendar Customs*
- E. Estyn Evans (1989) *Irish Folkways*
- Olive Sharkey (1987) *Old Day, Old Ways: An Illustrated Folk History of Ireland*