



Hooley Dedication 2007

Breda McMahon

The all powerful mother-goddess was part of the mythology of Celtic Ireland where women were often figures of influence. In that era, it was believed by many that a woman, the Great Mother, was the creator of the universe and under her were lesser goddesses of healing, nature, fertility, and battle. Brigid was one of these, the protector of all natural things connected with air, fire, and water. Thus began the terms Mother Nature and Mother Earth which could well have been the stepping stones to Mother Ireland.

Many of these old beliefs blended in with those of early Christian Ireland so it is not surprising that St. Brigid of the 5th to 6th centuries was named after the goddess. She too was a woman of power and one of history's most liberated females. She was the best brewer of the day and could well have been found sharing a draught with St. Kevin, St. Finian, and even St. Patrick himself who shared her fondness for ale. Brigid, the female patron saint of Ireland, was second only to Mary, Mother of God and was known as Mary of the Gael.

In later years, women's role was one of doing man's bidding or becoming window dressing for their fathers and husbands. Maud Gonne McBride was one of the latter, serving as hostess for her wealthy father when he was assigned to Dublin Castle. Upon his death, however, she began to work for Irish nationalistic causes and organized protests against the mass eviction of Irish people from their lands. She founded the Revolutionary Daughters of Erin and because of her activities was imprisoned several times by the British and was often on their most wanted list. She was to the Irish, however, their Joan of Arc.

From the mid to the late 1800's, thousands of Irish nuns left Ireland for America. In the beginning they came to serve the needs of the Famine immigrants but their role expanded as orders moved west to the frontier settlements. These were strong women who had a huge impact on society, among them Mother Francis Clare and Sister Mary Frances Warde who opened the first convent in the U.S. more than 150 years ago.

Then, of course, there is Annie Moore who, at age 15, was the first immigrant to set foot on Ellis Island, where she was met by her parents. It was not unusual for children so young to emigrate, usually coming to family members who had led the way. Annie is a vivid reminder of both emigration and immigration and all those affected by both.

Let us not forget the infamous but gallant sea captain Grace O'Malley, the Pirate Queen who was constantly hunted by the Elizabethan Navy. She was an extraordinary woman who won Queen Elizabeth's respect by fearlessly announcing to her that she was just as royal as Her Majesty and insisted on being treated as such.

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Probably the most outstanding woman of the 1900's was Constance Gore-Booth, Countess Markiewicz, a revolutionary who fought side by side with James Connelly during the Easter Rising. She was sentenced to death with him but time and the Irish response was on her side and she was freed. She was a member of the first Dáil Éireann and was the first woman elected to the British Parliament representing Ireland.

Unforgettable too is Margaret Tobin Brown. Born to Irish immigrants in a shanty town in Hannibal, Missouri, she was one of the first women in the United States to run for political office, and ran for the Senate eight years before women even had the right to vote. She was a woman of indomitable spirit and was hailed as a heroine by the survivors of the Titanic whom she helped save. She was the Unsinkable Molly Brown!

In the past 100 years, Irish women have risen to prominence in many areas – in the arts, politics, sports, medicine, education, and especially in public service. Mary Robinson became Ireland's president, followed by Mary McAleese. Eileen Collins piloted the Shuttle Discovery and Kathleen Sullivan walked in space. Joanne Hayes White and Kathleen O'Toole held prominent positions in police departments in San Francisco and Boston, and Lynn Tierney was a commissioner in the New York City Fire Department. Here we must also include our own Anne Marie Sweeney. Let us not forget Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy who through unbelievable challenges and tragedy never lost her faith in God.

Though all these women's contributions are indeed notable, we must also pay tribute to those not numbered among the famous, wealthy, or powerful. We especially remember those whose unwavering belief in God and family stood firm even when persecuted. These women were the backbones of their churches, their communities, and most especially of their families. We know some of them. They are parents and friends, among them people like Maureen Butler Fitzgerald and Kathleen Distin Krajick who enrich our lives with grace and dignity. They are people such as Julia Murphy Mannix who, like Rose Kennedy, saw much tragedy in her life yet instilled in her children a deep faith and a love of learning.

Let us right now remember our ancestors who passed on to us the rich heritage we celebrate today. Let us especially remember our mothers and grandmothers who have shaped so many of our lives.

To them, Irish women of true grit, let us dedicate this festival, our Hooley 2007.

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