

## Festival of First Light



The moment of First Light lies exactly midway between winter solstice and spring equinox. It is a time of stirrings, when the increasing light is felt but not quite believed in. The weather is full of changes, from brilliant sunbursts to sharp, sudden showers, which bring an abrupt chill to the atmosphere. The unwary are caught without coats. At one moment the promise of spring hovers in the air; the next, winter leaps out and catches us by the throat. It is a changeable time, yet a time of promise.

It is a quiescent time in the bush, as if the new light has not yet penetrated there. On the bush floor, green-hooded orchids are flowering and mushrooms pop out of the damp into the gentle new warmth, but trees are still gathering their buds. Kumarahou, tawari, puawananga (clematis), karaka and kowhai are preparing to flower, but have not yet burst forth. This season precedes the drama of spring; it is a time of gathering, of preparation.

The quiet of the bush stands in contrast to the new energy of the open garden, where exotic plants respond to the warming of the earth. Bulbs push their spears through sun fingered soil to flaunt delicate colours and sweet perfumes. Narcissi and daffodils abound, while primroses sit delicately upon their nests of leaves. Daphne lets loose the last of its pink fragrance. Snowdrops cluster in shady corners; polyanthus flashes with bright colour, and pink clouds of flowering cherry waft among bare branches, contrasting with the frothy, white clusters of plum blossom.

This is the season that aligns with the northern hemisphere Chinese New Year.

### **Aotearoa**

For Maori, First Light comes in the second lunar month of the year, Pakawera (July/August), described as ruarua huangohingohi ('few and withered'), when Ka haere memenge nga rau o nga mea katoa i te huka ('the leaves of all things become shrivelled by frost'). The Tuhoe called it Hongonui, when Kua tino matao te tangata, me te tahutahu ahi, ka painaina ('people are now extremely cold and kindle fire to warm themselves').

### **Food**

Kereru (wood pigeons) run short of berries at this time. They are forced to turn to unpalatable kowhai leaves and consequently lose condition, the leaves giving their flesh an unpleasant smell that makes them bitter to eat and can cause a headache.' Traditionally, the bird and rat-gathering seasons were now ending and people came home from the forest.

However, the young eels began to swim upstream and could now be caught, and at sea the moki were said to be growing fat. The inanga (whitebait) went up the rivers 'like a company of soldiers in great numbers, keeping a column two or three feet wide', and were caught in large numbers in oval hoop-nets known as haokoeaea. They were caught in July, August and early September and were always eaten fresh. The kotukutuku tree is bare, being one of very few native trees that lose their leaves. This event figures in a proverb used to chide those who absented themselves at this time, for if conditions were suitable, the ground needed to be prepared for the planting season: I whea koe i te ngahorotanga o te rau o te kotukutuku?

(where were you when the fuchsia leaves fell?) Workers were kept busy heaping up the earth into mounds that would receive the spring kumaraseed shoots. Matariki, the Pleiades constellation, watched over them, and this is referred to in the proverb Matariki nhunga nui ('the Pleiades with many mounds heaped up').

### **Stars**

Whakaahu (Castor of Castor and Pollux), a star associated with summer, rises now. Kaiwaka, which gave its name to the third lunar month of August/September, may also be coming into view.

### **Tauroru the bird-hunter**

The constellation of Orion shines high in the sky, with Tauroru (Orion's Belt) clearly visible. There is a story about Tauroru. He was famous as a skilled bird-hunter, who used berries and sweet-smelling flowers to bait his snares. His specially trained dogs ran with him to catch the ground dwelling birds kakapo, weka and kiwi. Too wise to rely solely on his skill, Tauroru invoked the support of Tane, god of the forest, through karakia and rituals. Even though he was only a mortal, Tauroru was so skilful and strong that Rauroha, a goddess of the air, fell in love with him. Every night she descended from the sky to stay with him until dawn, but always she hid her face. Tauroru longed to see it, even though he knew this was forbidden. One night his longing to see Rauroha's beauty became so great that he broke the tapu and gazed upon her as the dawn light flooded over her beautiful features. Rauroha fled instantly, leaving Tauroru grief-stricken at losing her. He was so distraught as he went about his work of snare-setting that he slipped from a tall tree and fell to his death.

Rauroha saw birds wheeling about the tree top, crying out, and descended to find Tauroru lying on the ground. She sent a message for his kin to come and get his body, which they did; but as they were carrying the stretcher home they noticed that it had become very light. When they looked, they found to their amazement that his body had disappeared. The tohunga later explained to them that because of Tauroru's observances to Tane, Tane the first bird-snarer must have taken him up into the heavens. From that time he has remained there as the star cluster that bears his name and forms the shape of a bird snare. Jauntily rising out of the snare is the star Puanga (whose appearance announced winter solstice) which was seen as the pewa, the flower decoy that attracts birds. And if you look closely, you will also see the flocks of tiny kereru flying to be caught.

## **Pagan Europe**

### **Celtic society**



In the old Celtic calendar the name for First Light was Imbolc, or Imbolg, derived from the older word Oimelc or Oi-melg, the Celtic word for ewe's milk. After the cold of winter the flowing of milk was significant, not only to nourish new lambs, but also for old people and the very young. For them the availability of milk could mean the difference between life and death, especially as the weather was still cold. At Imbolc milk was poured on to the earth as an offering.

This was regarded as the beginning of spring, marked by the

lighting of fires and rituals to bless the coming crops. It was time to celebrate the return of the Goddess in her maiden aspect, released from the tower where she had been held by the Cailleach (pronounced the same as the Indian goddess Kali), or crone aspect of the Goddess. This was a time of women's rituals, celebrating the Goddess and the mystery of her return.

### **Ancient Greece**

Rituals of renewal also took place in ancient Greece at this time: the lesser Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated at Agrae near Ilissus, in honour of the return of the maiden Persephone from the underworld and her reunion with her mother Demeter. The ritual was an important prerequisite to the greater Mysteries that were celebrated at autumn equinox.

### **Fire symbolism**

The lighting of candles or torches is a feature of many of the First Light rituals. In the lesser Mysteries it was a torchlight procession that took place at night; for the Romans it was the burning of candles in a purification ritual dedicated to Juno Februa, mother of Mars. In ancient Britain, at the neolithic site of Avebury, the Feast of Lights was celebrated at this season. People carried torches at night to help the Goddess return from the underworld and be born again. In the Celtic women's festivals of Imbolc, candles or torches were lit at midnight. Later the use of fire would survive in the Christian tradition of burning the Christmas decorations at First Light, forty days after Christmas.

### **Brigid**

In the old Celtic calendar, the festival of Imbolc belonged to Brigid (also called Bride), goddess of the Celtic empire of Brigantia, which once covered parts of Spain, France and Britain. One of her earliest shrines was at Brigeto on the Balkan Peninsula. Daughter of the Celtic god the Dagda, she had two sisters also called Brigid - one associated with healing and one with smith-craft. Together they were known as 'the three mothers' or 'the three blessed ladies of Britain' and were associated with the moon in its three phases, waxing, full and waning: Maiden, Mother and Crone.

It was Brigid in her maiden aspect who became associated with First Light. She represented the power of the new moon, spring and the flowing sea. In Pagan times her statue was washed annually in the sea or a lake, signifying renewal, and she was greeted with candles and water. The cow was associated with Brigid because of its nourishing milk, and the cauldron of plenty was one of her symbols. Her flower was the sun-yellow dandelion, whose white juice also suggested milk and was thought to nourish young lambs.

Brigid was strictly a women's festival. In the Scottish Highlands the women would bar the door of the feasting house to the men, who had to plead humbly to be allowed to honour Bride.



Fertility rites were part of the Celtic celebrations of Brigid or Bride, where the women dressed a sheaf of corn in female clothing. It was then placed in a basket with a phallic like club and called 'the bride's bed'. The basket was put on to a bed of hay or corn, and candles lit all around it so that the 'bride' could be invited to come to it. Just before going to bed the women would cry out three times, 'Bride is come. Bride is welcome.' In the morning they would examine the ashes of the fire for an impression of Bride's club, which would be greeted as an omen of a good crop and a fertile year to come. The practice is suggestive of even more ancient rites, where the coupling of a man and woman was thought to encourage crop fertility.

Sometimes the dressed straw doll or 'brideog' was taken from house to house in procession, or a chosen girl dressed in white would be taken around instead. Cakes, butter and other food would be laid out for this impersonation of Brigid.

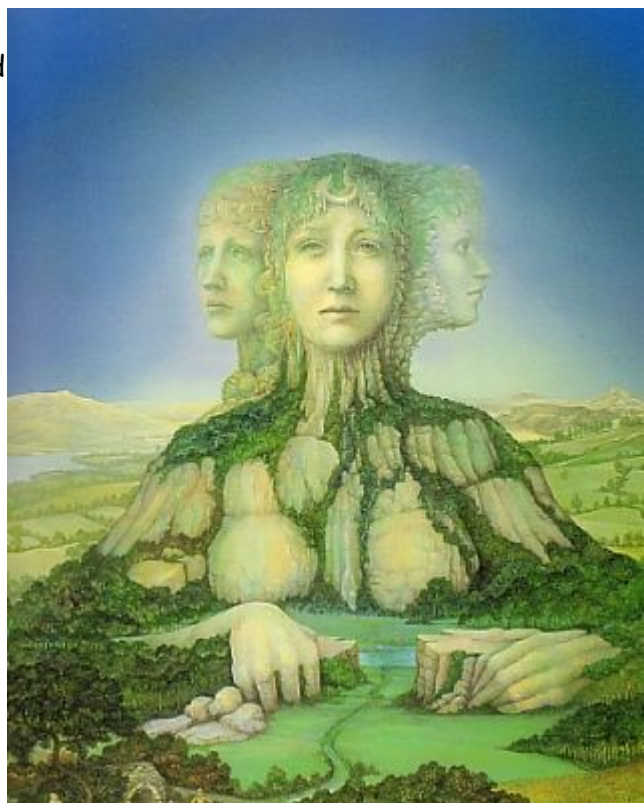
Another custom that lives on in the British Isles is the making of Brigid-crosses from straw or corn, their shape being either the goddess lozenge symbol or the four-armed swastika known as the fire-wheel. As a fire goddess, her cross was seen as protection against fire or lightning. In Ireland her festival was regarded as the first day of spring, and the time to prepare for the sowing of crops. In some places farmers would remove their trousers and sit on the bare ground to test whether it was warm enough to plough.

In the Scottish Highlands Feill Bhrìde (Gaelic for St Bride's Day) was celebrated at the beginning of February. It was a sign that winter was turning and spring was on its way. The raven, an important harbinger of the end of winter, was watched for weather prospects and referred to in the old Celtic saying:

On the Feast Day of beautiful Bride  
The flocks are counted on the moor  
The raven goes to prepare its nest.

It was also said: *Fitheach moch, feannag anmoch* ('the raven [in voice] early, the hooded crow late'), the raven's early appearance signifying fine weather to come. Another sign of Feill Bhrìde was the opening of 'the little notched flower of Bride', the golden-yellow dandelion.

In the Scottish Highlands it was said that a snake, traditionally a symbol of regeneration, emerged from the hills on the day of Bride. People made snake effigies on this day in honour of emerging life.



## Brigid of Kildare Christian Europe: Candlemas



Virgin, abbess, inspired

**Born** [451](#)

**Died** [525](#)

**Venerated in** [Catholicism](#),  
[Eastern Orthodoxy](#),  
[Anglicanism](#)

### Saint Brigid

In early Christian Ireland there was a saint who took her name from the goddess and inherited Brigid's essential characteristics. Her story illustrates the vitality of the Pagan tradition in Ireland and its resistance to Christian colonisation. The myths that grew up around Saint Brigid told of her birth at sunrise, neither in nor outside a house. She was said to have been fed by the milk of a white, red-eared cow, recalling both the milk of Imbolc and the significance of the colour red, which for the Irish was charged with supernatural powers. The cow was, of course, the companion animal of her Pagan predecessor. Brigid, they said, hung her wet cloak on the rays of the sun, and wherever she stayed, that house would appear to be ablaze with fire. With nineteen of her nuns she was said to guard a sacred fire that never went out, a fire that was enclosed by a hedge within which no man was permitted to enter. The number nineteen reflects the nineteen-year cycle of the Celtic Great Year, nineteen being the number of years it took for the new moon to coincide with winter solstice once more.

Despite the efforts of Christianity to overcome the goddess tradition, Irish writers persisted in referring to Saint Brigid as 'Queen of Heaven', an echo of her older forms as Juno Regina and Tanit the Heavenly Goddess.

Brigid was associated with both fire and the underground, and many sacred wells - 'Bride-wells' or 'St Bride's wells' - were dedicated to her, and visited at festival time for purification. The Irish shamrock with its three leaves was said to stand for her three aspects. The Church overrode this by claiming the four-leafed clover was superior, and a sign of good luck. To this day, Irish people visit sacred wells and leave signs there, from handkerchiefs and glasses to asthma inhalers and tampons, in the hope of receiving healing.



### Candlemas



Later, the Church transformed the festival of Brigid into the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, or Candlemas, marking the time when Mary completed her ritual cleansing after the birth of Jesus and brought him to Jerusalem for blessing. Candlemas, with its burning of candles at midnight, retained much of

the Pagan symbolism of fire and cleansing. In some parts of England candles were blessed in church and then carried in processions. Every window in the church and at home would be lit

up by a candle. Snowdrops, which were known as Candlemas bells or Mary's tapers because of their purity, were dedicated to the Virgin on this day." In the north of England Candlemas was called 'The Wives' Feast Day', acknowledging its earlier origins as a women's fertility festival. Later it became the traditional time for the more secular custom of spring-cleaning.

### **Weather predictions**

In Britain the weather at First Light, or Candlemas, was thought to be a significant portent of the season to come, and rhymes abound to this effect. Many of them carry the theme that a fine, clear day at Candlemas is a sign of a prolonged winter, but a cloudy or rainy day means spring is not far away:

If Candlemas Day is fair and clear

There'll be two winters in one year (Traditional Scottish)

If Candlemas Day be wind and rain

Winter is gone and won't come again (Traditional Warwickshire)

If Candlemas Day be sunny and warm

Ye may mend your ault mittens and look for a storm (Traditional Cumbrian)

If Candlemas Day be fair and bright

Winter will have another flight

But if Candlemas Day be clouds and rain

Winter is gone and will not come again!

The belief that Candlemas was an important time to foretell the weather for the coming season is also found in the practice of watching the hibernating hedgehog or badger, one that continued through the Middle Ages. The hedgehog was supposed to emerge from its underground burrow for the first time on this day. If the sun was shining, however, the hedgehog might catch sight of its shadow and be scared back underground for another six weeks, encouraging winter to linger on. If the weather was cloudy, all would be well and the animal could safely stay above ground, letting everyone know that spring was near. In the United States this day is now observed as Groundhog Day.

### **Lupercalia**

As a postscript, it is worth noting the existence of a second festival, two weeks later, that was held in Rome. Called the Lupercalia, it too was a candle-lighting festival, held in honour of Proserpina's return from the underworld and reunion with her mother Ceres (the Roman names for Persephone and Demeter). The date of this festival, February 14, was later taken over by the Church and named after the little-known St Valentine. St Valentine's Day, when lovers declare their passion, remains today as an echo of the fertility rites of Brigid. As Ophelia remarks of Valentine's Day in Hamlet: 'young men will do't if they come to't'.