

**Christianity and the Irish Landscape in
Lady Augusta Gregory's
*A Book of Saints and Wonders****

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Introduction

As the heavily industrialized cultures reassess their environmental ethics in the face of a new millennium, many of their religious responses to environmental degradation have sought to renew ancient religious traditions of earth care. This is not a recent trend, but is deeply rooted in Romanticism and Euro-American thought. Almost invariably, modern admirers restructure the older religious traditions, adapting Iron Age or medieval myths and artistic motifs to current social concerns. The revival of Celtic Christianity in the last two decades has a better scholarly foundation than many similar experiments with pre-Christian European religions. Twentieth-century interpretation of religious rituals and literature, however, has different emphases than that of pre-modern Celts.

Among the 'minor' works of the Irish literary revival that first flourished prior to the seizure of the Dublin post office and the 1916 uprising, is a volume of translations from the Irish compiled by Lady Augusta Gregory, which contains portions of Irish saints' lives and religious folklore. Periodically out of print, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*¹ has found a new audience among today's pilgrims to Iona and trekkers to Glendalough. First published in a limited edition in 1906, this slim volume not only sings of monastic heroes and the miracles of unrepressed Christendom, but it also reaches back into the pre-Christian era in describing the Land of Promise, and Brigit's attachment to the hearth. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the attitudes towards the natural landscape depicted by pre-Christian

* I thank Tim Redman of the University of Texas, Dallas, for editorial assistance and thoughtful comments on Irish literature, and Gilbert Markus of the University of Strathclyde for pointing out a misinterpretation concerning Columba's crane.

1. *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 4th edn, 1972).

and early Christian themes in Lady Gregory's sources. The essay discusses Lady Gregory's selection of materials to translate, and her addition of passages not found in medieval hagiographies in relation to the possible social implications of the work at the time it was published. Special attention will be paid to Lady Gregory's presentation of the voyage of Brendan, and the manner in which she has portrayed the relationship between Christianity and nature.

Lady Gregory and the Irish Language

Although they have become the dominant figures in modern Irish literature, the participants in the Celtic revival were actually the third wave of writers and scholars who searched out the literature and history of Gaelic culture. In the late seventeenth century, Irish nationalists began to recover Irish language poetry, and this was followed by an attempt in the early nineteenth century at rescuing ancient Irish texts. Beginning about 1870, an upsurge in translation of old Irish manuscripts was followed almost immediately by the coming of a new generation of English language poets, forming the third, and most influential, revival.² The major figures in this movement employed different approaches to the problems of working with literatures originally in Q and P Celtic languages. Some participants, such as Kuno Meyer, were professional scholars who were formally trained in philology and produced academic commentaries as well as poetic translations. J.M. Synge understood Irish, but wrote original works in English. Lady Augusta Gregory learned Irish without formal university study, and, almost by accident, became a literary, rather than an academic, translator.

Yeats reports that Lady Gregory learned Irish 'to satisfy her son's passing desire for a teacher'.³ Prior to 1902, Francis Nutt approached Yeats seeking assistance in preparing English language translations of some heroic myths. Yeats did not have time, and Lady Gregory, who had no substantial previous history of writing, said she would attempt the project. She soon brought back a translation written in the English dialect of the neighborhood, rather than in formal, 'educated'

2. Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985); John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

3. William B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 294.

prose. Yeats notes that: ‘An eminent Trinity College professor had described Irish literature as “silly, religious, or indecent,” and she thought such work necessary to affirm traditional Irish culture. “We work to add dignity to Ireland” was a favorite phrase of hers.’⁴

In evaluating Lady Gregory’s work, it might be better to identify her as a redactor, rather than as a translator. She spoke Irish well, but also had an ear for the way the people of town and countryside spoke English. She was thus the first to prepare translations in dialect,⁵ a matter of great importance when one looks at the overall tendency of the third revival to recognize the Irishness of Erin’s English. Lady Gregory utilized the translations of others. She also edited heavily, removing texts she thought less relevant or, perhaps, less poetic, as well as emending and rephrasing.⁶ Unlike academic translators, she would add materials not found in the originals, and would splice works together, combining versions from different sources, even inserting a text from one venerable myth or hagiography into the body of another. A comparison of Lady Gregory’s works such as *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*⁷ to those of authors bent on accurate translation of all portions of a text, such as Thomas Kinsella’s English version of the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*,⁸ indicates that she sanitized, reducing passages the modern reader would find redundant, and deleting ‘formulaic phrases’. In ceding to late Victorian sensibilities, by deleting ‘grotesque and bloody detail’ and old Celtic sexual humor,⁹ the accomplished playwright strove to make Iron Age Irish heroes more respectable. John Wilson Foster suggests that as a ‘more literary, less scholarly’ writer, Lady Gregory’s ‘beautiful rendition’ retains ‘abundant investment’ in lyrical outbursts, supernaturalism and romanticism.¹⁰ James MacKillip deems her the ‘perfect popularizer...learned and cultivated enough to avoid the malarkey about the Irish past

4. Yeats, *Autobiography*, p. 306.

5. C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880–1935* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p. 147.

6. James MacKillip, *Fionn MacCumhail: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. 111.

7. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970.

8. Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). The introduction to this volume has a sound discussion of the styles of previous generations of translators.

9. MacKillip, *Fionn MacCumhail*, p. 112.

10. John W. Foster, *Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp. 23-24.

propounded from the time of Macpherson¹¹ and his heirs, colloquial enough to be able to speak to all classes of the Irish populace'.¹² MacKillip also sees the published result of her efforts as something novel. Her retelling of the adventures of Fionn MacCumhail, for example, 'is like nothing ever seen before in any language...more a product of her own taste and genius than of translation'.¹³

In *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, Lady Gregory combined passages from a number of sources, including several different medieval hagiographies and folklore she personally collected in the West. The original edition of the text, published as a limited edition in Ireland in 1906, contained four saints' lives and a few short miracle stories consolidated in a section entitled 'Great Wonders of Olden Time'. In a revision published in England the following year, she added 'The Voyage of Maeldune', and additional short tales, for a total of six 'books'.¹⁴ The hagiographies which she utilized as the core of the volume, were originally a literature produced by well-educated monastic scribes, who wrote in both Irish and Latin, thereby producing multiple variants of the lives of major saints. Celtic hagiography frequently incorporates pre-Christian and non-historic materials, as well as providing some historic basis for determining where saints were active, how they lived and how they were viewed in old Gaelic society. Lady Gregory tapped other monastic materials as well, including the substantial body of early Christian poetry.

In her original selection of texts, Lady Gregory follows neither a chronology based on the approximate age of her sources, nor a historic development of monasticism in Ireland. By beginning with 'Brigit, the Mary of the Gael', a saint of house and hearth whose legends may well reflect the deeds attributed to a pre-Christian goddess of the same name, *A Book of Saints and Wonders* grows out of both the mysteries of pre-history and the agricultural landscape (and spiritscape) of the Celtic peoples. Although Book 1 starts much as any hagiography would, with a discussion of the saint's origins and family, Lady Gregory infused several narratives from more recent folklore into the chapter. Thus as the reader nears the end, it documents

11. Macpherson was the author of a version of the story of Oisín, that he supposedly collected from folk sources, but probably primarily composed the work himself.

12. MacKillip, *Fionn MacCumhail*, p. 111.

13. MacKillip, *Fionn MacCumhail*, p. 112. Cf. Vivian Mercier, *Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

14. Edward Malins, 'Introduction', *A Book of Saint and Wonders*, p. 7.

the continuing importance of Brigit in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish religious belief. In a section entitled 'The First of February', the text not only describes the making of Brigit's crosses from straw, a continuing folk practice, but it also repeats some verses that the 'Gael of Scotland' recite on the saint's day. This ties Brigit to the pre-Christian Celtic holidays, 'for the death of the year is done with and the birthday of the year is to come'.¹⁵

Lady Gregory thus developed and expanded Brigit's connections to the druids mentioned in the first sections of Book 1 (Brigit grew up in a druid's house and her mother 'was in bondage to a druid of Connacht'),¹⁶ and continued the original hagiographer's weaving of the Old Religion into Christianity. The last three sections of Book 1, include two miraculous healings from Brigit's well in the Burren and the rite of binding, which is also a continuing folk belief. In the ultimate stroke that brings in the text not just into contemporary society, Book 1 describes a little girl healed by the holy water of Brigit's well, who 'grew to be as strong a girl as ever went to America'.¹⁷

Lady Gregory's second selection is 'Columcille, the Friend of the Angels of God'. She used the Irish name of the saint rather than the Latin (Columba), and if one compares her short rendition to the much longer *Life of Saint Columba* compiled by Adamnan in the ninth century,¹⁸ her materials have a different emphasis. Adamnan organized the *Life* into three parts: the first on prophecy, the second on miracles, and the third on apparitions of angels. The major theme, therefore, is the deeds and powers of the saint. Adamnan included a wide selection of human characters including other holy persons and monastic figures, common people and antagonists, such as Broichan the druid who makes the winds unfavorable for Columba's voyage.¹⁹ Lady Gregory, in contrast, reduced the long list of prophecies, miracles and monastic contacts. She favored passages that described Irish or Ionian geography, such as the section entitled 'Doire the Plain of the Oakwood'. She selected miracles that contained natural symbolism or that tied natural features to Ireland, such as 'The Crane from Ireland'. Her content also accentuates narratives of travel and voyages, and she has inserted several selections of poetry including

15. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 20.

16. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 15.

17. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 22.

18. Adamnan, *Life of Saint Columba* (trans. William Reeves; Dyfed, Wales: Llanerch Enterprises, 1988 [1874]).

19. Adamnan, *Life*, p. 94.

Columcille's farewell to Aran, and his praise of Doire (Derry) and its oaks. (Columcille supposedly wrote hymns and poetry, in both Irish and Latin. The Irish poetry attributed to him is potentially of other authorship and later date,²⁰ but it does incorporate gorgeous descriptions of natural features, such as coastal environments.) Book 2 ends not with a contemporary miracle, but with an inserted tale of a hound of Finn Son of Cumhail (an ancient pagan hero), who would not follow a deer into Columcille's valley. This pre-Christian figure is tied to a future prediction of doom in the form of an apocalyptic prophecy of a world-wide war. Lady Gregory's version concludes:

And when the war comes as far as the blessed bush at Kilchrest, a priest will put on his stole, and will read from his book, and lift a chalice three times, and that will weaken it for a while. But the fighting will never reach to the Valley of Columcille; and it will be well for all the people that will be in that valley at the time of the last great war.²¹

After bringing Brigit into the present in Ireland and the future in America, she ties the heroes of old to the traveling saint of Donegal, whose forest will remain in peace until the ends of time.

Her third saint, Patrick, was actually earlier than Columcille or Brigit the Abbess (as opposed to Brigit the goddess). After reporting in Book 2, that 'if Columcille died in Hii [Iona], his soul is in Doire and his body in Ardmacha beside Brigit and Patrick...'²² Book 3 quickly brings the captive Patrick back to Ireland to interact with the ancient kings and to die on Irish soil. Lady Gregory's account emphasizes the heroic in the center of the glorious nation. She does, however, in her next-to-last vignette, tell the story of Patrick preventing the people from killing a fawn on the hill of Ardmacha, and carrying the young animal up the hill on his shoulders. 'And it was in the place where he put down the fawn, the church of Ardmacha was built for him afterwards.'²³

In the 1907 edition, published in London, she added Book 4, 'The Voyage of Maeldune'. As Edward Malins suggests, Lady Gregory has 'brilliantly retold Whitley Stokes translation of the Codex with the Maeldune Legend',²⁴ but this addition seems out of place in a volume emphasizing religious figures and wonders. Perhaps it was intended

20. Lucy Menzies, *Saint Columba of Iona: A Study of his Life, Time and Influence* (Felinfach, Wales: J.M.F. Books, 1992 [1920]).

21. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 43.

22. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 42.

23. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 53.

24. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 7.

as a heroic introduction to the wanderings of Brendan, which end the volume, and some of its sections, such as 'The Island of Birds', and 'The Bird from Ireland', are related to Brendan's adventures. 'The Voyage of Maeldune' gives the reader the impression, however, of steeping back into a dream world, after the entirety of Erin has already been conquered for Christianity by Patrick.

Book 5, which is more in keeping with the major themes of the work, is composed of a series of vignettes about different saints and religious figures. Some of the sections, such as 'Blessed Cirian and his Scholars', are taken from hagiographies and others come from more recent folklore. The mix reinforces the impression that Ireland's religiosity is very venerable, and little changed from the ancient world to the present day. In 'The Little Lad in the Well', for example, a nineteenth-century toddler falls into a blessed well, and tells his rescuers it was a gray man, identified as Saint Colman, who kept him upright and lifted his head above the water.²⁵ This section also disperses the wonderful and miraculous, spreading it to more minor figures and away from a few major holy sites, such as Ardmacha and the Valley of Columcille, to the entire damp, verdant island. Book 5 ends not with a canonized bishop, but with Digi, the Old Woman of Beare, who rather than priding herself on virginity, had several men who lived with her, all of whom 'died of old age'. Digi finally completes her life's run with a hundred years wearing a veil that 'Cuimare had blessed', and perhaps like old Eiru herself, has hundreds of sons, then expires chastely praising God.²⁶

Scholarly versus Literary Translation of 'The Voyage of Brendan'

Book 6, is a short version of 'The Voyage of Brendan', which spreads Celtic Christianity seaward and takes a saint not just to neighboring Scotland but west towards the New World. Unlike Patrick, whose vision and goal is to return to Ireland and convert the heathens, Brendan begins his life with an angelic prophecy of his journey to a 'hidden country'. The story of Patrick is about the tangible, while that of Brendan is about the mystical land of the forever blessed. Patrick brings the change of an age, while Brendan anticipates a history that is yet to be initiated. Brendan is Erin's future: the saint who recognizes that Ireland does not stop at the end of the Dingle Peninsula.

25. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 96.

26. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, pp. 101-102.

In her presentation of Brendan, Lady Gregory only utilized texts based on the medieval hagiographies and did not incorporate folk healings or anecdotes about modern priests. In the context of *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, this enhances the other-worldly character of the voyage narrative. As was the case with Columcille, she dedicated substantial text to geography, particularly the magical islands. The final vignette is short and to the point. After many dangers, Brendan returns home to Ireland. *A Book of Saints and Wonders* concludes: 'And as to Brendan he was from that time as if he did not belong to the world at all, but his mind and his joy were the delight of heaven. And it is in Ireland he died and was buried; and that God may bring us to the same joy as his blessed soul returned to!'²⁷ No modern-day miracles are necessary to conclude the tale of Brendan—dying in Ireland is wonder enough.

Since Book 6 most closely corresponds to the oldest sources, it presents an opportunity to investigate Lady Gregory's selection of materials in more detail. In the case of St Brendan, there is more than one major old Irish version of his adventures. The Latin, which is not a direct translation of the Irish—although it contains attempts to express Irish idioms in Latin—is available from numerous medieval manuscripts. The most useful comparisons are to the scholarly translation from old Irish of Carolus Plummer, 'Life of Brendan of Clonfert',²⁸ the careful translation of John J. O'Meara from the Latin in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land*,²⁹ and the translations from Latin found in anthologies edited by Eileen Gardiner³⁰ and D.H. Farmer.³¹ Plummer provides additional information on Brendan in 'The Twelve Apostles of Ireland'.³²

Book 6 begins the life without the lengthy comparison of Brendan to biblical figures and without the detailed information on his family found in the Irish version. In Plummer's translation, the first vision

27. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 114.

28. In Charles Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922).

29. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1976.

30. Eileen Gardiner (ed.), *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* (New York: Italica Press, 1989), pp. 81-133, this is a collection of the older translations. Her English translation is based on Denis O'Donoghue (ed. and trans.), *Brendaniana: St. Brendan the Voyager in Story and Legend* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1893), pp. 111-75.

31. D.H. Farmer (ed.) *The Age of Bede* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 209-45. The voyage of St Brendan in this version is translated by J.F. Webb.

32. In Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, II.

belongs to Brendan's mother, not to Brendan, and the infant and youthful Brendan produces several miracles and spiritually meaningful events. On the night of his birth, for example 'thirty cows bore thirty calves to Airdi son of Fidach', and after he was baptized 'three wethers leapt from the fountain...and they formed Brendan's baptism fees'.³³ His foster-mother Ita actually directs the adult Brendan in shipbuilding. Lady Gregory's rendition is, in general, more similar to the translations of the Latin than to Plummer's work, and like O'Meara's translation eliminates much of the information on Brendan's childhood and relatives. In modernizing, however, Lady Gregory divorces Brendan even further from his *tuath*. Her saint comes merely from good parents and only one location is mentioned (the typical way of describing a nineteenth-century peasant). The old Irish Brendan, in contrast, exists in a complicated set of relationships that incorporate Gaelic-style fosterage. His familial associations are the origin of his place in the landscape.

The scholarly translations from both the Irish and the Latin report more interaction between Brendan and his home monastic community than Lady Gregory's version of the *Navigatio*. Plummer's *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* includes a whole series of monastic adventures which take place after Brendan returns from the promised land. The saint goes off on monastic business to Britain and Gaul, and busies himself building churches. The old Irish Brendan rescues his monastic brothers from numerous demonic attacks, and spends much of his time in Christian instruction and worrying about the pains of hell. The emphasis of the Irish hagiography is not just on Brendan as a leader, but also on the structure of the monastic hierarchy and on the management of monastic life.

In editing, Lady Gregory reduced the portion of directly Christian material, and specifically avoided fragments of liturgy, prayers, adverse prophecy and theological rationalizations. Statements found in O'Meara's version such as 'God is our helper, sailor and helmsman, and he guides us...', 'Beware brothers lest Satan lead you into temptation...' or 'Receive the body and blood of the Lord, for your soul will now leave your body...'³⁴ are frequently left out in Book 6. She dropped the saintly intermediary Barrind from the early part of the narrative, where Brendan speaks to Mernoke who knows of the land of promise directly. In the process, the description of natural features is removed from conversation and reported directly by the narrator.

33. Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, II, p. 45.

34. O'Meara, *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, pp. 10, 11, 14, respectively.

Lady Gregory also shortened vignettes such as O'Meara's 'Three Late Comers', thereby reducing conversations between Brendan and his monks. In 'Paul the Hermit', for example, she moved information from Paul's discourse to the absent narrator, and greatly reduced the commentary on monastic values.

Lady Gregory's Brendan is more individualized, and more clearly an adventurer than an abbot or a bishop. The landscape becomes more of an objective reality, and less something seen through the eyes of the monks. Lady Gregory unraveled the connections between the *tuath* and the land and the church and the *tuath*. The difference in emphasis among the versions is quite clear in their various endings. O'Meara, from the Latin, concludes with his monastic brothers receiving Brendan home. In the final passage, Brendan anticipates his passing. 'For when he had made all arrangements for after his death, and a short time had intervened, fortified by the divine sacraments, he migrated from among the hands of his disciples in glory to the Lord, to whom is honour and glory from generation to generation. Amen.'³⁵ Gardiner's version concludes with Brendan recounting his adventures to his monks and: 'Afterward he ended the days of his life in peace on the nones of July, our Lord Jesus Christ reigning, whose kingdom and empire endure for ever and ever. Amen!'³⁶ Plummer's version from the Irish concludes with eight stanzas of prayer, followed by a description of Brendan's brother, Cuirrine mac Setna, placing his body on a chariot and taking it to Clonfert. The description incorporates the singing at the funeral, a declaration of the Trinitarian nature of God and an invocation of divine mercy.³⁷ Lady Gregory's final passages carry Brendan safely home, not to the monastery, but to Ireland. The old Irish Brendan belongs specifically to Clonfert, the Latin Brendan is a man of his entire religious community, while the Brendan of *A Book of Saints and Wonders* belongs to the nation.

Lady Gregory combines the Brendan narrative into one voyage and reduces the number of sites visited. As with the other saints' lives, she retains much of the spectacular natural imagery, including the mass on the back of a whale or a great fish. Her redaction, in fact, accentuates the natural features of the wondrous islands Brendan and his company explore. In the case of the paradise of the birds, for example,

35. O'Meara, *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, p. 70.

36. *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, pp. 126-27.

37. Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, II, p. 92.

Plummer's version says 'there were many churches there and a monastery in the middle of the island'.³⁸ The old Irish Brendan meets the abbot and engages him in a long Christian conversation. Not just the birds, but the abbot and his community do nothing but praise God. In Brendan's second visit to this site a bird alights in front of him at the monastery and prophesys. O'Meara's translation from the Latin lacks a detailed description of a monastic settlement, and there are no human monks living on the island. Brendan engages a female bird in deep religious discussion, and the text provides an extended description of the Easter vigil, including the activities of Brendan's crew and the birds' singing of the hours.³⁹ In Lady Gregory's version, the emphasis is on the bird's singing and their spiritual discourse.⁴⁰ The spiritual activities are centered in the natural environment, and the monastery has disappeared.

Old Worlds and New

Lady Gregory's editing changed the relationship between religion, Gaelic culture and nature in the lives of Irish saints. The first question one might ask is: is this change largely a product of modernization or does it reflect philosophical concepts or literary conventions inherent to the Celtic Renaissance? Her relationships with Yeats and Synge and the political ideology of the time appear to have influenced her selection of materials. Yeats and Synge were exceedingly complimentary about her work on the Chuchulain saga⁴¹ which, with its idealized national heroes and emphasis on loyalty and gallantry,⁴² fitted the mood of the time. *A Book of Saints and Wonders* concedes to the revolutionaries' dream when it clearly nationalizes the saints. John Hutchinson suggests that ancient religious idealism was 'antithetical to British political culture'⁴³ in its resistance to 'over materialist conceptions of human progress',⁴⁴ and its affirmation of 'holy simplicity...rural virtue...and contempt for worldly power'.⁴⁵

38. Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, II, p. 57.

39. O'Meara, *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, pp. 19-25.

40. *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, p. 106.

41. Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), pp. 149-50.

42. Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory*, pp. 140-41.

43. John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 136.

44. Hutchinson, *Dynamics*, p. 120.

45. Hutchinson, *Dynamics*, p. 138.

A second concession to Celtic revival ideology concerns the land and nature as a source of magic or spiritual power. Lady Gregory and her literary friends recognized that religious literature, Christian and non-Christian, could serve 'the process of mythic regeneration'.⁴⁶ Yeats frequently espoused Romantic ideas in this regard. In his essay 'The Celtic Element in Literature' (first published in 1902), he hypothesized that 'our "natural magic" is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted...'⁴⁷ Denis Donoghue suggests that Yeats tried to persuade his readers that 'a naive relation to nature is possible',⁴⁸ and that the Irish peasant had a special relationship, both to the spirit world and to 'an original or aboriginal Ireland'.⁴⁹ When Yeats asked, 'Have not all the races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?'⁵⁰ he was expressing the idea that myth grows from and is fused to the land.

Lady Gregory, in her redaction, relates saints, like Brendan, to the whole of Ireland and accentuates their interactions with the natural world. The old Irish hagiographers, however, saw the saints as products of their *tuath* and family lineage, and thereby family territories. Further, in removing Christian phrases and discourses, Lady Gregory greatly reduced the importance of Christian activities and the interactions of the saints with both their mentors and followers. The saint becomes much more a heroic individual in a national landscape, and much less a teacher in a community. She also, by deleting prayers and liturgical phrases, excluded much verbal magic. This editing process might superficially seem to retain the ancient 'nature religion' while peeling away more recent Christian dedication to the Word. There is evidence, however, that the druids held oral transmission of learning in high regard, and that they used incantations, prayers and other forms of spoken ritual.⁵¹ Many ancient religions, in fact, have a

46. Daniel Murphy, *Imagination and Religion in Anglo-Irish Literature: 1930–1980* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987), p. 22.

47. William B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 176.

48. Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 30.

49. Donoghue, *We Irish*, p. 31.

50. Donoghue, *We Irish*, p. 45.

51. See such sources as Kinsella's translation of *The Tain*, with its reports of druid religious activity; Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 141–85; Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1968); and Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948).

fascination with the power of language.⁵²

Lady Gregory, by transferring geographic description of Brendan's islands to the 'absent narrator', removes spiritual authority from the monastic community, who have been out exploring these locations and bringing the news to other members of their religious *tuath*. For modern Lady Gregory, nature is an objective reality, organized on a topographic map. For the ancient Irish, nature is retained in verbal description. Oral expression ties the people and creatures to it. Lady Gregory selects the tale of Columcille and the crane, and portrays the crane as symbolizing love for Ireland. For Columcille, however, the crane was a living bird, and symbolized his continuing relationship with his clan, and the ties between the monastery on Iona, in Dalriada (Scotland) and its king, his cousin Cenel Conaill, and his *tuath* in northern Ireland, the U'Neill.

Celtic hagiography is ultimately about the power of the saints, a power provided by the other-worldly and enhanced by relationships to nature and to family. Lady Gregory is writing, instead, about the power of Ireland and her people. In modifying the role of the saints in time, as well as space, she makes them founders of an immigrant nation. She also takes figures representing a hierarchical and aristocratic culture,⁵³ and reconstructs them as folk heroes. In setting the saints' lives in dialect, reducing theological discourse, and adding contemporary folk material, she makes the Irish church less clerical and less scholarly, and more an expression of popular belief than was historically the case.

Yeats touted the 'unique qualities of the Celtic church as opposed to the church on the continent',⁵⁴ and seems to have considered the early church 'as the truer Christianity',⁵⁵ as he steered away from more orthodox Christian practice.⁵⁶ Lady Gregory is far more friendly to modern Christianity than Yeats is, yet she avoids giving authority to the centralized Catholic church and, instead, blesses popular belief. This is embedded in her high view of the Irish peasantry. She mildly

52. Gen. 1 is a fine example of ancient fascination with 'the Word'.

53. Robert Welch, *Changing States: Transformation in Modern Irish Writing* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.

54. Carmel Jordan, *A Terrible Beauty: The Easter Rebellion and Yeat's 'Great Tapestry'* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1987), p. 23.

55. Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeat's Search for Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 48.

56. George M. Harper, *Yeats and the Occult* (New York: Macmillan, 1975); and Dwight H. Purdy, *Biblical Echo and Allusion in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats: Poetics and the Art of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994).

rejects both the priests' power and influence, which had increased since penal times,⁵⁷ and of the material values of the rising Catholic middle class, who had abandoned the Irish language, and adapted to the Anglo-dominated economy. Hoping for a better life, peasants were often striving to leave small, life-consuming farms, and taking jobs in town or leaving for England or the US.⁵⁸ As Peter Costello has suggested, Anglo-Irish revival authors created an ideal 'based on ancient sagas and life of peasants in the West. It was an anti-industrial, reactionary ideal...'⁵⁹ *A Book of Saints and Wonders* ignores the strong influence of Rome on Irish Catholicism at the end of the nineteenth century, when the redaction touts holy wells, but neglects the rounds and the rosaries, as well as anti-nationalist doctrine. When the volume proclaims Brigit as 'Mary of the Gael', it is offering quiet resistance to Mary as the Immaculate Conception (proclaimed in 1854).⁶⁰

A Book of Saints and Wonders is neither early Irish Christianity, nor is it modern Irish Catholicism. It is, however, an affirmation that it is healthy for Ireland to be Catholic, as long as it is Catholic in an Irish sort of way. Lady Gregory was probably more interested in affirming the 'ancientness' of Irish religion than in affirming Christianity per se. The inclusion of 'The Voyage of Maeldune', the selection of passages about druids that portray them as compatible with figures like St Brigit and her emphasis on the relation of the Irish nobility to the Sidhe in the story of Patrick all indicate that she was seeking a peace between the age of heroes and the age of saints. Her other efforts at incorporating religious themes, such as the imagery of crucifixion in *The Gaol Gate* and the affirmation of peasant beliefs found in *The Story Brought by Brigit*, are all nationalistic in intent.⁶¹

Although Yeats is more completely a Romantic, while Lady Gregory might be considered more a classicist,⁶² both writers idealize the land so thoroughly that they remove it from the day-to-day sphere. For the early Christian saints, the spiritual world was thoroughly integrated into the surrounding natural *and social* environments. Their milieu was not compartmentalized. Religion was not an ideal,

57. Peter Costello, *Heart Grown Brutal: The Irish Revolution in Literature from Parnell to the Death of Yeats, 1891–1939* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), p. 13.

58. Costello, *Heart Grown Brutal*, p. 41.

59. Costello, *Heart Grown Brutal*, p. 41.

60. Innes, *Woman and Nation*, p. 35.

61. Innes, *Woman and Nation*, p. 38. See also FitzGerald (ed.), *Selected Plays: Lady Gregory* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983).

62. Innes, *Woman and Nation*, p. 158.

because it was too immediate and was a central source of structure in their society. In *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, religion is incorporated as a literary ideal. Instead of the divine infusing this world, modern Ireland must attempt to reach towards it, recover the past ages and enter a 'new age of communal glory'.⁶³ J.M. Synge sailed west looking for Ireland's heritage, and Ireland's future.⁶⁴ For the ancient Irish, the land was around and with them. For Lady Gregory's audience, the land was ahead of them. When she ended *A Book of Saints and Wonders* with Brendan's voyage, she was encouraging her readers on to the day when they too would find the land of promise and be buried on truly Irish soil.

Romanticism, Redaction and Nature Religion

Investigation of Lady Gregory's influence as a redactor should caution us about utilizing modern edited collections of myths as an entrée into the relationship between the ancient mind and the natural world. Although ancient religious narratives often show greater attention to wild woods and mountain pastures, and make greater use of natural imagery than modern Western theology does, the process of editing and material selection may actually accentuate this relationship, as may the nineteenth- and twentieth-century craving for simpler times and less abstract existence. Romantic and all-too-vague concepts of nature magic or of 'spirit in nature' may displace very complex human interactions with both the environment and the sacred. An American literature that has many of the characteristics of Lady Gregory's work is the recent outpouring of retold Native American myth. Since clan relationships, family histories, details of agricultural practice, local geography, sacred formulas and the repetition common to oral literature are not very meaningful to the general reading public, editors and translators may remove part or all of such materials. Concepts such as an immanent earth spirit or 'mother earth', that are actually Euro-American summaries or attempts at

63. Hutchinson, *Dynamics*, p. 119.

64. In the period immediately prior to the publication of *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, J.M. Synge was writing to Lady Gregory from Dingle and the Basket Islands, the old home region of St Brendan. Ann Saddlemyer, (ed.) *Some Letters of John M. Synge to Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1971), pp. 8-12.

generalization may be overlain on traditions where they did not historically occur.⁶⁵

The 'nationalization' of the environment may inspire the reader to value Ireland, but it can also de-emphasize concern for family lands or the local region. Romanticized versions of myths may actually move the modern reader into a projected and more perfect world, yet divorce the reader from the complexities of actual environmental management. Once ritual and sacred language have been removed from the redactions, the texts become increasingly story-like, or national literature, while losing part of their function as sacred text. Lady Gregory herself read the hagiographies differently than their old Irish audience did. The latter would attempt to replicate literally many of the saints' actions, including attending religious services, caring for the poor, performing devotions and resisting temptation. Lady Gregory wanted to elicit love and respect for Ireland and her traditions, not more Masses or extended daily prayer. The old Irish reader would arrange burial at a holy site so she would rise with a saint and her *tuath* in the last days. Lady Gregory would throw her heart and soul into the Abbey Theatre, and the language of the nation. Lady Gregory retained passages that portrayed wild and domestic animals as participants in monastic communities. The scale of their participation has changed, however. The original hagiographies were demonstrating the spiritual authority and love of the monks, as well as the 'universality' of the monastery. Lady Gregory is demonstrating the integration of the landscape of Ireland with the national spirit.

In conclusion, it is important to recognize that these literary differences may have an impact on how one conceptualizes human relationship to nature. For the old Irish, the natural was local and within the sphere of the *tuath*. Further, the old Irish reader assumed the narratives were 'true', and that the wildlife and landscape were full participants in Christian life. For Lady Gregory, both peasant religious practices and the images of nature in the hagiographies are ideals—always at distance, either in time because they are the old or ancient way, or because they have to do with a barely reachable spiritual realm. Contemporary environmentalists, by adapting this mythic literature much as Lady Gregory has done, have probably enhanced their respect and aesthetic appreciation of nature, while reducing the chance that religious writings will precipitate meaningful action. Nature has become ever increasingly the virgin bride or the sleeping

65. See Sam Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

beauty, whose value is destroyed when she is finally taken to bed by the human race. No ancient Celtic writer would have worried about the pleasures of the marriage.

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Isabella Augusta, Lady Gregory (née Persse; 15 March 1852 – 22 May 1932) was an Irish dramatist, folklorist and theatre manager. With William Butler Yeats and Edward Martyn, she co-founded the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre, and wrote numerous short works for both companies. Lady Gregory produced a number of books of retellings of stories taken from Irish mythology. Born into a class that identified closely with British rule, she turned against it. Her conversion to cultural nationalism by Lady Augusta Gregory. No Customer Reviews. Select Format Book Overview. Folk stories about the Irish Christian saints have been known for 1500 years. This collection is a treasure house of the tales according to the old writings and the memory of the people of Ireland. The best known saints are certainly St. Patrick, St. Brendan the Navigator, St. Brigid, and St. Columcille. Lady Gregory has included numerous tales about each of them, as well as stories about the fantastic voyages of the wandering hero, Maeldune. And, Read More. Lady Augusta Gregory learned Irish without formal university study, and, almost by accident, became a literary, rather than an academic, translator. Yeats reports that Lady Gregory learned Irish “to satisfy her son’s passing desire for a teacher.”³ Prior to 1902, Francis Nutt approached Yeats seeking assistance in preparing English language translations of some heroic myths. In *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, Lady Gregory combined passages from a number of sources, including several different medieval hagiographies and folklore she personally collected in the West. The original edition of the text, published as a limited edition in Ireland in 1906, contained four saints’ lives and a few short miracle stories consolidated in a section entitled “Great Wonders of Olden Time”.