

Dancing at Lughnasa Study Guide

by Deleah Waters

From Paganism to Christianity

In the early fifth century, the Roman empire included much of Europe and Britain. As the Roman empire spread, so did Christianity. St. Patrick saw it as his mission to bring this Christianity to the Pagan Irish, transforming them into "something new"- a Christian culture where slavery and human-sacrifice became unthinkable, and warfare, though impossible for humans to eradicate, diminished markedly.

Though the Irish came to know Christianity and adopt its ways, they never troubled themselves too much to eradicate the Pagan influences, which they still celebrated and enjoyed. This mixture of the Pagan and the Christian is represented in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Prejudiced Views of Paganism-

'Pagan' comes from Pagus, meaning the uncultivated countryside, which inevitably suggested discomfort and hardship. The inhabitants of the pagus- pagani, or pagans- were country bumpkins, rustic, unreliable and threatening. Before St. Patrick introduced Christianity to the mythical, pagan Irish, this prejudiced view was held of them by the Roman Christians and then maintained by the more 'educated,' as represented by Kate's view of the festival in the play.

Celtic Oral Tradition

Celtic history is rich with traditional stories and myths. Because of this strong oral tradition, they have a great appreciation for storytelling. Many of these stories and myths are still remembered and recognized today. There were many different types of storytellers.

Some of these types are:

Fili were learned bards at the courts of the Irish kings.

Seanchai was the humble teller of tales around the hearth in the home.

The Monastic Scribe sat in a scriptorium transcribing the stories of the saints onto vellum.

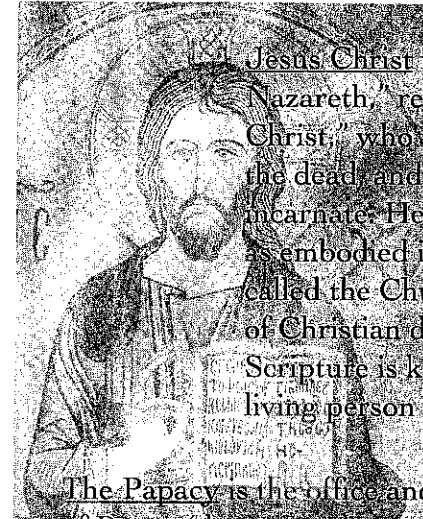


Queen Maeve and a Druid

The legends described by Celtic storytellers were often about secular and religious heroes who had strange visions, made voyages to other worlds, endured great hardships for tribes and gospel, and traveled frequently in the company of friends. These stories and legends expressed the ancient Celts' religious beliefs, values and spirituality.

Catholicism in Ireland

A Few Fundamental Beliefs:



Jesus Christ is the person called "Jesus of Nazareth," recognized by Christians as "the Christ," who was crucified on a cross, rose from the dead, and is proclaimed as the Son of God incarnate. He is perceived to be personally active as embodied in Spirit in the visible community called the Church and in the world. The purpose of Christian doctrine, morality, spirituality and Scripture is knowledge and experience of the living person of Jesus Christ.

The Papacy is the office and jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome (the pope)...Because of the tradition that Peter and Paul (the two main leaders of the apostolic church) were martyred in the imperial city of Rome, the Bishop of the local church of Rome has been considered the possessor of a specific authority associated with the mission and well-being of the whole church.

The Eucharist (Gr., "thanksgiving") is the sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery (i.e., Christ's dying and rising for humankind) in a context of praise and thanks for all that God has done and continues to do. During the Eucharist the Holy Spirit is called down on the assembly, that it might become the Body of Christ, the people of God.



The Holy Spirit (Heb., ruah; Gr., pneuma) is the third person of the Trinity. The Christian understanding of God affirms that God's unity is tripersonal. The God whom Jesus called Father is revealed and present to us in the incarnation of the Word and the gift of the Holy Spirit. To say that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, however, does not satisfy the desire for greater comprehension; if anything, it brings awareness of the degree of mystery involved in efforts to understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

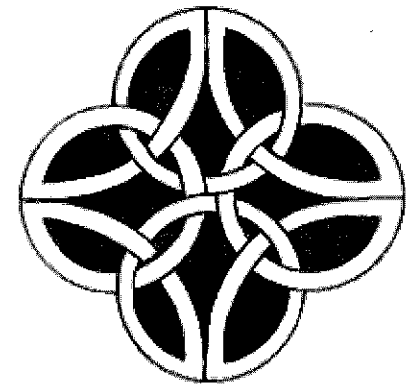
The Irish are known to be committed/practicing Catholics

"No one can visit Ireland without being impressed by the intensity of Catholic belief there, and by the fervour of its outward manifestations. Watch the enormous crowds of people who fill the churches in the town, the men as numerous as the women; see them all kneeling on the flagstones, without a sound or gesture, as though petrified in prayer! Go to early mass in Dublin and watch 3 or 4 priests simultaneously giving the sacrament to throngs of communicants too great for the size of the churches."

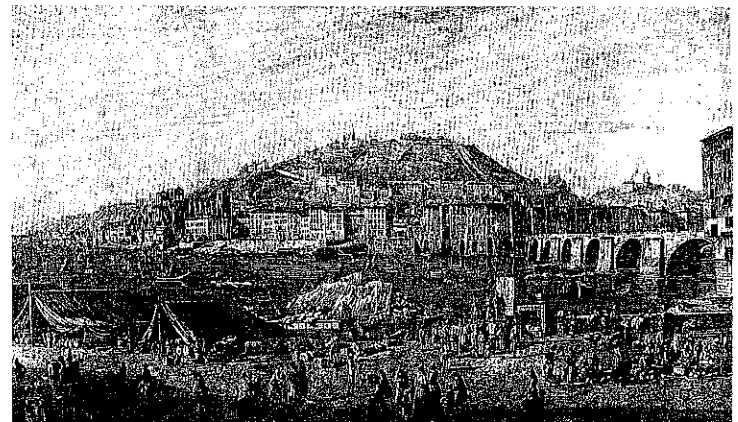
—Louis Paul-Dubois, a French writer

The Festival of Lughnasa

The Festival of Lughnasa dates back to early Celtic tradition and represents the Autumn harvest generally celebrated at the end of July or the beginning of August. There are various stories which explain the origin of this festival, the most popular telling that the festival was founded by Lugh in honor of his foster mother, Tailtiu, who died on the calends (the first day of the Roman month) of August.



Lugh appears as an early ancestor in the genealogies of ruling Irish families, undoubtedly as a tradition of divine descent and a claim for his protection. The Festival of Lughnasa is represented in a story that contains a harvest myth outlining the process of agricultural prosperity throughout the year.



The town of Lyon, which was associated with the cult of Lugh.

Political Ireland

For centuries Ireland has been in a state of political unrest, whether it be against Britain in defense of their independence, or against themselves to determine what the Irish actually stood for—whether to be united with Britain or not, or to be Catholic or not, and so on. Ireland has remained a war-torn country, and while certain advances and efforts have been made and achieved, many issues have not yet been resolved and solutions still not found. There are many political groups that have emerged from this unrest, including the major split being between Republicans and Loyalists, with Republicans in favor of establishing The Republic of Ireland and gaining Irish independence, and with Loyalists in favor of remaining loyal to the British crown. In 1922, the Irish Free State was established as a result of a national revolution whose aim was to liberate Ireland from imperial authority, which remained until 1937.

One of the more influential groups in this revolution was Sinn Féin. Formed originally in 1905 by Arthur Griffith, it became a genuine mass movement by the end of 1917, and was the main beneficiary of the rising tide of patriotism. Sinn Féin is one of the more prominent nationalist groups. While revolutionary, Sinn Féin still attempted to distinguish itself from the much more hostile IRA (Irish Republican Army) which perpetuated much more hostile and violent acts against British institutions in the name of independence. Originally called the “Irish Volunteers”, the IRA took on themselves the role of the Royal Irish Constabulary in many places so as to maintain or restore law and order and enforce the decisions taken by the Dáil courts (Sinn Féin’s alternate Parliament).

This is an example of many of the “troubles” that Ireland has faced and continues to face. Every major event ties back to another, constantly reviving Ireland’s history and making it impossible to ignore. For this reason many of Ireland’s plays are set within a historical framework, as they are reflective of this history.



Brian Friel

Born January 9, 1929, Catholic, in Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. His father was from Derry where he worked as a high school principal. His mother was from Donegal, as were his father’s parents, though they were illiterate peasants

whose first language was Irish. Friel later moved to Donegal himself as he felt his roots lay there “partly to get into the countryside and partly to get into the Republic.” He later left due to the political situation in the north.

He began writing short stories for *The New Yorker* and then wrote radio plays in 1958, and continued to write, as well as found the Field Day Theatre Company with Stephen Rea in 1980, where they premiered one of his more successful plays *Translations*, which has gone on to be one of the most translated and staged of all post-World War II plays.

Not too much is known about Friel as he protected the privacy of his personal life. He married Anne Morrison in 1954, and had four daughters and one son. In his “Self Portrait” he made one of his few personal statements:

“I am married, have five children, live in the country, smoke too much, fish a bit, read a lot, worry a lot, get involved in sporadic causes and invariably regret the involvement, and hope that between now and my death I will have acquired a religion, a philosophy, a sense of life that will make the end less frightening than it appears to me at this moment.” (quoted in Andrews 2)

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