



HOLY WELLS

You will come across them in every corner of Ireland – little shrines built around a spring or well. There will be small objects left as votive offerings – Rosary beads, holy pictures, flowers, little statuettes, usually one of Our Lady, poems or printed prayers. Often there is a tree or bush nearby where rags or ribbons flutter in the breeze. There may be a cup to drink from, and usually a cross.

The well may be dedicated to Our Lady, Saint Patrick or Saint Brigid. But it is just as likely to be dedicated to a local saint, one that would not be known outside a small area, but one whom the local people regard with affection and loyalty. The water of the well is believed to have healing properties, and there are many well-attested records of “miracle” cures. Down through the generations, people have brought their sorrows and afflictions, griefs and worries, to be eased at the well. A token would be left as a reminder to the saint. If the trouble was aches or pains, or troubled eyesight, the sufferer would rub the afflicted part with a rag and tie it to the tree, leaving the aches behind, so to speak.

Each well has its ritual. This usually consists of doing the “rounds,” that is encircling the well a certain number of times, while reciting a set number of prayers or invocations. Always clockwise, sunwise. Anti-sunwise movements are considered unlucky and could bring severe retribution on the person and his or her cattle. They will sip three times from the well, and fill a bottle with the blessed water to bring home. If the well serves a fishing community, a bottle of the well water will accompany each boat as it goes out to sea. At some of the major sites, Mass will be said on Pattern Day (which is the primary day for pilgrimage visitation), and even the local Bishop may be present.

Attendance at Holy Wells go back a long, long way in Ireland. Many of them were originally the sites of pagan shrines. The Druids of Celtic Ireland exerted their power through the cult of sacred wells. When Christianity came, veneration of the wells was adapted and assimilated into the new religion.

People come to the wells at any time, but there is a special day, the “Pattern” Day, when large crowds traditionally assembled. In the past, the Pattern Day became a public holiday, and attendance at the well was followed by sports and celebrations, so the wells were used at various times. However, despite dire warnings, the people never deserted them, and this can be seen by the fact that so many of them are still well tended and decorated. As the wells are so often located in secluded, peaceful and beautiful places, searching them out is very rewarding and you never know, you may find your cure.



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See: **Ireland of the Welcomes – Nov./Dec. 2003 – “Come to the Holy Well” by: Elizabeth Healy**

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!