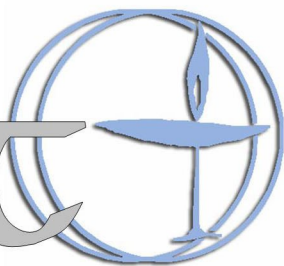


Oscailt



February 2024

IRELANDS UNITARIAN MAGAZINE

Vol.20 Nº 2





Christmas Generosity

For our charity this year we supported the Capuchin Centre in Smithfield. We checked with the centre as to what would be most helpful for them, they suggested Hats and Gloves, Pyjamas and vouchers for Smyths Toy Shop. We received in excess of 100 pairs of pyjamas, countless sets of hats and gloves. The centre acknowledged receipt of €1,570 in vouchers. (see January Oscailt) All of which was delivered on 17th December in time for Christmas. In addition the proceeds of our collection on the 17th 24th and 25th December totalling €3,528 have been forwarded to them.

After our Carol Service we had a sale of cakes, soup, Christmas tree decorations, jams, honey and chutney. We also had our Monster Raffle. This events raised €1,491 which was donated to the Restoration fund.



Sunday 17th December



Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

Oscailt is Published by the
St.Stephen's Green Unitarian Church
112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23.

Minister: Rev.Bridget Spain
e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com
Rev.Bill Darlison *Minister Emeritus*.

hellounitarianchurch@gmail.com
www.dublinunitarianchurch.org
www.unitarianchurchcork.com

Cork Unitarian Church
Princes Street, Cork.
Minister: Rev.Mike O'Sullivan

Editor: Paul Spain

To Subscribe

Annual subscription 12 monthly issues.
€35 Posted for Ireland
£35 Posted for England & Scotland
Cheques and PO should be made payable to: *Dublin Unitarian Church*.

Deadline

The deadline for articles to be included is the 15th day of the month.
Unsolicited articles, news items, letters, poems, etc are always welcome, however there can be no guarantee of publication. Copy should be sent by e-mail or at least typed, photographs should be 300dpi.

e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Advertising

Advertising rates available on request. e-mail: oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Front Cover: Detail from the Wilson Memorial window.
(photo P.Spain)

CONTENTS

The Wilson Window Reimagined for the 21st Century

Elaine Harris 2

Celtic Spirituality

Rev.Bridget Spain 12

Our Minister 18

Book Review 19



Our magazine title, *Oscailt*, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

The Wilson Window Reimagined for the 21st Century

I know every time I take a service I say one aspect of our proud tradition of a free pulpit is that not everyone is going to agree with what you say and I'm pretty certain that is definitely the case for this address – so I look forward to chatting with you about it at coffee afterwards or if you feel really strongly about it, why not offer to take a service and give your take on this or another topic.

For the next 20 minutes or so I want to take you on a thought experiment of what we might replace the window with, if, for example, some disaster were to happen and it was destroyed. But before I look at how I would suggest we change it – let's look at it and have a quick recap of its history. For historical detail I've relied mainly on two addresses by Rory Delaney on the window, an article he wrote for *Transactions*, the *Journal of the Unitarian Historical Society* in 2022, a paper by Isabella Evangelisti entitled: "From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Commemorative Stained-Glass Windows in the Unitarian Church, Dublin 1863 – 1918" and the address at the dedication of the window by Savell Hicks in June 1918.

As I'm sure many of you know, the window we look at today is actually the 3rd "Wilson" memorial window – the two previous ones were both destroyed by fire – one in 1892 and a second in June 1916. In commissioning this window, the committee responsible for its installation decided to have the work done by Sarah Purser's "An Tur Gloine" – a Dublin-based cooperative studio founded in 1903 for stained glass artists. The committee selected an English stained glass artist and a lecturer in the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, Alfred Ernest Child (1875–1939) for the commission. As Savell Hicks in his dedication address says its focus was "Discovery, Truth, Love and Work, with the central thought of Inspiration in the in-breathing of the Divine Over-Soul into the lesser life of Man, the indwelling of the Spirit of God in human life, thought and activity.....and every flash of colour, every symbol, is part of that upbuilding of that central thought of Inspiration the whisper from the eternities, the Voice that comes from the soundless to the Soul, the call of the infinite of the restless hearts of men." .

If we all look at the window now I'll take you through some of its key features. The theme of the window is helpfully inscribed on it "Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love and Work. The central register is composed of figures which typify these – a scientist, a woman in armour, Jesus, a woman with children and men working in a forge. In the lower register there are five historical figures who, it is assumed, also display these virtues. Christopher Columbus (Discovery), Martin Luther (Truth), Jesus (inspiration), Florence Nightingale (Love) and William Caxton (Work). Looking up above the central register there are a number of smaller panels. The next two containing figures are, on your left, one of an astronomer. According to Savell Hicks this panel unites the ideals of Truth and Discovery and in his dedication address he mentions that it could represent Galileo, Copernicus or Newton, explaining that they may have "helped man to raise his mind to some faint and faltering appreciation of the tremendous drama of creation in which he plays his little part". On the right the figures harvesting in the field are seen to unite the ideals of Work and Love and in the same dedication address he suggests that this is a "symbol at once of the labour of man, the never failing providence of God, and the promise of ever-renewed growth".

At the very top and perhaps a little difficult to see clearly, are three small trefoil windows where three figures bare three scrolls on which are written "Ye shall know the Truth", "and the Truth shall make you free" and "Upwards and onwards forever".

I'm sure we all agree it's a very beautiful example of an Art Nouveau – inspired window and we probably all have our favourite panel - mine, unsurprisingly is the scientist and I particularly love the round bottomed flask containing the vivid purple liquid – I'm not sure if Child was aware when he was designing the window, but the synthesis of a purple dye, mauveine by William Henry Perkin in 1856, allowed for the colour purple to be made available to the general public. Until this discovery, purple dye had not been effectively synthesised and the original Tyrian purple dye which was made from the secretions of sea snails was extremely expensive. In ancient times this lead to the colour being chosen as the imperial colour worn by the rulers of the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, and later it was the colour chosen by Roman Catholic bishops. Perkin patented his synthetic route to this colour and purple clothes became all the rage in Victorian Britain and elsewhere. Interestingly, at least for

me, this discovery of the purple analine you see here was a happy accident, Perkin was actually trying to synthesis the anti-malarial drug quinine.

And now that we've had a look at it and admired its beauty, I'd like to propose some things to consider if we were ever to replace it. First things first: can I say, there are many things I would not change – I think the overall design is stunning and I love its vibrancy and sympathetic portrayal of people and the infusion of nature into every panel and I believe the overarching themes found in the words Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love and Work are certainly appropriate ones for framing both this window and our lives in general. So what would I change.....oh where do I start?

Have a look again at the window, does anything jump out at you? Aside from its beauty and history and pleasing central message that has been in our sight of view every time we attend here. Perhaps how Eurocentric and paternalistic it is? Perhaps how the vast majority of the people featured on it are male? Perhaps some of you might bristle at the idea of people like Christopher Columbus or Martin Luther being used as exemplars for discovery and truth. For those of you who know the history of Wilson family, you may be aware of some of their troubling links to the slave trade in America and perhaps that's what you think of when you contemplate it.

So I propose to start with that. I rely heavily here on an excellent article by Rory (Delany) in the Spring 2022 edition of Transactions, the journal of the Unitarian Historical Society and would suggest that you ask him for a copy of it, if you would like to learn more and also a lecture in 2022 on the "Public History of Slavery in Dublin" by Trinity Academic, Ciaran O'Neill. When Savell Hicks gave his address for the dedication of the Wilson window he said it was dedicated "to the memory of a good man, to the service of those who worship here, to the glory of Almighty God". He described Thomas Wilson as "head of the firm of Thomas Wilson & sons, ship owners of North Wall Dublin" and referred to him as being USA consul to Dublin, as was his father Joseph Wilson before him. In praising Thomas Wilson he says "His is one of the many high-minded, generous, devoted personalities to which this church owes so much, and who have bequeathed to us a record of good citizenship, upright deal-

ing, honourable life, and sincere faith which makes our history one to be proud of.”

In Rory’s article in the Journal of the Unitarian Historical Society he expertly presents research from The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership established by University College London detailing nine separate claims for loss of slaves on estates in Trinidad by Wilson amounting to a £23,320 for the loss of 451 slaves. In the article he also asks a very pertinent question “were the congregation members really unaware that he had owned slaves and that the compensation he had been paid for the ‘loss’ of his slaves was one of the sources of Wilson’s wealth? Or were they just selectively remembering what it suited them to remember? ”. He doesn’t resolve this question but it is definitely an interesting one to consider, particularly when he also outlines a contemporary of Wilson and fellow member of this church James Haughton. In the article he quotes an Irish Times article on him saying Haughton was:

.....a staunch supporter of Daniel O’Connell. To his urgent instigation were mainly due some of O’Connell’s noblest denunciations of slavery. He was a most uncompromising adversary of slavery and some of his most severe letters were written against that long curse of the United States. To the abolition party in that republic his name was as well-known as in Ireland.

Rory then continues this article saying

James Haughton was a founding member of Hibernian Antislavery Association, and he was one of Frederick Douglass’s hosts when Douglass made his speaking tour of Ireland in 1845.

In the publicity for the tour Haughton’s daughters’ names and his home in Eccles Street were published as the address for those who wished to send donations towards defraying the tour costs. Haughton was such an active campaigner for so many causes that his detractors labelled him ‘An Anti Everythingarian’. His lifetime of social activism and campaigning for social justice should surely mark him out as a Unitarian hero yet his name is without memorial in his church and it is virtually unknown within Unitarian circles in Dublin.

Definitely some food for thought there!

So now for the fun part – for me at least: my fantasy pick, if you like, for the replacement window. After thinking about it long and

hard, I think I would still retain the name the “Wilson Memorial Window” – even with all I have found out about the original benefactor Thomas Wilson. Uncomfortable legacies affect almost every institution and organisation and how we choose to deal with this is a measure of our maturity. Retaining the name would be an excellent opportunity to include a plaque addressing the history that connects it and our church to the slave economy.

I’d also keep each of the themes and the overall layout.

To illustrate Discovery:

In the Central Register, I think I’d like to address both gender imbalances and the lack of Irish people portrayed and suggest the scientist Kathleen Lonsdale. Born Kathleen Yardley on 28 January 1903 in Newbridge, County Kildare, Lonsdale was the youngest of 10 children, born to Harry and Jessie Cameron. Her father was postmaster at Newbridge Post Office. Unfortunately the marriage did not appear to be a happy one and in 1908 Jessie left him and took the children to Seven Kings in Essex. Academically gifted she won a scholarship to Ilford County High School for Girls but she had to attend classes in physics, chemistry and mathematics at the boys’ high school because the girls’ school didn’t offer these subjects. At 16 she attended the Bedford College for Women, part of the University of London and came top in the University of London BSc examination in 1922, with the highest marks for 10 years. She was invited by W. H. Bragg, one of her examiners and a pioneer of X-ray diffraction, to join his research school at University College, London and it was there in 1924 that she met an engineering student Thomas Lonsdale. Following their marriage Lonsdale encouraged his wife to continue her scientific work, and she joined Leeds University chemistry department as a part-time demonstrator. It was here that she made her most significant contribution to chemistry demonstrating using X-ray diffraction of crystals of hexamethylbenzene, that the benzene ring was flat.

After their marriage, both Lonsdales became Quakers and she identified strongly with Quaker insistence on absolute opposition to war. She was sent to Holloway prison for one month in February 1943 for refusing to pay a fine for failing, on conscientious grounds to register for employment or civil defence duties which would have helped the war effort. As a result of her experiences, she became an advocate of prison reform.

For the Lower Register: Perhaps here to both address the notion

that Columbus' "discovery" of America had any noble intentions and the murky slave-related fortune that helped pay for our church I thought of replacing him with Frederick Douglass, and indeed there are historical links between our Unitarian Churches in Cork and Dublin and Douglass during his Irish visit in 1845 and this topic is probably worth an address of its own one day.

Moving on to the panels that illustrate Truth:

Looking at Central Register: I actually really like the image here, it's one of my favourites in the whole window, although I have to admit I always assumed it as Joan of Arc, rather than, as Savell Hicks tells us, it portrays:

The figure of Truth, symbol of intellectual honesty, integrity in action and veracity of speech. She is clad in armour from head to heel, for Truth has ever to fight her way forward through the grim ranks of opposition, persecution, and cruelty.

He then adds:

Her eyes are looking straight at you. They will follow you wherever you move in the building. Such has been the artist's object and he has attained it, and at the same time given beautiful expression to the inexorable fact, that we cannot escape those all seeing eyes of Truth. From them there is no hiding, no concealment, with her there is no compromise.

If I were to replace this figure, although it is strikingly beautiful, I think it would have to be for a speaker of the difficult Truth and quite a few options come to mind here – Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, John Hume or even Seamus Mallon who has graced us here for our Good Friday services.

The Lower Register depicts Martin Luther – I must admit I feel ambivalent about his presence. Intellectually I understand his vast contribution to religious freedom, but I don't feel any connection to him. I think this very much speaks to my relationship with doctrinal arguments, they no longer resonate with me. My truths tend not to come from them, but from more spiritual sources – my personal preference would be for some words here from John O'Donohue's *Anam Cara*.

Moving on to the theme of Love:

I always assumed the figure in Central Register was Mary and Jesus and some other random saintly children – which probably says way more

than I'd like about the effectiveness of 14 years of Catholic Education! But according to Savell Hicks it is:

The figure of Love the mother-instinct of humanity clasping the child, the symbol of the Future, to her breast, while at her feet two elder children carry on the same thought in attitude and action; the elder offering a bowl of food to the younger and the younger intending to share it with a tame robin which perches on her hand.

These are very worth sentiments and other than suggesting we should not assume these are noble characteristics can be found throughout humanity and the image should be more inclusive.

For the Lower Register in the Love theme: Here I propose a like for like swap – I have no great animosity towards Florence Nightingale, but I feel that Margaret Huxley would be at least as worthy in being commemorated here. Born in London in 1856, Margaret Huxley arrived in Dublin in 1883 to take up the post of 'Lady Superintendent' (Matron) at the Eye and Ear Hospital and within a year she was appointed as Matron 'Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital'. She then went on to establish Sir Patrick Dun's School of Nursing and subsequently became President of the Irish Nurses Association.

When she retired from her role as Matron at the hospital in 1902 her colleagues subscribed money with the intention of making a presentation to her. However she refused to accept the money for herself and instead it was used to establish a 'Margaret Huxley Memorial Medal' which for many years was awarded to the nurse who attained highest place for conduct in her examinations. She was also the driving force behind the efforts of church members to relieve a housing crisis. The Margaret Huxley Public Utility Society constructed ten family homes on Cork Street Dublin and was named Huxley Crescent in her memory. The Margaret Huxley Memorial Window on the east side of the church was gifted to the church by her friend, the artist Sarah Purser.

Work:

Looking at the Upper Register: Again this is one I'd leave alone – not because of any particular grá for the forge –I'm not sure I could come up with a justifiable alternative particularly when you consider Savell Hick's words on it

The restless impulsion of the Divine, within the human, finds its expression in the restless desire for activity, the love of Work, the joy of Work, and in placing before you the figure at the forge it seemed that it was typical of the great human constructive gift which seizes the raw material of the earth and wields it to shape and use.....it may serve to remind us that all human accomplishments, all wealth, all civilisation are built by work

The framing of accomplishment and achievement in such terms leaves me cold. The violence of the image of seizing raw material from the earth for exploitation does not sit easy with me. I don't think of my relationship with work in these terms.

For the Lower Register: Here I very much agree with Rory Delany and his address "A labour of love" from August 2021 to mark the 200th issue of our Oscailt magazine and the amazing work of its editor Paul Spain, I'd retain William Caxton. As Rory puts it "Caxton is credited with bringing the printing press to Britain (and by extension to Ireland). The printing press was a huge technological advance that allowed for a much faster dissemination of information and knowledge. The right to disseminate information was a key battle ground in the reformation. Access to the written word and the knowledge that flowed from reading was limited to a Latin speaking elite. The reformers wanted the written word to be far more accessible to a far wider range of readers, and for it to be accessible to them in their own language. So, the availability of the printing press was a significant weapon in the battle for people's minds. Although literacy and the cost of printing limited access to publications, the introduction of the printing press was still a huge step in the democratisation of knowledge and the development of civilisation."

Those of you who haven't drifted off to sleep yet may have noticed that I skipped over the Registers associated with Inspiration. Here again I'm going to agree with Rory and his 2021 address and propose that the figure of Jesus be kept in the Central Upper Register.

For the Lower Register I don't believe it is necessary to have a second image of Jesus included. From my past 20 years or so

attending this church I've listened to inspiring, comforting, challenging words from many of the world's religions and from many who have no specific spiritual beliefs. If anything this church has taught me is that we are all on our own individual paths, we alone have the responsibility and honour to choose who we allow to influence, guide and support us. We are a spiritual community in which each person is encouraged to think for themselves in a spirit of freedom, reason and tolerance. So for me those are the words that should be on this panel:

Freedom

Reason

Tolerance

And in the final minutes of this address, I'd ask you all to take a look at the window again and think about how you feel about it – does it adequately capture our belief in freedom, reason and tolerance?

What should we keep?

What definitely has to go?

What would you replace some/all of it with?

To conclude, although I have a huge fondness for the window as it stands and I hope it graces our church with its presence for many more years, in preparing this address I've learned lots about our congregation's history, I've loved reading the book of Savell Hick's sermons and essays and have spent an enjoyable few hours contemplating my fantasy window picks! Maybe something in what I've said might encourage you to do the same, I think visiting and revisiting our beliefs, our heroes and our outlook on life is always something worth doing – as Savell Hicks says in his sermon "The Hobgoblin of Consistency":

It is apparently considered, that to change your idea on religion, or politics, or social questions is in the nature of perfidy, disloyalty and disgrace.....At what period of our life is it permissible to sit back, make up our mind about the complex and numerous problems of Life and Death, Time and Eternity, and to sigh contentedly and say, "Well that's that. I shall not



A place of worship since 1717

UNITARIAN CHURCH

Prince's Street, Cork.

Registered Charity Number 0000246

Service: Sundays at 11a.m.

Minister: -Rev.Mike O'Sullivan Telephone:023-8842800

e-mail:- osullmike@gmail.com Mobile 087-9539998

Further information from 087-9539998

Treasurer : Brian Cluer e-mail: bmcleur@gmail.com

Secretary : Colm Noonan : e-mail : colm.noonan@gmail.com

www.unitarianchurchcork.com

**Jazz Vespers,
first Friday of the month @ 6pm.**

An ecumenical service with the Methodist church.

Please Note

If you are aware of any member of our community who is unwell, or who has suffered a bereavement, and who would welcome contact from others in the church, please e-mail Rev.Bridget Spain.

Vestry 01 - 4780638

e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Childrens Programme - Sunday Club

Takes place on the 2nd Sunday of each month

For any queries about Sunday Club, or to volunteer as a leader, please email Denise at sundayclubunitarianchurch@gmail.com

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

Lunch-time service every Wednesday from 1.10 to 1.40 p.m.

Each week Eileen Delaney sends an e-mail circular as to what is happening in the church and the other activities associated with the church.

If you would like to receive this information you should send your details requesting your name be added to the list to:-
[**eileendelaney76@gmail.com**](mailto:eileendelaney76@gmail.com)



Dublin Unitarian Church

112 St. Stephens Green Dublin 2.

Service 11.00a.m.

Sunday Rota for February 2024

4 th February	<i>Are you happy to be content?</i>
Service	Paul Murray
Reader	Andrew Connolly Crangle
Flowers	Andrew Connolly Crangle
Welcomer	Upstairs - Sheila Hanley Downstairs - Paul Murray
Coffee	Janet Mulroy, Denis Conway, Michael Robinson

11 th February	<i>Affirmation not Reformation.</i>
Service	Rev Mike Sullivan.
Reader	Dorene Groocock
Flowers	Paula Mills
Welcomer	Paula Mills
Coffee	Kevin O'Hara, Gráinne Carty, Maeve Edwards

18 th February	<i>No Stars in my Crown.</i>
Service	Clive Geraghty.
Reader	Janet Mulroy
Flowers	TBA
Welcomer	Michael Robinson
Coffee	Catharine Cook, Madeline Stringer

25 th February	<i>Namaste.</i>
Service	Rev. Bridget Spain
Reader	Daria Ostrowski
Flowers	Monica Cremins
Welcomer	Monica Cremins
Coffee	Kevin O'Hara, Gráinne Carty

Services are broadcast live from the church each Sunday at 11a.m.
On our WebCam, click and connect at www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

Recordings of previous services are also available on the website.

LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.

TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM
TO SERVE MANKIND IN FELLOWSHIP
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL GROW IN HARMONY
WITH THE DIVINE
THIS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH GOD.

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

112 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin D02 YP23, Ireland.
Unitarian Church - Dublin Registered Charity Number 20000622

Service: Sunday at 11a.m. Phone: Vestry 01-4780638

Managing committee:- Chairperson: Denise Dunne;
Vice Chairman: Dennis Aylmer; Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy; Treasurer: Rory Delany;
Tony Shine; Andy Pollak; Peter White; Will O'Connell; Collette Douglas;
Malachy Hevehan; Paul Murray; Madeline Stringer; Gavin Byrne.

www.dublinunitarianchurch.org

e-mail: hellounitarianchurch@gmail.com

oscailtmagazine@gmail.com

Minister: Rev. Bridget Spain: Telephone: 01 - 8388 808
Vestry 01 - 4780638 e-mail: revbspain@gmail.com

Rev. Bill Darlison (Minister Emeritus)

Chairperson: Denise Dunne:- Tel: 087-2450660

Secretary: Trish Webb-Duffy:- Tel: 087-9346720

e-mail: secretaryunitarianchurch@gmail.com

Treasurer: Rory Delany: 087-2217414,

e-mail: treasurerunitarianchurch@gmail.com

Musical Director: Josh Johnston :- 086 892 0602

Caretaker: Kevin Robinson

Telephone: 4752781

Recordings of the church services are available on the church website.

change my opinion or outlook anymore. Henceforth I shall be consistent”

I think as Unitarians we can probably agree that we don't ever reach that point where we believe we have solved the ultimate questions of life, the universe and everything and I hope we never do. This window captured a snapshot of what perhaps framed our congregations outlook and beliefs over a hundred years ago, of course it may not resonate with us as it may have with them, but even if someone chose to indulge me and allowed me to design a 21st century version of it, I'm sure someone would pen a similar address in 20 or 200 hundred years' time criticising all my choices.

Elaine Harris

St.Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

Bibliography

https://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/2022-01/2021-gilbert-lecture-slavery_web.pdf

Evangelisti, I., 2018. From the margins to the mainstream: the commemorative stained-glass windows in the Unitarian Church, Dublin, 1863–1918. *Folk Life*, 56(1), pp.40-52.

<https://dublininquirer.com/2021/03/17/a-dublin-church-reflects-on-how-it-benefited-from-slavery/>

A Labour of Love: Rory Delany, Oscailt Sept 2021

<https://www.dublinunitarianchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Sept21Final.pdf>

What do these Unitarians Believe? (2010) Ernest Savell Hicks

CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

I was at summer school in Hucklow in Derbyshire a few years ago. One of the leaders of the Summer School was an American University Lecturer called Nancy Crumbine; Nancy is a big woman with a big personality, she sought me out because of my name. She wanted to know how my parents were so wise as to call me after a Goddess, I rather burst her bubble when I told her that I got my name from my granny not the Goddess!!! My encounter with Nancy shows that Celtic Spirituality is enjoying a resurgence. In recent years the Celtic Goddess Brigid has regained popularity. In every bookshop in the Mind, Body, Spirit section there is always a large number of books with covers showing the traditional celtic patterns of intertwined animals and symbols. For years the books of John O'Donohue have topped the list of best sellers. The ancient Celtic Festivals of **SAMHAIN**, **IMBOLC**, **BELTANE** and **LUGHNASA** are widely celebrated. It has been remarked that just now "Celtic Spirituality is cool". A rather less kind individual referred to Celtic Spirituality as the "fast food" religion, but remember fast food can be a fat laden, 'Big Mac' it can also be the best organic salad.

We all have a vague idea by what is meant by Celtic Spirituality but if we were asked to describe exactly what Celtic Spirituality means, many of us would find it difficult to give a precise definition. Most people believe that Celtic Spirituality traces its roots to the earliest of years of Christianity; that it is a combination of the best influences from pre and early Christian Ireland. Many people believe that a return to Celtic spiritual practices, means that we are regaining a more holistic form of Christianity. A Christianity not dominated by a hierarchical church with a better gender balance and with less emphasis on dogma.

The Celtic world is located on the fringes of Europe, in Brittany, Cornwall, Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland. Ireland is on the outmost edge of Europe, but Ireland holds a central place in the world of the Celtic spirituality. Ireland's history of emigration has

helped to spread Celtic helped spread Celtic Spiritual ideas to America and beyond. It was Irish Emigrants who brought the celebration of Halloween or Samhain to North America.

Celtic Spirituality claims a very long history but an academic study of what we call Celtic Spirituality shows that there is **no** long unbroken tradition of Celtic Spirituality. Just think what are the most ancient religious books that exist in Ireland? or the U.K. here it is the Books of Kells, Durrow and Lindisfarne. These books are copies of the Canonical Gospels, they are not books about ancient Celtic spiritual rites. No matter how faithfully book publishers reproduce the illuminations from the Book of Kells in order to decorate their newest publications; remember that the book of Kells belongs firmly in mainstream Christianity. There are no books on Celtic Spirituality dating before the 18th Century.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both experienced waves of interest in Celtic Spiritual Traditions. Much of the material that underpins this current wave of popularity came from the Theosophical Society. Yeats and George Russell (AE) were Theosophists. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 with the object of “investigating spiritualism, comparative religions, philosophy and science” We should be aware that when we read a book about Celtic Spirituality that the ideas contained in the book do not belong to a long verifiable unbroken tradition. I am drawing attention to the relative youth of what we call Celtic spirituality; we should be aware of the origins of the material; but despite its lack of a long lineage it does have real spiritual value. To paraphrase the Dali Lama the medicine that works for you is the right medicine, the religion that works for you is the right religion for you. If what we call Celtic Spirituality helps you along your spiritual path then use it.

In Ireland Celtic Spirituality is connected with personalities of firstly Brigid, then St. Patrick. Both of these individuals are very familiar to us and at the same time complete strangers. There are few if any historical information concerning them. The primary personality is the female Goddess. Brigid was the Celtic Goddess of Healing, Inspiration, and Black smithing, she is associated with fire. The importance and influence of the Goddess is confirmed by the fact that Brigid metamorphosed into the

thinly disguised St.Brigid of the Christian Church. Unusually this Christian female saint is depicted holding a Crosier, i.e. a symbol of authority in the Christian Church. The fact that the dominant figure in Celtic Spirituality is female is a real advantage. In religion adherents may worship God as male; but they empathize and connect with the image of Deity as female. God as male created the universe, God as male is a busy God. God portrayed as female; is more approachable she cares for our human concerns.

The sacred places that we associate with Brigid and Patrick are not the many fine ecclesiastical buildings that bear their names; they are places set in the heart of the countryside. Think of St.Brigid's well in Kildare and Croagh Patrick in Mayo. The location of these sacred spaces in remote areas of natural beauty tells us that Celtic Spirituality has its roots in nature. In Kildare the shrine of St.Brigid is in a peaceful setting among trees there is a stream flowing nearby; it is a place of serenity and tranquillity as is Croagh Patrick. As I said Brigid is associated with fire. We know from historic documents that the keeping of a fire in her honour continued until about 1200, in this document the local bishop orders the fire to be extinguished; because of its pagan associations. Recently the nuns in the local convent have revived the tradition of keeping St.Brigid's flame. Looked at together we can see that St.Brigid's Well contains the four elements of fire, earth, air, water. The ancients believed that everything could be classified as being of fire, earth, air or water. These elements are deep in the human psyche. If you don't agree with me, think of sitting in the garden, the most beautiful gardens will have the sound of running water and we sophisticated city dwellers will complete the idyllic picture by lighting a candle as we sit to enjoy the garden.

All the Celtic Festivals mark the changing of the seasons. The festival of St.Brigid is celebrated on 1st February, the time of the year when it is clear that the light from the sun is becoming stronger. It is the time of year the earth literally bursts into life. If you take a walk outside at this time of year nature confirms that Winter has lost its power and spring has come again. Human beings are part of nature; the human soul is tuned to respond to the changes in the natural world. The connection between Celtic Spirituality and the natural world means that this type of spirituality is at-

tractive to the growing number of people who are concerned with how we treat the natural environment. A Spirituality that closely follows the seasons reminds us of the cyclical nature of life. Like the seasons our life continually changes, nature tells us that we should not cling onto life, but accept and embrace the changes in life. Every season has its beauty and its lessons, every change to our life gives us the opportunity to grow and learn.

Water either a stream or a well is an essential element in the spirituality connected with Brigid and Patrick. And at many of the wells there is a shrub or tree decorated with pieces of rag. The rags festoon the trees, blow in the breeze and are simply allowed to rot. For rational Unitarians this may smack of the hocus pocus. But then religion is not simply about being rational. As always we need to look to what lies behind the tradition. People tie a piece of cloth to the tree and leave it there. By this action they symbolically leave something behind; they are discarding something from their life. What they leave can be anything; it may be an illness, a worry, a hope or a hurt. But the act of leaving behind some physical symbol acts to reinforce the intention. This action is psychologically very sound. The fact that the shrub or tree is covered with hundreds of other piece of cloth serves to reinforce the commonality of our human situation; we see that almost everyone has something they would like to discard from their life.

Places like Croagh Patrick and the beautiful Island of Iona are places of pilgrimage; closely associated with Celtic Spirituality. At Croagh Patrick, Reek Sunday takes place on the last Sunday of July naturally close to the Celtic Festival of Lughanasa. Here is another example of a Christian festival being imposed on an existing Pagan Festival. Pre the Reformation people went on pilgrimage to a sacred place or shrine rather like we now go on a summer holiday. Instead of lying in the sun on a beach people walked a pilgrim way. The Reformation exposed many of the shrines to be fakes; and now pilgrimage is more associated with the Catholic Tradition. But then not all pilgrimages are the same. There is a

world of difference between joining a crowd to view a moving statue and taking time to travel somewhere like Iona. Where there is an opportunity leave the world of commerce behind and to take time to listen to your soul.

The language in the books on Celtic Spirituality is poetic, it is never theological nor dogmatic; it leaves itself open to many different interpretations. The style of language used invites the reader into an awareness of the gift of life, to see the sacred in every aspect of existence, to open us to see beyond the merely physical. The language encourages the reader to make a connection between humanity, the world of nature, and the divine. These types of books never try to define Divinity. Celtic Spirituality tells us that we do not need intermediaries to act between us and the divine. Religion is set in church buildings, spirituality is what is in our souls. It tells us to have confidence in ourselves as spiritual guides.

The eye adores the physical world, for the exploring eye there could be no dream greater than the visual world that exists. The human eye falls in love with the enthralling plenitude of the visible. This fascination is addictive, when we are born almost immediately our amnesia in relation to the invisible sets in. We live in this world as if reality consists of just what is visible. However, when we consider it, we recognize that an invisible light accompanies a new soul into the world. We also notice, at the other end of life, how in the shadows of old age, life is lit more and more from the invisible world.

Yet, in our day to day lives, we continually fail to recognize the invisible light that renders the whole visible world luminous. Perhaps we should invert our thinking in how we view the visible world. Instead of thinking of the visible as being the only reality that exists; we could think of the visible world as being the shadow that the invisible world casts.

Fixated as we are on the visible, we forget that the decisive presences in our lives; soul, mind, thought, love, meaning, time and life itself are all invisible. No surgeon has ever opened a brain to discover crevices full of thoughts. And yet our thought determines who we think we are, who we think others are, and what we believe the world to be. We are not the masters of our own reality; granted we may chose the lenses through which we see the world, yet the shape and colour of these lenses comes to us from the pri-

mal benevolence of the unseen world. Everything that exists has its origins in the unseen world. The invisible is the parent of the visible.

Before time began the invisible world rested in the eternal. With the creation of our world, time and space began. Every stone, bush, raindrop, star, mountain and flower has its origin in the invisible world. Humans are created a mixture of the visible and the invisible world; we live poised between both worlds. In times of fear and uncertainty we call upon the invisible structures of original kindness to come to our assistance; to open our soul to our invisible potential. This is what blessing is; and when we bless our existence we work from a place of inner vision, A vision that is clearer than our hearts and brighter than our minds. Blessing is the art of harvesting the wisdom of the invisible world.

One of the most urgent problems confronting the human race at this time is the state of the planet. The mainstream religions rarely address the ethics of how we treat the earth. Celtic Spirituality is so intimately connected with the world of nature that having a caring attitude towards the earth is central to its spirituality. This connection between Spirituality and nature is particularly attractive for those who have an interest in ecology. All religions need to foster in their members a concern for the earth.

Celtic Spirituality is a very loose concept, it can be all things to all people. As a liberal church we appreciate the value there is in its lack of dogma, in the freedom it gives to people. We know that God doesn't need convoluted theology, We know that God is rarely found in Cathedrals or basilicas. We know God builds his temple in the hearts of people and is most often found in those beautiful, remote places in nature.

Rev. Bridget Spain

Minister St. Stephen's Green Unitarian Church

Dublin February 2011

Our Minister

On the 10th February 2007 Bridget Spain was ordained and installed as assistant minister to Rev. Bill Darlison. That is 17 years ago.

In the year before on Sunday 5th February, 2006 Bridget Spain was licensed as a minister in the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, following five years of arduous part-time preparation.

Her licensing was an historic occasion because Bridget is the first assistant minister for 116 years and the first woman ever, to be licensed by the Synod of Munster. Bridget Spain is only the 5th Assistant Minister since 1656, and one of only a few from the south of Ireland. To mark this unique occasion Bridget was presented with a beautiful stole that was specially designed for her. It incorporates all of what Bridget is and her beliefs.

There are two identical panels on the four inch width at the front, each fall is fifty two inches long. The design incorporates the reversing circles from the heart of Newgrange where it is illuminated once each year at the Winter Solstice. This design could also be said to reflect the Buddhist belief in continuous renewal, ever reversing entwining circles. Rising from within the circles is the Unitarian chalice entwining a stylized cross of St. Bridget in the flame of knowledge.

Three of the arms of the cross have the Emblem of the Harps of Ireland mirrored so as to form a leaf shape. If you scribe a line round the outside you make the shape of a shamrock.

St. Bridget's cross with the harps is repeated on the back collar, supported in the symbol for the female form with the glyph of Bridget's birth sign alongside.





**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for November 2023.**



Shuggie Bain

by

Douglas Stuart

Shuggie Bain is the heartbreaking story of a young sensitive and lonely boy growing up in Glasgow in the 1980's. He lives with his mother Agnes who is a chronic alcoholic and his older half sister Catherine and brother 'Leek'. They live on a run down council estate that is ravaged by unemployment, poverty and deprivation and as a result there is widespread social issues such as alcoholism, drug abuse, childhood neglect, domestic violence and serious mental health problems. The author does not flinch from describing the harsh lives of Shuggie and his family and neighbours as this story is semi autobiographical. He knows his characters very well and he relays with great insight and empathy the complex relationship between a child and parent who is in addiction. In addition to the already depressing environment there is a sectarian element which exists between Catholics and Protestants , thus adding another layer of fear, discrimination and oppression for both sides of the community. It is an uncomfortable and unrelenting read and some of the book club members chose not to read it and some who started it did not finish it. Those of us who did persevere, while finding it unrelenting in it's misery also found it powerful in it's honesty and therefore an admirable depiction of a story that is often not told.

We first meet Shuggie when he is sixteen years old, he lives alone in a run down bedsit and he is working part time on the deli counter of the local supermarket. He dreams of becoming a hair dresser and having a life and a future. Even this part of the story is depressing and sad although there are lighter moments when Shuggie interacts with the other supermarket staff. The story then goes back to the 1980's so we can find out how he got to this point .

Agnes, Shuggie's mother is very beautiful in the style of Eliza-

beth Taylor. She prides herself in her looks and always keeps herself well, even in the height of addiction, she faces the day with her best foot forward. She is living in a council tenement flat with her mother and father, her three children and her second husband, big Shug Bain. She left her first dependable husband for Shug and took their two children Catherine and Leek with her. Shug is Shuggie's father, he is an obnoxious character. He is violent, abusive, totally selfish and controlling but Agnes falls for his 'charm' and good looks. She thinks her life with Shug will be more promising and exciting, a life that she feels she is entitled to.

This is a very toxic relationship and descends into a horrible and tragic situation as Shug coerces Agnes into moving to another part of town away from her parents, neighbours and any outside supports that she had. He moves her and the three children to a deprived run down miners council estate called Pitheads. He does not move in with them but instead sets up with another woman, Joanie, who is in Agnes's circle of 'friends' and works in the Taxi company that Shug is employed at. This is so cruel and heartless as Agnes slips ever more into alcoholism and we see how this flawed vulnerable and tragic woman tries desperately to be a mother and wife and keep their lives together. Shug visits sporadically to satisfy his own needs and to exercise control over Agnes who clings to the idea that he will return, but he does not and eventually he leaves for good.

Shuggie's older sister Catherine escapes by marrying and emigrating to South Africa. 'Leek' his older brother who is a talented artist tried to look after Agnes and Shuggie but he is thrown out by Agnes in one of her drunken episodes. Shuggie idolises Agnes and they form a strong relationship with all the complexities where a child becomes the carer of a parent in full blown addiction. Shuggie is also struggling with his own sexual identity, he's "no right" as those on the estate describe him, he doesn't fit the Glaswegian idea of masculinity. His brother Leek recognises his 'otherness' as he too has had to conform to societal norms in order to survive. Leek tries to show Shuggie how to walk like a man in order to avoid the bullies at school and on the estate but to no avail.

There are many alcohol and drug addiction war stories in this book and many unsavoury characters ready to take advantage of anyone that is vulnerable. You have to look hard for those that show some goodness and compassion like the shopkeeper who ex-

tends 'tick' from one giro to the next but you always get the feeling that there is an ulterior motive behind any act of kindness.

Agnes moves herself and Shuggie back into the city where she continues to drink and Shuggie tries to care for her but she dies choking on her own vomit which is witnessed by Shuggie.

A year later we are back at the beginning of the story with Shuggie living alone in a squalid flat keeping his head down and avoiding the authorities. He has one friend, Leanne whose mother Moira is also a chronic alcoholic and is living on the streets. Shuggie and Leanne visit Moira bringing her clean clothes and food for which she ridicules them. The two teenagers leave Moira and as they head back into town they wish they could go dancing like Leanne's big brother. Shuggie then breaks out into a wild fit of dancing making Leanne laugh at his antics. In this last scene we get a sense that Shuggie will survive into the future as he has already shown great courage and resilience in the face of all the adversity thrown at him in his short life.

The book club readers were split 50/50 as to whether to recommend this book . It comes with a major health warning for those of you who might try it as you may find yourself putting it down and coming up for air every few pages.

Alison Claffey

St.Stephen's Green Unitarian Church



**The Doctrine of
this Church is**



solves

Most Problems

[**www.dublinunitarianchurch.org**](http://www.dublinunitarianchurch.org)