

Walter L. Brenneman, Jr. and Mary G. Brenneman. **Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland.** Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995. Pp. xii + 141, illustrations, glossary. \$27.95 cloth.

Lawrence J. Taylor. **Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics.** Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. Pp. xv + 320, illustrations. \$39.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

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The landscape of Ireland has long been imbued with meaning, not only for romantics, but for residents and researchers as well. Two recent studies address the relationship between the beliefs and religious practices of people in Ireland and the landscape in which these beliefs and practices are sited. In *Crossing the Circle at the Holy Wells of Ireland*, Walter and Mary Brenneman approach the subject from the perspective of religious history and phenomenology, focusing on the symbolic significance of Ireland's holy wells and the continuity in their use by centuries of worshippers. Lawrence Taylor's *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, on the other hand, provides a historically-informed and comprehensive ethnography of religious life in a particular Irish community in southwest Donegal, the northwesternmost county of Ireland.

In *Crossing the Circle*, the Brennemans survey the use and significance of Irish holy wells from the ancient Celtic past apprehended primarily through myth to the Christianized present. Despite great changes in religious organization, much of the practice and discourse surrounding the wells has remained remarkably stable. Indeed, the Brennemans see the wells as a demonstration of a vibrant syncretism between the early Irish and later Christian traditions. They trace the circumambulation of the wells to ancient kingship rituals and meditate on linkages between present-day narratives and early epics and tales which suggest a continuity in practice over centuries, if not millennia. Perhaps the Brennemans' most original contribution is their coining of the term "loric" to describe the unique indwelling power of particular geographic locations. They distinguish this idea from the concepts of "worldhood" and "the sacred," which they categorize as incorporating universal forms or models that apply to all people (43). The holy wells demonstrate loric power in that at one time each was associated with a specific *deus loci*, or deity of the place, whose healing powers were intimately connected to the particularities of that place. With the coming of Christianity, universalized Christian sacred symbols were integrated with resonant Celtic symbolic complexes, thus linking the sacred salmon of the wells with the

fish that represents Christ, the wells' healing waters with Christian baptismal waters, sacred trees with the tree on which Jesus was crucified. "Celtic Christianity," the Brennemans suggest, "amounted to a 'seeing' of Celtic symbols through the subjectivity of a Christian" (87). The Brennemans conclude their study by demonstrating how syncretic processes continue to unfold, as wells consecrated to the Virgin Mary take increasing precedence over those dedicated to local saints such as Brigid, while at the same time incorporating many of the loric elements associated with these sites.

Thought-provoking, though perhaps necessarily speculative at times, *Crossing the Circle* leaves the reader curious to hear more of the voices of the authors' informants as complements to the Brennemans' interpretations of the wells' archetypal and symbolic significance. Despite these concerns, however, the book's generously-sized pages, wide margins, and black and white photographs, coupled with its interesting content, make it a good addition to the coffee table as well as to the classroom.

While the Brennemans investigate the symbolic resonances of holy wells throughout Ireland, Taylor grounds himself in the lived experience of the people of a small Donegal community. The landscape in which the people of this community reside, he explains, and through which they travel, is "the anchor of personal and collective history, the material with which local, regional, or national identity is constructed" (4); language, he maintains, is the means of this construction. In keeping with this claim, Taylor emphasizes the significance of narrative—historical, legendary, and personal—in mediating the complexity of religious experience available to the people of the area around the small town of Teelin. Indeed, the narratives he relates and discusses refer not only to the healing power of holy wells, but also to that of drunken priests. The narratives suggest the therapeutic potential of biennial visits by the Redemptorist mission, as well as, for some, that of charismatic prayer meetings. They consider the importance of pilgrimages to holy sites not only in Ireland but also abroad, in France and Yugoslavia. By admirably integrating ethnographic and archival research, Taylor shows how phenomena such as holy wells and sacred relics are inescapably embroiled in negotiations of religious, political, economic, and social power not only at a local level, but often at a national and international level, as well.

Offering interesting and distinct insights into Irish religious culture, these two studies will appeal to readers in both folklore and Irish studies, as well as those in anthropology and religion. Appropriate for classroom use together or alone, they raise issues relevant to the study of material culture, cultural geography, and narrative, while addressing the complexity and significance of vernacular religious traditions in a particular place with a long, and often contested, history.