



## RECOVERING HERSTORY – II

**HALFWAY THROUGH THE HERITAGE TOUR, OUR TRAVELLING BAND OF MODERN-DAY PILGRIMS IS ENJOYING A PAUSE IN OUR TRAVEL AS WE SPEND THE WEEKEND IN HERRNHUT. REFLECTING ON THE MANY PEOPLE, PLACES AND MOVEMENTS WE HAVE ENCOUNTERED OVER THE PAST SEVEN DAYS, NUMEROUS WOMEN STAND OUT IN THEIR SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO HISTORY.**

• **BRIGID OF KILDARE** (451-525)—Already on our first day in **Utrecht**, we came across a street named after this female Irish bishop. Utrecht was the seat of the work of Willibrord, of the Anglo-Celtic mission movement from Britain to the continent. According to some, Willibrord received part of his training in an Irish monastery. Brigid was abbess of Ireland's first convent and founded several others. Her father being a pagan chieftain and her mother a Christian, Brigid was named after the pagan goddess of fire.

As a 17-year-old, Brigid converted to Christianity under Patrick's preaching. Her most important achievement was the founding of Kildare Abbey while still a mere 20 years old. Kildare ('*cill-dara*' meaning 'the church of the oak') was a mixed monastery for both nuns and monks.

Brigid was quickly regarded as the most holy native saint after Patrick, and became one of Ireland's patron saints. Her's remains a popular name in Ireland, and hundreds of place-names honouring Brigid are found all in both Scotland and Ireland. Irish missionaries made Brigid a popular saint for converted pagans all over Europe too.

It was not uncommon in the early Middle Ages for an abbess to oversee communities of both men and women. **HILDA, ABBESS OF WHITBY**, (614–680), was sought out by kings and rulers for advice. No less than five future bishops were trained in her community.

• **LIoba** (710-777)—Our visit to **Fulda**, close to the border of former West and East Germany, focussed on the transforming work of Boniface among the Germans, and also introduced us to the outstanding story of Lioba. Boniface was the first to appeal for women from his native England to come and help him convert the pagan Saxons. Among the thirty women who responded was his niece, Lioba. Boniface's strategy was to plant monasteries, or Christian communities, wherever he had preached his message. He gave responsibility to Lioba to oversee the nuns working for him, and also the monastery in Tauberbischofsheim. Later she founded several more convents, and took a leading role in the evangelisation of her region. She became widely respected, consulted by bishops, and was befriended by Charlemagne's queen Hildegard.



• **ELIZABETH OF THURINGIA** (1207-1231)—Our climb up to the **Wartburg Castle** was rewarded not only by a visit to the small room where Luther was secluded after being outlawed at the Diet of Worms, and where he translated the New Testament into German. As we were led through the beautifully restored halls and corridors of the castle, we also encountered the inspiring figure of young Elizabeth, who was canonised four years after her early death at the age of 24. Daughter of King Andrew of Hungary, she was the pawn in a politically-arranged marriage, at the age of four, to the heir of the Duke of Thuringia. After her fiancé died before the marriage took place, she married his younger brother Ludwig, when she was still 14 and he 20. This was a marriage of mutual love, as records tell of her rushing out to meet him after a journey, to kiss him in public "with heart and mouth a good thousand times".

But in the remaining decade of her life, she became legendary for her compassion for the poor. Inspired by St Francis, she founded a hospital at the foot of the Wartburg where she personally tended to the needs of the sick. After Ludwig died while on a crusade to the Holy Land, Elizabeth moved to Marburg. There she founded another hospital, serving the sick and living as a Franciscan Tertiary, in a time when care for the sick was still considered men's work. But her sacrificial service for the poor and sick took their toll on her health, and eventually led to her premature death in Marburg, where she was buried.

• **KATHARINA VON BORA** (1499-1552)—Several stops later in **Wittenberg**, we met that remarkable and self-confident woman who insisted on marrying the reluctant Luther. The enormous house—a former monastery—where she and Martin established the first *pfarrerhaus*, or vicarage, was a huge managerial undertaking which she tackled with relish. Luther called her affectionately: '*Herr Kate*: preacher, brewer and gardener.' Their marriage immensely influenced thinking about family in newly Protestant parts of Germany which had never before known such a model of married spiritual leadership.

Here the women of our group pose with their new heroine. Till next week,

Jeff Fountain