

Bridget Cleary

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Bridget Cleary (Irish: *Bríd Ní Chléirigh*) was an Irish woman killed by her husband in 1895. Her death is notable for several peculiarities: the stated motive for the crime was her husband's belief that she had been abducted by fairies with a changeling left in her place; he claimed to have slain only the changeling. The gruesome nature of the case — she was either immolated while still alive or set on fire immediately following her death — prompted extensive press coverage. The trial was closely followed by newspapers in both Ireland and Britain.^[1] As one reviewer commented, nobody, with the possible exception of the presiding judge, thought it was an ordinary murder case.^[1]

Early life

Cleary was born Bridget Boland around 1869 in Ballyvadlea, County Tipperary, Ireland.^[2] She married Michael Cleary in August 1887. The couple met in Clonmel in August 1887, where he worked as a cooper and she served as a dressmaker's apprentice.^[3]

After the marriage, she returned to her townland of Ballyvadlea to live with her parents, while Michael continued to work as a cooper in Clonmel. During this period of living apart, Bridget's independence grew, with her keeping her own flock of chickens and selling the eggs to neighbours. Somewhat unusually for the era and location, she was also a professional woman. She obtained a Singer sewing machine, state of the art at the time, and was variously described as a dressmaker and a milliner. Despite their eight years of marriage, the couple had had no children by the time of Bridget's death. Following the death of Bridget's mother, the Clearys found themselves responsible for Bridget's elderly father, Patrick Boland. His residence with the couple enabled them to secure a house reserved for labourers. Neither Bridget nor Michael was entitled to this cottage, but as Patrick had been a labourer in his youth, they were able to acquire the best house in the village. However, there was no widespread interest in the house, as it was built on the site of a supposed fairy ringfort.^[3]

"Disappearance"

Bridget was reported missing in March 1895. She evidently had been ill for several days, although her specific diagnosis is unknown.^[4] More than a week into her illness, on 13 March 1895, a physician visited her at her home; her condition was considered sufficiently grave that a priest soon followed, to administer last rites. Several of her friends and family members attended her over the next two days, and a number of home remedies were administered, including one ritual that anticipated her later demise: her father and her husband accused her of being a fairy sent to take Bridget's place. Urine was thrown on her, and she was carried before the fireplace to cast the fairy out. By 16 March, rumours were beginning to circulate that Bridget was missing, and the local police began searching for her. Michael was quoted as claiming that his wife had been taken by fairies, and he appeared to be holding a vigil. Witness statements were gathered over the ensuing week, and by the time Bridget Cleary's burnt corpse was found in a shallow grave on 22 March, nine people had been charged in her disappearance, including her husband. A coroner's inquest the next day returned a verdict of death by burning.

Trial

Legal hearings ran from 1 April to 6 April 1895. A tenth person had been charged, and one of the original nine was discharged at this stage, leaving nine defendants bound over for trial. The court session began on 3 July, and the grand jury indicted five of the defendants for murder, including Michael. All nine were indicted on charges of "wounding". The case proceeded on to trial. The evidence showed that on 15 March, Michael summoned Father Ryan back to the Cleary

household. Ryan found Bridget alive but agitated. Michael Cleary told the priest that he had not been giving his wife the medicine prescribed by the doctor, because he had no faith in it. According to Ryan, "Cleary then said, 'People may have some remedy of their own that might do more good than doctor's medicine,' or something to that effect." Bridget was given communion, and Ryan departed. Later that night, neighbours and relatives returned to the Cleary house. An argument ensued, again tinged with fairy mythology.

At some point, Bridget told Michael that the only person who'd gone off with the fairies had been his mother. Michael attempted to force-feed his wife, throwing her down on the ground before the kitchen fireplace and menacing her with a burning piece of wood. Bridget's chemise caught fire, and Michael then threw lamp oil on Bridget. The witnesses were unclear as to whether she was already dead by this point. Michael kept the others back from her body as it burned, insisting that she was a changeling and had been for a week previously, and that he would get his wife back from the fairies.^[1]

Michael Cleary was found guilty of manslaughter, and spent 15 years in prison. He was released from Maryborough (now Portlaoise) prison on 28 April 1910 and went to Liverpool.^[5] On 14 October 1910, a black bordered letter was sent from the office of the Secretary of State, Home Department, Whitehall, to the undersecretary, Dublin Castle^[5] stating that Michael Cleary had emigrated from Liverpool to Montreal on 30 June. Charges against some of his co-defendants were dropped, but four were convicted of "wounding".^[6]

Public reaction and aftermath

Bridget Cleary's death has remained famous in popular culture. An Irish nursery rhyme reads,

*Are you a witch, or are you a fairy
Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?*

She has been popularly described as "the last witch burned in Ireland"^[7] or as the subject of the last of the witchcraft trials,^[8] although it has been noted^[7] that Bridget was never actually described as having consorted with the devil, which is customary with accused witches. Instead, she was thought to have been replaced by a fairy changeling. Her death and the publicity surrounding the trial were regarded as being politically significant at the time. Irish home rule was an active political issue in England; William Ewart Gladstone's Liberal Party had come to power on a Home Rule platform, but had relatively recently^[9] lost its latest Irish Government Bill in the House of Lords. Press coverage of the Cleary case occurred in an atmosphere of debate over the Irish people's ability to govern themselves, and worries were expressed about the credulity and superstition of rural nationalist Catholics. The coroner who examined Bridget's corpse claimed that "amongst Hottentots one would not expect to hear of such an occurrence."^[10]

The New York Times covered the story in April^[11] and again in July 1895.^[12]

The writer E. F. Benson took a considerable interest in the case, publishing a scholarly commentary on it, "The Recent 'Witch-Burning at Clonmel'", in the influential periodical *The Nineteenth Century* in June 1895, before the trial itself began. It accepts the defence argument that those involved with Bridget Cleary's death acted out of a genuine belief that she had been possessed by a spirit, had no intention of murder, and were attempting to restore her to her rightful self. Benson cites a pattern of similar beliefs in "savage tribes", with examples from various societies, and talks of "the enormous force which such beliefs exercise on untutored minds". He also points out that the door of the Cleary house was left open and no attempts were made to keep the assaults on Bridget secret. "It is inconceivable that, if they had wished to kill her, they would have left the door open, that they should have allowed their shouts to attract the neighbours, or that ten persons should have been admitted to witness the deed. Terrible and ghastly as the case is, we cannot call it wilful [sic] murder."^[13] The article ends with the statement: "... if ... they killed, but not with intent to kill, still less should the extreme penalty be inflicted".^[13]

In 2010, *The Fairy Wife*, a play by Lawrence Bullock, based on the life of Bridget Cleary, premiered in New York City, at the Producers' Club Theatre, under the auspices of Le Wilhelm and Love Creek Productions.

See also

- [Capgras delusion](#)

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1. David Willis McCullough (8 October 2000). "[The Fairy Defense](#)". *New York Times*. Retrieved 23 March 2007.
2. Her father is recorded as giving her age as 26 years old in 1895.
3. Angela Bourke. "[The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story](#)". *Books.google.co.uk*. Retrieved 24 February 2016.
4. Bourke posits pneumonia, although Hoff and Yeates suggest tuberculosis, which had been rumoured at the time.
5. Angela Bourke (1 July 2001). [The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story](#). Penguin Group USA. p. 231.
6. [David Willis McCullough](#). "[The Fairy Defense](#)". *The New York Times*, 8 October 2000; accessed 23 March 2007
7. Bourke, p. 232.
8. Knowles, George. "[The Fairy Witch of Clonmel](#)". *Controversial.com*. Retrieved 24 February 2016.
9. March 1894 according to Bourke, although the Wikipedia article gives September 1893.
10. Bourke, p. 130.
11. "[NOT WITCHES, BUT FAIRIES - A New Explanation of the Strange Tragedy in Tipperary. - View Article - NYTimes.com](#)". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2016-02-14.
12. "[A WITCH BURNER SENTENCED. - Michael Cleary Condemned to Imprisonment for Twenty Years. - View Article](#)". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2016-02-14.
13. [Benson, E. F. \(1895\). "The Recent 'Witch-Burning' at Clonmel". *The Nineteenth Century* Vol. 37 \(1895-Jun\), pp 1053–58](#); accessed 16 September 2010.

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- This page was last modified on 25 February 2016, at 17:41.

*Are you a witch or are you a fairy
Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?*

By Julia Reddy

Celtic 361 2009, Instructor Séamus MacFloinn

The name Michael Cleary has been immortalized in a child's nursery rhyme, occasionally heard in the playgrounds of Southern Tipperary, Ireland. The rhyme invokes fear of the gruesome fate of women in the past labelled as witches. Bridget, the unfortunate wife of Michael Cleary, was not burnt for witchcraft but for being a fairy changeling. A fairy in today's popular imagination derives from the English tradition as a light, flimsy, winged being endowed with magical powers. The fairy tradition in nineteenth century Tipperary Ireland was of Celtic origin, thus significantly different. A changeling is the term applied to a child that was believed to have been spirited away, and substituted by a sickly, deformed child. Young women were less commonly known to be changelings. The events of March 1895 in Ballyvadlea, County Tipperary, Ireland, gave the Irish rural society a reputation of being backward brutes. The unusual case arose in a time of political turbulence, rapid industrialization and the decline of the fairy-faith tradition. Angela Bourke's book *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* is an extensive study of the murder case, including modern interpretations of the psyche behind the actions of the perpetrator. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* illustrates the crucial functions of folklore in rural nineteenth century Ireland within the context of a system of beliefs, demonstrates how propaganda was used in a time of political strife and examines the case in a modern perspective.

Bridget Boland was born to Patrick Boland and Bridget Keating of Ballyvadlea in the year 1868 or 1869. Ballyvadlea was a small, poor community. A convent opened shortly after Bridget's birth and she was able to receive a good education. A dressmaker by trade, Bridget was distinguished among her neighbours, dressing in the latest fashions and carrying an air of superiority about her. She also sold eggs and fowl, which enabled her to be financially independent. Michael Cleary, a cooper by trade, met Bridget Boland while she worked as an apprentice to a dressmaker in Clonmel. The couple married in 1887. In 1891, the Clearys and Bridget's parents moved into a small cottage in Ballyvadlea. Her mother died shortly before the [2] year 1895. The Clearys were very well off for a couple living in Ireland during the late nineteenth century. Both were literate and had steady incomes. The future looked bright for the couple, apart from the fact that they were childless, an unusual feature for a married couple of seven years.

The fourth of March, 1895, marks the beginning of Bridget Cleary's descent into hell. Bridget walked half a mile to the village Kilenagranagh to the house of Jack Dunne, a farm labourer and local story teller. She caught a cold and became very ill. The days that followed saw the visits of the doctor, Dr. Crean and several neighbours and relatives. Michael Cleary obtained herbal remedies, possibly under the influence of Jack Dunne, and he paid no attention to the doctor's medicine. Thursday, March the fourteenth, Michael sought out Denis Ganey, for more herbal medicines. The news of his father's death also reached him. The night of the fourteenth was carried out in hysteria among the collection of 9 people in the Cleary's household. The collection of people included Bridget, Michael, Patrick Boland, her aunt Mary Kennedy, her four cousins: Patrick, Michael, James and William Kennedy and lastly, Jack Dunne and William Adeahrne. The witch doctor's remedy of herbs floating in new milk was forced down the woman's throat while shouts of 'Take it, you old bitch or I'll kill you!' were heard. Jack Dunne retold the activity of the men on that particular night:

"I think then," said [Cleary] after a start, "it is time to give her this." He had it in a pint which he held against his breast; the four of us caught her and I had her by the neck; it

was very hard on her to take it; Cleary told me that after taking that she should be brought to the fire; so we brought her to the fire; we raised her over it, but did not burn; I thought it belonged to the cure; he told me it belonged to the cure (Bourke, 89). Bridget was doused in urine, and continuously asked “Are you Bridget Boland, wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of God?” It is curious that Jack Dunne would claim to be following the instructions of Michael Cleary, as Jack was the storyteller, therefore well versed in fairy customs.

The next night would be fatal for twenty six year old, Bridget Cleary. Father Con Ryan said mass and gave Bridget Holy Communion. This was the second time the priest gave Bridget [3] her last rites which clarifies that the Clearys were better off than most. The house on this evening was very crowded. The Kennedys, the Burks and Patrick Boland all witnessed the horrific actions of Michael Cleary. Michael Cleary is said to have knocked his wife out while she was weak with bronchitis and douse her body with paraffin oil while she lay by the open fire. Her body immediately ignited into flames causing her appalling death. Bridget’s aunt Mary Kennedy retells her view from the bedroom on that grave night:

When I looked out again he caught her by the head and threw her on the floor like he would throw an old turnip, and he got an old bag and an old sheet and put her in it. One of her feet was up that way (lifting her hand) — God bless the mark — and he gave it a knock with the shoe of his foot. The shock went all over the house, and I nearly died with it. So he rolled her up in a bag and the old sheet, and left her on the middle of the floor (Bourke, 125).

After the murder, Cleary and Patrick Kennedy buried the burnt body half a mile from the house. Michael announced that his real wife would soon return, riding on a white horse at the fort of Kilenagranagh. The case ended with the arrest of Michael Cleary, Jack Dunne and Patrick Kennedy.

Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* sheds light on the fairy-faith in rural Ireland, its impact on the people as well as the importance of the local storyteller. In 1891, Tipperary Ireland, those who initially believed in the realm of the gentry would not have been surprised to hear of the tragic death four years later of Bridget Cleary. The Clearys cottage in Ballyvadlea was built on a *ráth*, or a ringfort, which is a circular embankment used as a dwelling place for the pre-Celtic people. These mounds have been long associated with the otherworld. In the mythological cycle, the Túatha Dé Danann, the old Gods, were sent underground to live in the mounds by the Sons of Mil in the *Battle of Invasions*. A ‘fairy fort’ is another name applied to the dwellings. A large repertoire of folklore warns folk against interfering with *ráths*. The cottage into which they moved was previously occupied by a labourer; who left for reasons expressed in the *Daily Express*

“It is alleged that the fairies, who held high revel on moonlight nights on a rath quite close to the new cottage, were displeased with the tenant, and so annoyed him by unearthly cries and noises at night that he fled from the locality” (Bourke, 56).

The story [4] teller Jenny McGlynn of County Laois confirms the revered nature of the raths in a short narrative:

There was a man, now, sent out—he didn’t know it was a rath—and he was sent out to clean up. And he went and he cut old thorny bushes out of the way for to make room to till. And he got a splinter in his hand. And the hand decayed; he had to have the hand taken away. And it was the one he had hit the thorny bush with. He heard it was a rath and he wouldn’t let anyone else go near it (Lysaght, 30).

Equating the loss of a limb with the interference of a rath verifies its revered importance held by the rural dwellers.

Men and women experienced in herbal lore were believed to have gained their knowledge from the fairies. These ‘fairy’ doctors were important figures in rural communities. The

inhabitants would rely on their guidance for family as well as animals health. The fairy realm mingled with animal and human ailments and their cures. Foxglove, a poisonous plant, is often referred to in the Irish oral tradition, for instance

“...the fairy doctor recommends laying the changeling on a shovel outside the door from sunrise to sunset, giving the baby foxglove leaves to chew, and pouring cold water over the baby”(Underwood Munro, 268).

The Irish word for stroke is *poc sí*, literally ‘fairy stroke.’ The word for postnatal depression, *an fiabhras aerach* translates to ‘airy [fairy] fever.’ The ‘blast’ the term applied to a sepsis in Ireland, Scotland and Newfoundland was recognized to be the work of the fairies. The folk etymology of these ailments illustrates the importance of fairy legend in individuals’ health. The month of March, 1895, saw Michael Cleary travelling a great distance to obtain herbs and instructions from the local ‘fairy doctor’ Denis Ganey, in order to cure his sickly wife. Cleary deliberately avoided the medical doctor’s advice and refused his medicine. Denis Ganey was arrested as well for collaboration in Bridget Cleary’s unnatural death.

The ‘fairy doctor’ is directly related to the changeling. In fairy legend, a changeling is a fairy in the guise of a sickly, malformed baby. The real baby is believed to have been stolen away to the fairy world. Fairies were believed to steal babies in order to strengthen their population with human blood. Young women were also stolen by the fairies to serve as lovers or [5] to nurse fairy children. In the case of a changeling in fairy legend, the ‘fairy doctor’ would be consulted and the fairy spirit would be banished. According to W.B. Yeats,

“Many things can be done to find out in a child a changeling, but there is one infallible thing—if of the devil, burn; but if it of God and the saints, be safe from harm” (given by Lady Wilde). Then if it be a changeling it will rush up the chimney with a cry” (Yeats, 53).

Bridget Cleary’s cruel fate was initially justified by this belief. Michael Cleary exclaimed as he burnt his wife, “You’ll soon see her go up the chimney” (Bourke, 124). Joanna Burke testified that Michael Cleary “...would go to Kylenagranagh Fort on the following Sunday night. There he would see her riding on a white horse, and he said he would bring a knife to cut the straps with, and rescue her from the fairies” (Bourke, 25). The knife may be alluding to the belief that fairies detest iron, for instance Margaret Bennett, a guest speaker of Lister Sinclair’s program *Ideas* talks about the fairy-faith

“They used to put an iron, like the old smoothing iron, on the window sill or put a couple of iron nails in the bed to keep away the fairies” (qtd in “The Fairy-Faith”). Diarmuid Ó Giolláin suggests “...that the power of iron over the fairies supposedly reflects the superiority of Iron Age invaders over their Bronze Age predecessors” (Ó Giolláin, 203).

These customs are embedded in the story of Bridget Cleary. It is curious that Michael Cleary would succumb to the beliefs to the point of acting upon them when previously he moved into a cottage that was allegedly a fairy dwelling. Jack Dunne, the local story teller, was definitely influencing Michael Cleary’s beliefs regarding his wife’s sickness. Dunne, versed in fairy lore, is believed to have convinced Cleary that his wife was a changeling, in addition to sending him to the ‘fairy’ doctor. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* offers an abundance of lore and customs in a real life context as well as exemplifies the authority of the local story teller in nineteenth century rural Ireland.

The struggle for Home Rule (self-government) in Ireland became dire after the Great Famine hit in 1845. Redcliffe N. Salaman, the author of *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* announced that the “...state of Ireland in winter 46-47, has convinced me that it would be impossible to exaggerate the horrors of these days, or to compare them with anything which occurred in Europe since the Black Death of 1348” (Salaman, 300). The famine had the greatest impact on the *Gaeltacht* areas, ravishing the rural Gaelic speaking areas by death and

emigration. Traditional Irish culture rapidly declined. The Irish language, the oral tradition, folk customs and music became minimal as industrialization and English customs replaced the old way of life. The 1890's saw the revival of Irish Gaelic and folklore as a means to create national pride and to [6] encourage the Home Rule movement. "The Necessity for Deanglicizing Ireland" by Douglas Hyde in 1892, called for the abolishment of English culture in Ireland for it impeded on what made the Irish unique (language, lore, music) and ability for Home Rule. Bridget Cleary's murder, rooted in Irish lore, was used by Unionists (those in favour of Great Britain's power in Ireland) as propaganda to emphasize the primitiveness of the Irish peasantry, and in doing so discriminating against the traditional culture.

The news of Bridget Cleary's death spread like wildfire through the press, creating great interest in the case. Newspapers revelled in the sensational aspects of the story and the public consumed it eagerly. The widespread attention the story caused created unease among the Nationalists, who were commonly Catholics, struggling for Home Rule. The Unionists, Protestants, played on the unusual, misrepresenting the features of the case which were rooted in fairy legend not witchcraft. The Unionists papers which included *The Irish Time* and *Clonmel Chronicle* would accentuate how cruelty and heathenism were common among the lives of the Irish peasantry "Witchcraft" and "witch burning" were applied to Bridget's death, for instance, the *London Times* described the events as a "shocking occurrence, recalling the barbarities practiced in the Middle Ages upon prisoners charged with witchcraft" (Hoff & Yeats, 150). London's *Daily Graphic* on April 10th 1895 labelled the case as 'The Witchburning Case at Clonmel.' The use of the word 'witch' invokes the horrors of the medieval inquisition and is more readily understood by a vast audience than the 'fairy changeling.' The brutality and primitivism of the Irish peasantry were emphasized. The Nationalist feared this would jeopardize their chances for self government. *The Freeman's Journal*, a nationalist paper, avoided using supernatural words in their headlines, and attempted to de-emphasize the sensationalism of the murder by referring to it as an 'unusual murder case'. *Dublin Evening Mail* clearly states that Bridget Cleary's death exemplifies the Irish being incapable of self rule:

The precautions taken by the eleven persons now in custody for the murder of Bridget Cleary seem to leave no doubt that they were all aware that they were engaged in operations forbidden by the law of the land. The law is, of course, not as it would be if the Ballyvadlea people had the making of it. To them it is British Law, foreign-made law, unjustly interfering with their right to manage their own affairs, and running counter to ideas and the "wants and wishes" of the local "vast [7] majority" of Ballyvadlea. Freely admitting all this, we treat it as of no account. Civilization and humanity are much more precious, whether at Ballyvadlea or elsewhere, than the privilege of self-government, and must not be made the sport of ignorant and superstitious cruelty (Bourke, 142).

Clonmel's Nationalist reproached that the *Dublin Evening Mail* was attempting "...to stir up racial and religious passion and prejudice, and if possible to damage the cause of Home Rule" (Bourke, 143). The case was also used to create anti-sentiment towards Catholicism, for instance the Scotsman stated that "...the Irish peasants who are said to have tortured Bridget Cleary to death are no doubt devout Catholics, it may be made a reproach to their religion and their priests that they should be living in such a state of superstition" (Bourke, 172). The press turned the events surrounding Bridget Cleary's death into a metaphor that would define the Irish peasantry as a whole in order to assist political motives. Angela Bourke seeks to decipher individual explanations behind the murder case that reads like a folk tale.

The murder of Bridget Cleary was a result of her misinterpreted illness, Michael's frustration and his mental disturbance. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, an Irish folklorist, stated that "The role of

the fairies seems to have been traditionally to explain various kinds of misfortune and to impose a sort of framework around people's behaviour" (qtd in "The Fairy Faith"). In addition, Angela Bourke wrote that "Fairy belief legend provided a way of understanding congenital and other disabilities, or at least an imaginative framework that could accommodate them" (Bourke, 39). Numerous factors contribute to the unfortunate death of Bridget Cleary which will be further discussed. To begin with, Bridget Cleary as a changeling will be examined. A changeling, a child or young woman, abducted to the world of fairy and replaced with a sickly creature, is a prominent theme in Irish folklore. In oral tradition, a changeling would be banished with fire. Bridget Cleary is not the first person to be murdered in the name of a changeling. Thomas Crofton Croker recorded the death of a child under the illusion that it was possessed by a fairy:

Ann Roche, an old woman of very advanced age, was indicted for the murder of Michael Leahy, a young child, by drowning him in the Flesk. This case... turned out to be a homicide committed under the delusion of the grossest superstition. The child, though four years old, could neither, stand, walk [n]or speak –it was thought to be fairy struck (Bourke, 37). [8]

Ann Roche was acquitted of the crime. A third death was that of Patsy Doyle, an epileptic child whose mother brutally murdered him with a hatchet. The latter two deaths were carried out because of physical and mental disabilities. Changeling stories rationalized mental illness and child mortality among the rural populations. Why would the prosperous, clever Bridget Cleary be considered a changeling? Bridget was very ill with bronchitis or pneumonia along with fits of delirium prior to her death. The change in her behaviour, likely accompanied by the manipulative Jack Dunne, convinced Michael Cleary of his wife's fairy state. Jack Dunne is also believed to have told Michael that his wife has one leg longer than the other, which was a definite sign of a fairy. As Michael believed he was dealing with a fairy, he sought the advice of the 'fairy doctor.' Angela Bourke explained that fairies "... afforded a way for people driven to desperate remedies to rationalize their actions and live with the consequences" (Bourke, 39). Although Michael Cleary was delusional when rationalizing his wife's sickness, his frustration at the time could have contributed to his jumping to conclusions regarding her as a changeling.

Nineteenth century rural Ireland was dominated by the patriarchal system. Men controlled their wives and children, and were commonly the prime bread winner. Bridget Cleary was unusual as she was not dependent on a man financially. Her dress-making and hen keeping was able to sustain her needs. Michael Cleary would not have had control over how she spent her money. Bridget was also known to be pretty, clever and flirtatious. Her independent nature could potentially have annoyed Michael, especially given the fact that it was rumoured that Bridget had another lover. William Simpson was rumoured to have been having an affair with Bridget Cleary. Michael Cleary would likely have heard these rumours in the small town of Ballyvadlea. If Bridget did have a lover, it would prove that she was unhappy in her marriage with Michael Cleary. Bridget Cleary was also childless which was unusual for young families at the time. Richard Jenkins, a social anthropologist stated that "The folk view explicitly recognizes deviance from more than one behavioural or moral norm: the wife's duty to provide male heirs and the husband's obligation to find sponsors for his children at home" (Jenkins, 316).

This statement illuminates the importance of child rearing and how being childless was a form of social deviance. Michael Cleary can be viewed as being void of control which was socially abnormal at the time. In addition to being discontent and powerless, Michael Cleary's father died the day before Bridget was murdered. It is clear, that Michael Cleary would have been under immense emotional stress. Lastly, modern analysis suggests that Michael Cleary may [9] have become mentally ill with capgras syndrome. Capgras syndrome "...involves

delusional misidentification of a person, or people, usually someone who has close emotional ties to the person” (O’Connell, 77). Despite the examination of Michael Cleary’s mental health, one cannot deny that the case falls under spousal abuse, common in all cultures around the globe.

Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* is essential to the study of folklore as it is abundant in customs and beliefs practiced by real people; it reveals the utilization of the case for political purposes and discusses the functions of folk legend in the individual’s lifestyle. Bourke’s use of eye witness accounts of the nights preceding and following March 15th offers an enriching reading experience and creates a sense of the time. Folk customs, unique to Ireland, are brought to light, such as the *ráths*. The press’s method of utilizing the case in order to gain support for the Unionist and tarnish Home Rule, exhibits the frantic political atmosphere at the time. The actions carried out by Michael Cleary are attributed to personal mental health and environment, but are unquestionably rooted in the unique Celtic imagination.

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Bridget's Story

The Story of Bridget Cleary

The Last Witch Burned in Ireland: Fairy Folklore and the Law

by Alison Gillespie

(reprinted from the [Celtic Cultural Alliance](#) Newsletter - March 2009)

“Are you a witch or are you a fairy? Are you the wife of Michael Cleary”?

Such innocent words, often chanted by Irish children in nursery rhyme, only hint at the grisly but true story of the young Irish woman whose life was snuffed out on a bitterly cold day in March only a little over a century ago in Ireland. Here in America, the Salem Witch Trials brought an end to witch burning and the use of the supernatural or “spectral evidence” as permissible in court in the 1690s, but such practices continued in Ireland until as recently as the turn of the last century with the infamous ritual killing of Bridget Cleary and the precedent-setting trial of her accused murderers.

Bridget Cleary was a seamstress married to a cooper nine years her senior named Michael Cleary. Around the village she was known to be a polite, friendly, independent woman, well respected but little understood by her neighbors. The couple had no children after eight years of marriage, which was unusual in those days, and they lived in one of the finer cottages in town. The well-dressed Bridget was known to take long walks by herself to deliver eggs to her customers and often stopped by the old “Fairy Forts”, medieval ring forts outside of Clonmel.

One day in March of 1895 during the hardest winter so far on record, the 26-year-old Bridget fell ill, and the events that followed are still shrouded in mystery and folklore. The doctor was summoned, but he took almost a week to show up, so Michael grew impatient and visited a “fairy doctor” who prescribed herbs for Bridget. By this time, Michael had become convinced that the fairies had replaced his wife with a sickly changeling. Most likely the idea was planted in his mind by a relative who visited Bridget and thought her “much changed and not herself”.

Bridget grew weaker and the priest came to give her last rites – just in case. At this time, Bridget’s aunt and uncle decided to pay a visit to check on their niece and found the house full of villagers chanting and performing rituals while her husband and brother and some other men forced a concoction of herbs boiled in milk down Bridget’s throat. They also threw human urine on her – another popular fairy remedy. When that didn’t work, they held her over the hearth fire to try to cast out the devil they believed possessed her, while they prodded her with a red-hot poker from the fire. Bridget was repeatedly asked if she was a fairy and continuously tested by “established methods” in local folklore to see if she really was one.

A few days after St. Patrick’s Day, Bridget was reported missing. A rumor began to circulate that Bridget had been abducted by (or had gone willingly with) the fairies

inhabiting the fairy forts. Her husband supported the story. When her badly charred and mutilated body was found nearby in a shallow grave, Michael and eight other people were charged with her murder. The coroner confirmed death by burning, but also detected signs of previous abuse. Michael denied having murdered his wife, although he did admit to “driving out the fairy.” The real Bridget, he said, would soon be found at a nearby fairy ring riding a white horse where he would be waiting to bring her home.

The ensuing investigation, legal battle and public reaction surrounding the case sparked national interest at a time when Ireland’s ability to self-rule was being hotly contested. How, asked the English and their loyalist Irish friends, could people who still believed in evil spirits be trusted to govern themselves in the modern world? This case also came to light at a time when Irish Nationalists such as writer William Butler Yeats were celebrating Irish folklore in their literary works. But the mutilated body of a country woman was not what Yeats, Lady Gregory and their well-known literary circle had in mind when they went out among the poor asking for lyrical stories about wee folk in the heather. Evidence given during the trial revealed that when Bridget’s chemise caught fire, Michael took the opportunity to douse his wife with lamp oil and held the other people back as she burned alive in their home.

Recent interest in this gruesome murder, the court trial and Irish folklore in general have prompted the writing of several books about Bridget Cleary, which include Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, and *The Cooper’s Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary* by Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates. The first book offers a detailed account of the probable events at the Cleary cottage and then the trial. The second book does an excellent job of exploring the folklore and the lifestyle of the rural people of Ireland at the turn of the century and their influence on this case. The circumstances of the case ask the questions: “Does a firm belief in fairies and the supernatural legally establish insanity”? And, “How does the legal system separate centuries of beliefs and traditions from the standard norm for society”? A fair analysis of the events must take into account the role of folk beliefs in a rural society that was gradually moving from oral tradition into literacy.

Michael Cleary denied having murdered his wife, admitting only to having done away with her changeling. His so-called “fairy defense” did not hold up in court and he was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 15 years in prison—after which he sailed for Montreal. His cohorts, including some of Bridget’s own relatives, were convicted of wounding Bridget and served lesser sentences.

As a result of this landmark case, a precedent was set in Irish law that a person could not be harmed or killed for suspicion of witchcraft, and a belief in witchcraft could not be used as an insanity defense in a murder trial. Much like Lizzy Borden and her ax in this country, Bridget’s story has remained part of popular culture in Ireland ever since. Even with the fact gathering for the case, interviews with locals

at the time, and further analysis more than a century later, no one is really sure what happened inside that cottage.

Some say Bridget was hiding an extramarital affair and that her husband killed her out of jealousy. Other witnesses claim she admitted to being a changeling and taunted her husband until he killed her. Many believe that Michael felt threatened by his modern-thinking, independent wife and took advantage of the circumstances to be rid of her.

No surprise that the macabre story of Bridget Cleary should capture the imagination of two 15-year-old girls local to the Lehigh Valley during a sleepover three years ago as they stayed up to read the eerie account by candlelight. Inspired and a little “creeped out” by the story, Rose Baldino and Genevieve Gillespie, the two young fiddlers, composed their first instrumental tune together in tribute to Bridget. The tune, “Burning Bridget Cleary” was to become the name of their Celtic music band as well as the signature cut from their first album, Catharsis. Three years later, they have again paid tribute to Bridget’s story with a song “An Tusa an Si” which they penned partly in Irish Gaelic, and recently recorded on their second album, “Everything is Alright.”

“We don’t want to appear morbid about our fascination with Bridget Cleary,” says Rose. “I suppose we first related to her because she was a young woman. We just think her story and the mystery and fairy folklore surrounding the case are representative of Ireland at the time. Much of the music we play dates back to that era so we feel a connection”.

Genevieve adds, “Bridget didn’t know it at the time, but she was to die for a good cause. In that sense she was a sort of heroine—some positive did come out of her death. She is remembered today in Ireland for that, and we honor her as well with our music”.

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- See more at: http://www.burningbridgetcleary.com/bridgets_story/#sthash.pl5mAws8.dpuf

Bridget Cleary: Fairy Intrusion in Nineteenth Century Ireland

BY LISA SPANGENBERG OCTOBER 13, 2007

Are you a witch?

Are you a fairy?

Are you the wife

Of Michael Cleary?

—Children's rhyme from Southern Tipperary, Ireland

I promised in my first post on fairies as other to look at a fairy intrusion in nineteenth century Ireland, specifically, the fairy burning of Bridget Cleary.



Brid Ní Chléirigh/Bridget Cleary

In March of 1895 Bridget Boland Cleary (Brid Ní Chléirig) was a trained seamstress, with a good eye for fashion, who owned her own Singer sewing machine. She lived with her husband Michael Cleary and her father Patrick Boland in a small cottage in Ballyvadlea, Tipperary, Ireland. Michael, like his wife, was atypical in that he could read and write; he worked as a cooper. In 1895 they'd been married about eight years; Bridget was 26, and Michael was 35. On the fifteenth of March, Michael Cleary, believing his wife Bridget had been taken by the fairies and that they had left a changeling in her place, having spent three days in various rituals that were intended to force the changeling to leave and bring his wife back from where the fairies had taken her, set fire to her. He and nine others of Bridget Cleary's relatives and neighbors were tried for her death.

On Monday March 4, Bridget walked to the house of her father's cousin, Jack Dunne, to deliver some eggs. It was an extremely cold day, and Bridget caught a cold. She

spent the next day in bed, and complained of “a raging pain” in her head, and shivers and chills (Bourke 2000, xi, 65). A few days later Jack Dunne came to visit, and, upon seeing the markedly ill Bridget in bed, said “That is not Bridgie” (Bourke 2000, 70). Jack Dunne was well acquainted with fairy folklore, and tales of fairy abductions and changelings, and the remedies and protections against them— as was Bridget’s own mother. By March 9, Bridget’s condition had worsened, and she told her cousin Johanna Burke that she thought she’d caught another cold. Despite the rain and cold, Bridget’s father Patrick Burke walked four miles to the doctor’s and asked him to come (Bourke 2000, 71). When the doctor hadn’t come by the following Monday, March 11, Bridget’s husband Michael walked four miles to Fethard and requested that the doctor come, and then, again, with a more forceful summons in hand from the local health authority, he made the trip again on Wednesday March 13. He also requested that the priest visit. While Michael Cleary was out, the doctor arrives and examines Bridget; he describes her as “nervous,” and prescribes some medicine. The priest gives her the last rites, just in case.

Michael Cleary, in the meantime, concerned, perhaps even despondent over his wife’s condition, has gone back to the doctor. On his way back, he purchases some herbs from a woman in Fethard that were said to be efficacious as a fairy remedy. At the trial Bridget’s cousin Johanna Burke testified that when Michael Cleary told Jack Dunne that he’d purchased herbs as a remedy against fairies, Jack Dunne said: “It is not your wife is there. You will have enough to do to bring her back” (Bourke 2000, 82).

The next day, Thursday March 14, Michael Cleary went to another herbalist; this time, to the locally known “fairy doctor” Dennis Ganey. He purchased more herbs as a “fairy cure.” Traditionally a remedy for someone “taken” by fairies is to boil specific herbs in “new” milk (new milk has properties associated with purification), and then the mixture administered to the patient, which Michael Cleary did. According to the testimony of Johanna Burke, she and William Simpson, and his wife Minnie, met outside of the Cleary’s door that evening.

Witness asked for admittance, but Michael Cleary said they would not open the door. While they remained outside they stood at the window. They heard someone inside saying: “Take it, you bitch, or ‘witch.’” When the door was opened, witness went in and saw Dunne and three of the Kennedys holding Mrs. Cleary down on her bed by her hands and feet, and her husband was giving her herbs and milk in a spoon out of a

saucepan. They forced her to take the herbs, and Cleary asked her: 'Are you [Bridget] Boland, the wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of God?' She answered it once or twice, and her father asked a similar question. Michael Cleary [witness thought] then threw a certain liquid on his wife. They put the question to her again, and she [refused] to repeat the words after them. John Dunne then said: "Hold her over the fire, and she will soon answer." Dunne, Cleary and P. Kennedy then lifted Mrs. Cleary off the bed, and placed her in a kind of sitting position over the kitchen fire, which was a slow one. Mrs Cleary had greatly changed. She seemed to be wild and deranged, especially while they were so treating her (*Folklore* 1895, 374).

This was the third dose of the herbs in milk; earlier, before Johanna Burke and the Simpsons arrive, Bridget had been forced to swallow two earlier doses, encouraged to do so by being threatened with a hot poker, a poker which left a small burn mark on her forehead (Bourke 2000, 91). Fire, particularly applied to iron, is a traditional method of warding off a fairy, or frightening a changeling into leaving so that the "real" person can return. The "certain liquid" was urine, traditionally believed to force the changeling to flee; Bridget was repeatedly doused with human urine. The neighbor, Michael Simpson, testified that after the third dose of herbs, while Bridget was still lying on the bed, the men "holding her arms on both side, and her head, they lifted her body and wound it backwards and forwards" (Bourke 2000, 92).

On the morning of Friday March 15th, Michael Clary fetched the priest, who performed mass in Bridget's bedroom, where Bridget was lying in bed. That night, according to Johanna Burke's testimony, Bridget was dressed, and brought to the kitchen, where, Johanna says

Her father, my brother and myself, and deceased and her husband sat at the fire. They were talking about the fairies, and Mrs. Cleary said to her husband, "Your mother used to go with the fairies, and that is why you think I am going with them." He asked her, "Did my mother tell you that?" She said, "She did; that she gave two nights with them." I made tea, and offered Bridget Cleary a cup of it. Her husband got three bits of bread and jam, and said she should eat them before she should take a sup. He asked her three times: "Are you Bridget Cleary, my wife, in the name of God?" She answered twice, and ate two pieces of bread and jam. When she did not answer the third time he forced her to eat the third bit, saying, "If you won't take it,

down you will go.” He flung her on the ground, put his knee on her chest, one hand on her throat, and forced the bit of bread and jam down her throat, saying “Swallow it. Is it down? Is it down?” ... I said, “Mike, let her alone, don’t you see it is Bridget that is in it” meaning that it was Bridget his wife, and not the fairy, for he suspected that it was a fairy and not his wife that was there. Michael Cleary then stripped his wife’s clothes off, except her chemise, and got a lighting stick out of the fire. She was lying on the floor, and he held it near her mouth (Folklore 1895 373-76).

Johanna Burke testified that she heard Bridget’s head strike the floor, and then a scream. Her chemise, we learn from the inquest and trial, was ordinary calico; it would have caught fire quite quickly. Mary Kennedy, who was in the back bedroom, rushed to the kitchen where she saw Bridget Cleary lying on the hearth, her clothing on fire. According to Mary Kennedy’s testimony, Michael Cleary said “Hannah, I believe she is dead.” It is at this point that Mary Kennedy saw Michael Cleary reach for the lamp from the table, and drench his wife with paraffin oil, until she was consumed with flames.

James Kennedy testified that when he cried out to Michael Cleary “For the love of God, don’t burn your wife!” Cleary replied:

She’s not my wife. ... She’s an old deceiver sent in place of my wife. She’s after deceiving me for the last seven or eight days, and deceived the priest today too, but she won’t deceive anyone any more. As I began it with her, I will finish it with her! ... You’ll soon see her go up the chimney! (Bourke 2000, 124).

According to court testimony, at about 2 am the following morning, Michael Cleary asked Johanna Burke’s brother, Patrick Kennedy, to help bury Bridget’s twisted, and partially incinerated corpse. They wrapped the body in a sheet and carried to a boggy area about a quarter of a mile from Bridget’s home. On the 22nd of March, after a week of speculation, newspaper reports, and intensive searching, the Royal Irish Constables discovered the body in a shallow grave. In the intervening time, Michael Cleary, once in the company of his father in law and neighbors, spent three nights at the fairy rath at Kyleneagranagh, convinced that he would see his wife emerge on a white horse, at which point he would cut her free, and rescue her from the fairies, much as Janet rescued Tam Lin.

I am absolutely positive that Michael Cleary, and most of not all of the relatives and neighbors who, like Michael, served time for their part in Bridget Cleary's death, genuinely believed that Bridget Cleary had been taken by the fairies just as Heurodis was taken by fairies in *Sir Orfeo*. But I think that there are characteristics or aspects of this tragedy that would have provided cause for that belief, in the context of traditional fairy folklore. I've already cited MacAllister Stone's definition of Other as a term to describe the phenomenon of the outsider, particularly in fiction, who represents some kind of threat to the community—but often, also serves as the agent for the community's salvation/redemption.

Bridget Cleary very much was an outsider in the tiny community of Ballyvadlea. She was attractive, and forthright, with a reputation for a quick wit, a sharp tongue, and a direct gaze—none of which were common characteristics of young Irish Catholic women in Ballyvadlea. Her wardrobe was much more fashionable than that of her peers, not unreasonable given her talent as a milliner. In addition to her income from sewing, Bridget, like most other women, kept hens, and sold their eggs; egg money, like milk money, was traditionally the property and income of women. Bridget was, then, fairly well off, and hence more independent because of it.

She was known to go for long walks in order to deliver eggs, and to visit the fairy fort at nearby Kilenagranagh. These “fairy forts,” or raths, are remnants of neolithic structures that dot the landscape of Ireland, where they are still seen as dangerous, liminal places, places frequented by fairies in search of mortal game and prey. Moreover, Bridget was married to a man who was nine years older than her, and, at the time of her death, though they had been married for eight years, they had no children; this would be very much seen as odd in an era and culture where women were valued for their fecundity, and men for their ability to get children and hence heirs to work the land in their own turn. In her extremely thoughtful study of Bridget Cleary, Angela Bourke observes “A suggestion that [Bridget] was away with the fairies was a serious reflection on [Michael Cleary] and on their marriage” (Bourke 2000, 96). Bourke builds a careful and well-supported case for Bridget as an outsider in Ballyvadlea, a woman who didn't know her place, a woman who might even have had a lover, a suggestion that emerged early in the court testimony, but was soon dropped.

In my next post, I'm going to look at the story of Bridget Cleary in terms of fairies as other, and in the context of sex, and death. If you want to read more, and you have access to JStor, here are some references to match my citations.

- § Bourke, Angela. "Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland." *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 21, No. 3. (Autumn, 1995): 553-586.
- § Bourke, Angela. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000. This really is the best study; there's another slightly more recent book that's vastly inferior.
- § "The 'Witch-Burning' at Clonmel." *Folklore*. Vol. 6, No. 4. (Dec., 1895): 373-384. This is an anonymous article that reprints the newspaper coverage of the court testimony.

Bridget Cleary, Sex, Death, Fairies and Other

BY LISA SPANGENBERG OCTOBER 21, 2007



Bridget and Michael Cleary

This is the third in a series of posts about fairies as other. I promised, in my first post, to concentrate on fairies as other, particularly in the context of sex and death, because, as MacAllister Stone notes "other is all about sex and death." Last time I looked at the tragic death of Bridget Cleary, burned because her husband Michael thought Bridget was the victim of a fairy abduction. This time I want to look at the story of Bridget Cleary in the context of sex and death.

In Bridget Cleary we have a woman who is seen as other, an outsider in her community because of her differences, differences which are particularly marked for a woman in nineteenth century Ireland where an assertive, opinionated and financially independent woman without children is very much seen as an anomaly. In the March 29, 1895, the *Cork Examiner* special report on her death, the reporter, having interviewed locals, describes Bridget as “a bit queer” in her ways, and this they attribute to a certain superiority over the people with whom she came into contact ... Her attire ... is not that of every woman in the same social plane (Bourke 2000, 43). Bridget was perceived as an outsider, “a bit queer,” even by another outsider.

The attention paid to Bridget Cleary’s clothing and body in the descriptions of her “cure,” in the careful details about the extent of her clothing in the court testimony (presumably, as Bourke suggests, to remove any thought of sexual impropriety) underscore the sexual subtext of the situations. Bourke observes that despite the “prudery” in the eye witness accounts the violence meted out to Bridget Cleary before her death has an unmistakably sexual character. On Thursday, when he used a metal spoon, and again, on Friday, when his weapon was a burning stump of wood, Michael Cleary’s actions amounted to a kind of oral rape. On both occasions Bridget Cleary was pinned down and prevented from struggling free, while a substance was forced into her body... [the inquest revealed signs of injury to her mouth and throat] The violence used in holding Bridget down was certainly not sufficient to kill her, but its scale and ferocity would have been enough to terrify her, and to show her and anyone watching just who was master (Bourke 2000, 120).

Michael Cleary may very well have felt he needed to assert himself, not only against the uncanny malice of fairies, but as a man with an assertive, financially independent wife, a wife who may well have had a lover. Most of all, he may have felt it was imperative to assert himself given community pressure regarding his relationship with a wife who had not born him any children, which would have been very much seen as a failing by the community. One reason Bridget was taken by the fairies might have been her childless state; the unvoiced assumption being that since she had no children, that there was some sort of sexual failure, a situation that wasn’t helped in the least by the fact that Michael was nine years older than Bridget and that they spent most of the first few years of their marriage apart except on weekends (Bourke 2000, 96).

The standard academic way to refer to fairies taking mortal women is to call it fairy abduction, or, more commonly, fairy rape, particularly in medieval texts. Corinne Saunders,

writing about Middle English romances that involve fairy abductions and rapes points out that “What is most striking in all these works is the association of the otherworld with sexual violence or desire for possession of the woman’s body” (Saunders, Corinne J. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001. 233). Both Bridget Cleary and Heurodis are perceived as victims of a fairy rape. The fairy king threatens to tear Heurodis limb from limb if she doesn’t come willingly, and tells her that she’ll be taken to the otherworld even if they take her in pieces. Bridget is mistreated physically, dosed with “cures,” verbally abused, then doused with human urine before being burned. The overt physicality of the way Bridget Cleary was treated, the man-handling of her, is an inversion of the customary fairy threat to a mortal victim; with Bridget Cleary, we see mortals abusing what they think is a fairy changeling, though she is a mortal woman—her sex is a huge part of the reason she is treated his way.

Women who are assertive, and independent, who dress better than their peers, women who are financially independent, women who have no children, forth-putting women who approach men, fairy mistresses and otherworld women like Rhiannon, these are *other*. They are potentially dangerous to the community, because they disrupt the natural order, or the perceived natural order. These women who like Heurodis are in the right place and the right time, and who, like Bridget, go to the forbidden liminal areas, are just as disruptive as the ostensible external agency, the fairies, who take them. It’s bad enough to have a child or lover taken by the otherworld, but what’s worse for those left behind are the mortals who go off with their fairy wooer, quite happily, and the abducted mortal women who choose to stay in the otherworld, rather than return to their mortal husband and children.

Bridget Cleary was perceived as dangerous and engaging in risky behavior; Michael Cleary objected to her going to the rath, and did all he could to “bring her back.” Underlying his frantic, desperate efforts, almost certainly, was the fear that Bridget might not *want* to come back. In court testimony from Johanna Burke, Bridget is said to have told her husband, shortly before he set her on fire, “Your mother used to go with the fairies, and that is why you think I am going with them.” Michael Cleary asked Bridget, “Did my mother tell you that?” She said, “She did; that she gave two nights with them” (*Folklore* 1895, 375). There’s a very definite sexual connotation to “she gave two nights with them,” particularly given the numerous references to fairies taking mortal lovers in medieval literature and folklore.

Otherworld folk are not shy about making sexual conquests. Rhiannon is very much seeking Pwyll as her spouse when she comes to the *gorsedd* in the first branch of the Welsh *Mabinogi*,

Pwyll Penduovic Dyfed. The fairy queen in Thomas of Erceldoune is more than willing to take Thomas as her lover, keeping him mute but with her in the otherworld for seven years, before returning him to the tree where she found him, saving him from becoming a human sacrifice. She leaves him with an unwelcome gift, the ability to prophesy, thus converting him from dangerous other, to magical other with a redemptive gift for the community.

In *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis returns from the fairy otherworld because Orfeo rescues her, and both return to Orfeo's kingdom. At the end we are told Orfeo leaves the kingdom to his faithful steward since Heurodis has no children and Orfeo has no heir. We rarely hear or read of otherworld folk having progeny, and when we do hear about fairy offspring, say the child of the Grey Selchie, the offspring are the result of liaisons between mortals and fairies, or other otherworld residents, and the children usually come to a bad end. Pwyll's otherworld bride Rhiannon is scorned by Pwyll's people because she is childless. Later, when Rhiannon has a child, the child mysteriously disappears. Rhiannon is typical in being less than fecund; otherworld folk are seemingly sterile, and, perhaps consequently, obsessed with taking fertile mortal women, and young children. Just as with other Others, say Gypsies, or whatever a given community's racial/ethnic minority is, or queers, in stories about fairies and otherworld intruders it's a case of "They want our women, and our children, and our women want sex/more sex/better sex, and so they voluntarily go with these Others, and leave us, and sometimes, they refuse to come back."

I think that fear—the fear that Bridget wants to be with the fairies, with the other, is what's underlying the Bridget Cleary horror. It's interesting to note, as Bourke does, that in the spring of 1895 that the Irish papers, and some of the English papers too, were carrying stories about the "witch burning" in Clonmel, Oscar Wilde was on trial for sodomy. It's also the date of the first attested use of "fairy" to mean queer. Both the *OED* and the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* cite the following reference from the *American Journal of Psychology* as the first use of fairy to mean queer, or as the *OED* has it "A male homosexual":

"The Fairies of New York" are said to be a similar secret organization. The avocations which inverters follow are frequently feminine in their nature. They are fond of the actor's life, and particularly that of the comedian, requiring the dressing in female attire, and the singing in imitation of the female voice, in which they often excel" (*American Journal of Psychology* VIII, 1895: 216).

I've been looking at the connection between fairy and queer for a long time, and I think there are a couple of reasons for fairy being used to mean queer. First, I think it works because

there's an association between fairies and an absence of progeny despite their overt eroticism, and the assumption, for many, that being queer has to do only with sex, that it's all about sex, and that it's sex without fear of progeny, just like real fairies.

Next time, I'm going to look again at medieval fairies as ways of dealing with other, and sex, and death.

Here are some references to match my citations.

§ "The 'Witch-Burning' at Clonmel." *Folklore*. Vol. 6, No. 4. (Dec., 1895): 373-384.

This is an anonymous article that reprints the newspaper coverage of the court testimony.

§ *Thomas of Erceldoune*. Scroll down to the Appendix for the text as printed by Francis Child, as part of the versions of Child Ballad 57 "Thomas the Rhymer." (Murray 1875)

§ Ford, Patrick K. trans. *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

§ Bourke, Angela. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000.

This really is the best study; there's another slightly more recent book that's vastly inferior.

§ Saunders, Corinne J. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001.

§ *Sir Orfeo* with text and ms. page images from the Auchinleck ms.

§ Anne Leskaya and Eve Sedgewick's annotated Middle English edition of *Sir Orfeo*.

§ A pdf of a lightly modernized *Sir Orfeo* from the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*

BRIDGET CLEARY BURNED TO DEATH

[From *Five Years in Ireland, 1895-1900* by Michael J. McCarthy, 1901]

"Novalis said of Goethe: *Let him engage in any task, no matter what its difficulties or how small its worth, he cannot quit it till he has mastered its whole secret, finished it, and made the result of it all his own.* This surely is a quality of which it is far safer to have too much than too little." - CARLYLE.

THE cases dealt with in this and the succeeding chapters are, so far as the public know, quite exceptional cases in Ireland. But the number of people more or less involved in two of them, and the apparent acquiescence of entire localities in some or all of the proceedings, raise them far above the category of ordinary crimes. These cases were hushed up and cloaked, or only partially reported, by the nationalist press of Ireland; and, furthermore, no public condemnation has issued in reference to them from either the pulpit, the press, or the platform - or from the oracle at Maynooth. That is not right. There are thousands of "good, moral, industrious" peasants in country localities in Ireland, who, if they do not firmly believe the superstitions which led to such horrible results in these cases, do certainly border on those beliefs. If these dreadful cases are not indicative of any general condition of intense superstitious depravity in Ireland, but are more or less isolated cases, then our note of condemnation should be all the more distinct and unequivocal. They are cases which occurred during the five years reviewed in this book, and, therefore, come within its purview. Perhaps I attach more importance to them than they deserve. But, at all events, I have come to the conclusion that they afford food for reflection; and that if they are to be narrated at all, they must be narrated in full. Let the reader skip this and the next chapter, if he or she pleases; they do not affect the tenor of the book.

I sincerely pity all the people connected with these tragedies, but I pity still more intensely the many peasants who border upon, if they do not firmly entertain, the beliefs expressed in these two cases. This latter feeling is the gadfly which urges me on, as it urged Socrates of old, to do what little I can to crush out those remnants of savagery which should by this time be as extinct as the snakes in this so-called "Island of Saints."

The earliest knowledge we have of the Ballyvadlea case was what occurred on Wednesday, March 13, 1895. It was on Thursday the 14th that the brutal tragedy began, so far as the public will ever know, and it was consummated on the night of Friday the 15th, and in the small hours of the morning of Saturday the 16th. Let the reader picture one of those new labourers' cottages, erected at the expense of the locality, and let by the guardians at a nominal rent, standing in its half-acre of

ground close to the public road in the townland of Ballyvadlea, in the county of Tipperary. The district is far from the railway, but is well peopled. It is in the parish of Drangan, and, I believe, in the Cashel arch-diocese, and all the people connected with the tragedy are Catholics. Father Ryan, the curate, tells us that the Clearys were "members of his congregation and under his spiritual charge," and that he knew them for four years and a half.

Michael Cleary, described to me as "a clever fellow," and by trade a cooper, and his wife, Bridget, were living in their new labourer's cottage, then, along with Mrs. Cleary's father, Patrick Boland. Mrs. Cleary, from all the accounts I can gather, was a handsome young woman, twenty-six years of age, who had been married for some years to Cleary, and had had no children. In the words of Judge O'Brien, she was "a young married woman, suspecting no harm, guilty of no offence, virtuous and respectable in all her conduct and all her proceedings." Another witness says, "She was nice in manners and appearance." Cleary's own words, "She is too fine to be my wife," point to her physical beauty also. One who had frequently seen her, before this dreadful business, on his way to hunt with the Tipperary hounds, tells me she was distinctly "good-looking." We have it that she wore gold earrings, and it leaks out accidentally that there is a canister with £20 in it in the house.

On the Wednesday, then, which we shall call the first day, Dr. Crean called to see Mrs. Cleary at her house. He had been summoned on the 11th, and "was not able to go till the 13th." He found her suffering from nervous excitement and a slight bronchitis. She was in bed, but the doctor "could see nothing in the case likely to cause death." Dr. Crean then gave her some medicine. He "had no anxiety about the case," left the house, and never saw her alive again. We, in the light of subsequent events, can well understand her "nervous excitement," although we are given no clue to anything that happened previous to this, the first day. She herself never uttered a word of complaint to doctor, to priest, or to neighbour, or to a living person, about the agonies she was subjected to tortures that equal some of the heinous doings of the Inquisition. Or, as the coroner, Mr. J. J. Shee, J.P., to his lasting credit, put it at the inquest, "Amongst Hottentots one would not expect to hear of such an occurrence."

The next actor on the scene is Father Ryan, who visited Mrs. Cleary on the same Wednesday afternoon. She was in bed. He says that "she did not converse with him, *except as a priest*, and her conversation was quite coherent and intelligible." He, also, left her on that day without, apparently, receiving any clue to the persecution and hellish misery of which she was the victim. If an unpierceable brass wall stood between this confessor and penitent, the confessor could not have been further away from the truth as to her condition. He, too, then walked out from that house,

on that spring afternoon, as ignorant of and as out of touch with her and those people of whom "he had spiritual charge," as if he were a marionette.

That is absolutely all we know about Wednesday the 13th. The doctor saw her, thought her illness trivial, prescribed, and left. The curate heard her confession, gave her extreme unction, and left - out of touch with the poor sufferer, who had no friend on earth to whom she could open her inmost heart, and thereby escape from the hideous doom which awaited her. There was no kindly human being in the locality to smell out this nest of horrors, no sharp, sympathetic eye to pierce beneath the surface and probe out her miseries.

We now come to Thursday, the second day. On the morning of Thursday the 14th, Father Ryan says "he was called to see Mrs. Cleary, but he told the messenger that having administered the last rites of the Church on the previous day, there was *no need to see her again so soon!* He did not consider her dangerously ill." The priest knew nothing at all, I hope and believe, about what was the matter with her. She, poor thing, was yearning for some one to speak to, but could not get the words out. *No need to see her again so soon!* A professional ceremony then, it seems, had exhausted the whole duty of the clergyman; a professional ceremony in which, as is proved in this case, nothing vital, nothing essential can have been revealed. The Rev. Father Ryan did not go to see her, then, on the second day. How the forenoon and afternoon of this second day passed will never be known; but it is now our task to narrate the horrors of the evening. "It appears almost incredible," said Judge O'Brien afterwards at the trial, "that there could be such a degree of human delusion, that so many persons, young and old, men and women, could be so incapable of pity or sympathy with human suffering." He added that the crimes of that night "had spread a tale of horror and pity throughout the civilised world."

But, if we are ignorant of the day's events, as we are of the events of the many previous days during which *she must have been* suffering persecution, our information as to the evening's and night's proceedings are explicit enough. William Simpson, a near neighbour of the Clearys, living only 200 yards off, accompanied by his wife, left their own house between nine and ten o'clock that evening to visit Mrs. Cleary, having heard she was ill. When they arrived close to Cleary's house they met Mrs. Johanna Burke, accompanied by her little daughter, Katie Burke, and inquired from her how Mrs. Cleary was. Mrs. Burke, herself a first cousin of Mrs. Cleary's, said, "They are giving her herbs, got from Ganey, over the mountain, and nobody will be let in for some time." These four people then remained outside the house for some time, waiting to be let in. Simpson heard cries inside, and a voice shouting, "Take it, you b----, you old faggot, or we will burn you!" The shutters of the windows were closed and the door locked. After some time the door was opened and from within shouts were heard: "Away she go! Away she go!" As Simpson

afterwards learned, the door had been opened to permit the fairies to leave the house, and the adjuration was addressed to those "supernatural" beings.

In the confusion Simpson, his wife, Mrs. Burke, and her little daughter, worked their way into the house. From this forward we know some, at any rate, of the doings of the incarnate fiends and cowards assembled within these walls. Simpson saw four men - John Dunne, described as an old man, Patrick Kennedy, James Kennedy, and William Kennedy, all young men, "big, black-haired Tipperary peasants," as they were described to me by one who had to do with the case from start to finish, brothers of Mrs. Burke and first cousins of Mrs. Cleary, "holding Bridget Cleary down on the bed. She was on her back, and had a night-dress on her. Her husband, Michael Cleary, was standing by the bedside."

Cleary called for a liquid,¹ and said, "Throw it on her." Mary Kennedy, an old woman, mother of Mrs. Burke, and of all the other Kennedys present, brought the liquid. Michael Kennedy held the saucepan. The liquid was dashed over Bridget Cleary several times. Her father, Patrick Boland, was present. William Ahearne, described as a delicate youth of sixteen, was holding a candle. Bridget Cleary was struggling, vainly, alas! on the bed, crying out, "Leave me alone." Simpson then saw her husband give her some liquid with a spoon; she was held down by force by the men for ten minutes afterwards, and one of the men kept his hand on her mouth. The men "at each side of the bed kept her body swinging about the whole time, and shouting, 'Away with you! Come back, Bridget Boland, in the name of God!' She screamed horribly. They cried out, 'Come home, Bridget Boland.'"

From these proceedings Simpson gathered that "they thought Bridget Cleary was a witch," or had a witch in her, whom they "endeavoured to hunt out of the house by torturing her body."

Some time afterwards she was lifted out of the bed by the men, or rather demons, and *carried to the kitchen fire* by John Dunne, Patrick, William, and James Kennedy. Simpson saw red marks on her forehead, and some one present said they had to "use the red poker on her to make her take the medicine." The four men named held poor Bridget Cleary, in her night-dress, over the fire; and Simpson "could see her body resting on the bars of the grate where the fire was burning." While this was being done, we learn that the Rosary was said. Her husband put her some questions at the fire. He said if she did not answer her name three times they would burn her. She, poor thing, repeated her name three times after her father and her husband! "Are you Bridget Boland, wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of God?"

"I am Bridget Boland, daughter of Patrick Boland, in the name of God."

Simpson said they showed feverish anxiety to get her answers before twelve o'clock.

¹ The liquid, described in the newspapers as "a noxious fluid," was, as a matter of fact, urine.

"They were all speaking and saying, *Do you think it is her that is there?* And the answer would be 'Yes,' and they were all delighted."

After she had answered the questions, they put her back into bed, and "the women put a clean chemise on her," which Johanna Burke "aired for her." She was then asked to identify each person in the room, and did so successfully. The Kennedys left the house at one o'clock "to attend the wake of Cleary's father," who was lying dead that night at Killenaule! Dunne and Ahearne left at two o'clock. It was six o'clock on the morning of the 15th, "about daybreak," when the Simpsons and Johanna Burke left the house after those hellish orgies. There had been thirteen people present in Cleary's house on that night, yet no one outside the circle of the perpetrators themselves seems to have known, or cared, if they knew, of the devilish goings-on in that labourer's cottage.

At one time during that horrible night, the poor victim said, "The police are at the window. Let ye mind me now! "But, alas, there were no police there!

We now come to the third day, Friday, 15th of March. Six o'clock on that morning found Michael Cleary, the chief actor, Patrick Boland, and Mary Kennedy in the house with the poor victim, when the two Simpsons and the two Burkes were leaving. Simpson says, "Cleary then went for the priest, as he wanted to have Mass said in the house to banish the evil spirits." This brings us back again to the Rev. Father Ryan, who says, "At seven o'clock on Friday morning I was next summoned. Michael Cleary asked me to come to his house and celebrate Mass: his wife *had had a very bad night.*" Father Ryan, apparently as completely estranged from those members of his flock as if oceans rolled between, suspects nothing, sees nothing, knows nothing. Cleary "asked him to come to his house *and celebrate Mass,*" for the celebration of which he was entitled to a fee, and he at once assented to that proposal. Father Ryan arrived at the cottage at a quarter past eight, and said Mass in that awful front room where poor Bridget Cleary was lying in bed. He was the medium through which the miracle of transubstantiation was performed there and then, yet he had no glimmering of the atmosphere of hell in which he stood!

"She seemed more nervous and excited than on Wednesday," he says, and adds, "her husband and father were present before Mass began, but I could not say who was there during its celebration." He had no conversation with Michael Cleary "as to any incident which had occurred," because he suspected nothing. "When leaving," he said, "I asked Cleary was he giving his wife the medicine the doctor ordered? Cleary answered that he *had no faith in it.* I told him that it should be administered. Cleary replied that *people may have some remedy of their own that could do more good than doctors' medicine.*" Yet, Father Ryan left the house "suspecting nothing." "Had he any suspicion of foul play or witchcraft," he says, "he should have at once absolutely refused to say Mass in the house, and have given information to the police." We have no personal censure for him. He too is a victim - the victim and the

product of a system as rigid as iron, to discuss which would require a separate book.

After Father Ryan had said his Mass and left, she remained in bed. Simpson saw her there at midday and never saw her afterwards. His excuse for his presence and non-interference on Thursday night is that "the door was locked, and he could not get out." We find the names of still more people mentioned as having visited her this day. Thomas Smith, a farmer, of Ballyvadlea, was ploughing in one of his own fields, adjoining Cleary's house, on this day, and "hearing that she was ill, went in to see her." He only remained ten minutes, and went home. Other names are also mentioned as having been in the house that day - Meara, Tobin, Anglin, Leahy, who called to see her also. Yet not to one of them did she utter a complaint, *let us hope*, about the persecution she was undergoing; nor do they seem to have noticed anything strange in what they must have seen and heard in that house. She seems, judging from the number of visitors, to have been extremely popular. Johanna Burke seems to have been in the house the greater part of this day. At one time she tells how Cleary came up to the bedside and handed his wife a canister, and said there was £20 in it. She, poor creature, took it, tied it up, "and told her husband to take care of it, that he would not know the difference till he was without it." She was "in her right mind, only frightened at everything." No wonder. Her brain must have been a particularly good one not to have become unhinged.

At length the night fell upon the scene; and, at eight o'clock Cleary, who seems to have ordered all the other actors about as if they were hypnotised, sent Johanna Burke and her little daughter Katie for "Thomas Smith and David Hogan." Smith says, "We all went to Cleary's, and found Michael Cleary, Mary Kennedy, Johanna Meara, Pat Leahy, and Pat Boland in the bedroom." The husband had a bottle in his hand, and said to the poor bewildered wife, "Will you take this now, as Tom Smith and David Hogan are here? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!" Tom Smith, a man who said "he had known her always since she was born," then inquired what was in the bottle, and Cleary told him it was holy water.

Poor Bridget Cleary said "Yes," and she took it. She had to say, before taking it, "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," which she did. Smith and Hogan then left the bedside and "went and sat at the fire." Cleary told them that his wife, "as she had company, was going to get up." She actually left her bed, put on "a frock and shawl," and came to the kitchen fire. The talk turned upon *pishogues*, or witchcraft and charms. Smith remained there till twelve o'clock, and then left the house, leaving Michael Cleary (husband); Patrick Boland (father); Mary Kennedy (aunt); Patrick, James, and William Kennedy (cousins); Johanna Burke, and her little daughter Katie (also cousins), behind him in the house. Thomas Smith never saw Bridget Cleary after that. According to Johanna Burke, they continued "talking about fairies," and poor Bridget Cleary, sitting there by the fire in her frock and shawl, wan

and terrified, had said to her husband, "Your mother used to go with the fairies; that is why you think I am going with them."

"Did my mother tell you that?" exclaimed Cleary.

"She did. That she gave two nights with them," replied she.

This shows us that Cleary had drunk in superstition with his mother's milk. Johanna Burke then says that she made tea and "offered Bridget Cleary a cup." But Cleary jumped up, and getting "three bits of bread and jam," said she would "have to eat them before she could take a sup." He asked her as he gave her each bit, "Are you Bridget Cleary, wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?" The poor, desolate young woman answered twice and swallowed two pieces. We all know how difficult it is, when wasted by suffering and excited by fear, to swallow a bit of dry bread without a drop of liquid to soften it. It, in fact, was the task set to those in the olden days who had to undergo the "ordeal by bread." How many of them, we are told, failed to accomplish it! Poor Bridget Cleary failed now at the third bit presented to her by the demon who confronted her. She could not answer the third time.

He "forced her to eat the third bit." He threatened her, "If you won't take it, down you go!" He flung her to the ground, put his knee on her chest, and one hand on her throat, forcing the bit of bread and jam down her throat.

"Swallow it, swallow it. Is it down? Is it down?" he cried.

The woman, Burke, says she said to him, "Mike, let her alone, don't you see it is Bridget that is in it," and explains, "he suspected it was a fairy and not his wife."

Let Burke now tell how the hellish murder was accomplished: "Michael Cleary stripped his wife's clothes off, except her chemise, and got a lighted stick out of the fire, and held it near her mouth. My mother (Mary Kennedy), brothers (Patrick, James, and William Kennedy), and myself *wanted to leave*, but Cleary said he had the key of the door, and the door would not be opened till he got his wife back."

Wanted to leave! Cowards, dolts! "They were crying in the room and wanting to get out." This crowd in the room crying, while Cleary was killing their first cousin in the kitchen.

"I saw Cleary throw lamp-oil on her. When she was burning, she turned to me" (imagine that face of woe!) "and called out, 'Oh, Han, Han!' I endeavoured to get out for the peelers. My brother William went up into the other room and fell in a weakness, and my mother threw Easter water over him. *Bridget Cleary was all this time burning on the hearth*, and the house was full of smoke and smell. I had to go up to the room, I could not stand it. Cleary then came up into the room where we were and took away a large sack bag. He said, 'Hold your tongue, Hannah, it is not

Bridget I am burning. You will soon see her go up into the chimney.' My brothers, James and William, said, 'Burn her if you like, but give us the key and let us get out.' While she was burning, Cleary screamed out, '*She is burned now. God knows I did not mean to do it.*' When I looked down into the other room again, I saw the remains of Bridget Cleary lying on the floor on a sheet. She was lying *on her face and her legs turned upwards*, as if they had contracted in burning. She was *dead and burned.*"

Cleary next asked Patrick Kennedy to assist him in burying the body "until such time as he could lay her beside her mother." According to his sister, Mrs. Burke, Patrick Kennedy at first refused. His own account, when charged before the magistrates, was that he went with Cleary to bury her "for fear he would be killed." He had nothing to do, he said, with the *actual* burning on that night; he "heard a roar" from the room in which he was, that was all; adding, "I am cracked after it for to see my first cousin burned." James Kennedy said, in court, that "on the second (Friday) night he *asked* Cleary for the love of God not to burn his wife; and he added that they had *gone three nights to the Fort* at Kilenagranagh, but *did not see anything.*

As this is the first mention of the word "fort," let me say at once that it means a ring fence, or double ring fence, of simple earth, thrown up in ancient times by the Danes, or other settlers in Ireland, after the manner of a Zulu kraal. The South of Ireland is studded with them; and though they are often most inconveniently situated on tillage land, and though their destruction presents no features of difficulty whatever, beyond merely levelling the fence, they have been preserved, from a superstitious dread of ill-luck to any one who ventured to destroy them. I am informed that people in Ballyvadlea believe that a person being near this fort at night is liable to be struck with rheumatism, paralysis, and so forth! Those accursed, unlively, and useless remains of barbarism should be levelled to the ground by every man who wishes to see Ireland prosper. I myself know a score of farmers who have these forts on their land: all farmers of the best class, comfortable, rational, hospitable, intelligent, keen men of business; yet, not one of them has the courage to remove these nuisances from their holdings, although they continually grumble at the inconvenience they cause.

Observe, now, the cool generalship displayed by Cleary. William Kennedy says that "when he came out of the room he saw Bridget Cleary blazing; he asked Cleary what he was doing. Cleary said it was nothing to him. He *asked to be let out.* Cleary wouldn't let him."

No! But "Cleary himself then *went out and locked the door after him,*" and left those four male and three female human beings in the house with the burned body. Out into the night with him, searching, no doubt, for a trusty, secret spot in which to put the body. The hiding-place he selected was over a mile distant from the cottage! "When he came back he got Pat Kennedy to go out with him," and they buried her!

Yes, and so well selected was the spot, that the body was not found for six days afterwards by the police.

Now, behold Cleary and Patrick Kennedy returning again to the house, having got rid of their horrible burden, after an absence of two hours. Johanna Burke says, "My mother, my two brothers, Pat Boland, my daughter, and myself were made prisoners till they came back." Cleary had locked the door on the outside! Cleary then, on his return, confronted Johanna Burke, and she says, "He told me to say that I went to prepare her a drink, and, when returning, met her at the door, and that she spat at me and went out of the door, and that I could not say where she went to." That was the story to be concocted to explain her disappearance. Cleary said that "he would go down towards Cloneen *and pretend he was half mad.*" Then he said to Johanna Burke, "Hannah, it is hard to depend on you; but if you were to be kept in jail till you rot, DON'T TELL."

Johanna Burke then says, "I went down on my knees and declared before God and man that, until the day I died, I would never tell, even if she was found." Cleary next faced his father-in-law, and, including Johanna Burke in his glance, said, "I dread the two of you." Old Boland said, "Now that my child is burned, there is no use in saying anything about it; but God help me in the latter end of my days!"

It was now daylight on Saturday morning, the 16th of March, the fourth day; and Johanna Burke "saw Michael Cleary washing the trousers of his light tweed suit that he had on him. There were stains like grease on it, and he exclaimed, 'Oh God, Hannah, *there is the substance of poor Bridget's body!*'" He also picks up one of his wife's earrings and destroys it, lest it should be evidence against him. John Dunne, who was not present at all on the Friday night, now reappears upon the scene. He is the man who is said to have suggested holding her over the fire on the Thursday night; but, in extenuation, he says "they did not burn her that night; they only *held her over the fire!*" On this Saturday morning he came up to Cleary's house, and "found her gone." Cleary, in explanation of her disappearance, told him the story which he had already concocted for Johanna Burke, adding that "he thought she was gone with the fairies." Dunne offered to search for her, and Cleary accepting his offer, the two men set off for Kylenagranagh fort, and searched it, and the whole neighbourhood near it.

Cleary said, "She used to be meeting an egg-man in the lower road about a mile and a half away." The peasant women, living in the by-roads, used to come out with their eggs, to meet this egg-man on the main road. A proof of Bridget Cleary's thrift, Cleary now insinuates to Dunne that he thought it possible that she actually had gone to meet the egg-man!

Having searched everywhere in vain, Cleary could not keep up the self-restraint any longer, and he burst out, "She was burned last night!" Ignorant and deplorable a

human being as Dunne may be, there is some spark of energy and manliness in his character, and I believe his story.

"You vagabond," said Dunne, "why did you do it?"

"She was not my wife," replied Cleary; "*she was too fine to be my wife*. She was two inches taller than my wife."

But Dunne brushed him aside, and said, "Go now and give yourself up to the authorities and to the priest. You will have no living on earth."

Cleary replied, "Well, I will if you'll come along with me." Dunne consented, and they went towards Drangan. They met Michael Kennedy on the road, and he went back to Drangan with them. He had not been present at the Friday night's doings either. There are various versions of how the communication was made to the priests. Father Ryan says "he saw Cleary kneeling near the altar, very nervous, and asked him into the vestry;" that Cleary "suggested going to confession, but I would not allow him, as I did not think him *fit to do so!* I coaxed him into the yard. I began to *feel afraid of him.*" *Not fit to do so!* Is not repentance the only cure for agony of mind? Michael Kennedy took away Cleary from the precincts of the chapel without confession.

John Dunne says he told the Rev. Father Ryan that "they had burned her to death last night and buried her; and that he had been asking Cleary all the morning to give her Christian burial." *Christian burial*; wait until you hear the sequel of the case! Father Ryan says "he was horror-struck, and could not remember what reply he made; his only thought was, *How could three or four of them go out of their minds simultaneously!*"

Suffice it to say, the priests only told the police that "they suspected there was foul play," and, with this vague direction, blind-folded Justice was started on the track.

John Dunne says he told the Parish Priest, whose name has not been allowed to appear in print in connection with the case, and which I shall not mention either. Dunne says that as they walked home from Drangan they saw a policeman following them. Justice, in the person of Acting-Sergeant Egan, met Cleary later on in the day "on the road near Cloneen," where Cleary said he would go, "*and pretend to be half mad,*" you remember. Acting-Sergeant goes to Cleary's house with him, asking him questions about his wife. Cleary tells him "she left home about twelve o'clock last night," and mentions that "Johanna Burke had been at the house last night," and also that his father-in-law had slept in the next room. The two people whom Cleary had coached, you remember, in the morning. Not much madness here, only the pretence of madness, which he foretold in the morning he would assume. Pat Boland is also there, and in reply to a query, cries and says, "My daughter will come back to me." The restless Acting-Sergeant goes off; but returns at ten o'clock at night, and finds

the house deserted and doors locked - like some hellish theatre after the tragedy had been performed! Gets himself in through the window, and *finds a burned night-dress*. Where Cleary and Boland were we do not know. Simpson does not appear to have seen Cleary at all on this day, Saturday.

Johanna Burke is taken in hands by the police, and deposes: "I was at the house on the night of the 15th. Bridget Cleary was raving. After some time she got up and dressed, and sat at the fire. She afterwards went to bed. I went out for some sticks. When I returned I met her at the doorway, *going out in her night-dress. I endeavoured to hold her and failed*. Since that night I have not seen her. Her husband followed her some time and returned. He did not see her. She is missing ever since, and they made search for her." Simpson also deposes what he knows of Thursday night's doings, before quoted, and says "he heard she was missing since Friday night."

Now, blindfolded Justice, double-bandaged, what are you to do? You can arrest the five Kennedys, mother and sons, and John Dunne and William Ahearne and Cleary and old Boland, or *watch them* like a cat watching wicked rats; and keep your Burke and your Simpson, your mainstays, close in hand. All of which things are well done. These rats, then under surveillance of the cats of justice, are allowed to play for a day or two.

Sunday, the 17th of March, St. Patrick's Day, now dawns. Moore's words, associated with this national holiday, are inappropriate in Ballyvadlea to-day:

"Though dark are our sorrows, to-day we'll forget them,
And shine through our tears like a sunbeam in showers;
There never were hearts, if our rulers would let them,
More formed to be grateful and blest than ours."

Our rulers cannot well be blamed for this sad business in Ballyvadlea, our *political* rulers!

Simpson saw Cleary on this Sunday morning, and Cleary told him that "his wife left home at twelve o'clock on Friday night." Between seven and eight that evening, Simpson saw him again, and Cleary asked him for a revolver, saying "that these parties who had convinced him about his wife would not go with him to the fort" - that execrable fort at Kylenagranagh Hill. "It appeared to me," says Simpson, "that they had convinced him that his wife had gone with the fairies. The fort was supposed to be a fairies' habitation. He said *she would be riding on a grey horse. She told him so*. And he said they should cut the ropes tying her on the saddle, and that she would then stay with him, if he was able to keep her." Simpson refused to give him the revolver. What a pity Simpson had not got his revolver with him on the Thursday night! Simpson afterwards saw Cleary going to the fort with a big table-

knife in his hand, to cut the ropes and set her free from the grey horse, presumably! Did he think of suicide, or was he still keeping up the pretence of madness?

During the interval that now elapses between the 17th and the 21st of March, the police are busily searching for the body, assisted by Michael Kennedy, who was *not in the house* on the Friday night. The police, thus set upon a false scent, under that able young man, District-Inspector Wansbrough, who certainly deserves to rise high in the Royal Irish Constabulary, proceed to search and scour the entire countryside. Railway stations are watched; farmhouses and outhouses are searched; fields, woods, glens, and brakes are tried in all directions; ponds and rivers are dragged! Neither priests nor participators give any assistance to the police.

At length, when, after several days, no trace is discovered of this woman *who had left her house at midnight, arrayed only in her nightdress*, District-Inspector Wansbrough rightly concludes that she must be dead. If Bridget Cleary's body was not discovered, no further effective proceedings could be taken. No crime whatever could be laid to the charge of those people. It seemed a hopeless quest that the police now entered upon. Hundreds of square miles of country to search for one poor half-burned body lying in a few square feet of earth! No assistance, no clue, though so many people around them knew everything!

All the parties - Cleary himself, Boland, Dunne, the five Kennedys, and William Ahearne - were arrested. The neighbourhood was astir with the *mystery* of the missing woman. On the 21st the prisoners are brought before the magistrates, in open Court, at Clonmel; Simpson's depositions and Johanna Burke's false Cleary-concocted story being the only basis on which the prosecution has to work. Denis Ganey, who is said to have supplied the herbs, is arrested, but afterwards released. There was no case against him whatever. His herbs were, perhaps, as good as much of the stuff called doctors' medicine. Nothing was elicited to elucidate the mystery. Cleary, Pat Boland, Pat Kennedy, and his mother and two brothers, all kept their secret well. Old Boland goes so far as to say from the dock, "I have three more persons that can say she was strong the night she went away; she got up and dressed." This would go to prove, you see, that what they had done to her on the Thursday night - which was all they were charged with so far - had inflicted no serious injury on her, was, in fact, a fatherly kind of curative treatment! Their 'cuteness is the most astonishing thing about all this gang of people. Their appearance, under arrest, in the streets of Clonmel, was greeted with "yells, hisses, and groans"; but their demeanour in the dock is described as "unconcerned: they chatted and exchanged pinches of snuff with each other."

But, notwithstanding all their cunning, discovery was at hand. After the Court had adjourned, and the prisoners were remanded to jail, District-Inspector Wansbrough directed the police at Cloneen, Drangan, and Mullinahone "to make a deliberate search" once again for the body. It was next day, Friday, 22nd March, that Sergeant Rogers, keen on the scent, when crossing some furzy ground, noticed "some broken

thorn bushes freshly cut from a hedge in an angle of a field." And there, under a shallow covering of clay, only a few inches deep, the body of poor Bridget Cleary was discovered at a spot considerably over a mile from the cottage. It presented "a most terrible appearance," back and lower part all burned, but head preserved and "features perfect!" Marvellous preservation. There was no clothing on the body, except the stockings. Her head was enveloped in a sack, and in her left ear was *one* of her gold earrings. Her limbs were cramped up, and her arms folded across her breast. Constable Somers, who knew her for three years, identified her "by her features - they were perfect." He had last seen her about a month or six weeks before.

I shall not give the gruesome description of the doctors who made the post-mortem, how the muscles of the spine were burned and the bones exposed, and so forth, and the deadly purple marks of strangulation, with others too horrible to mention. Suffice it to say, the burns were "the cause of death," which was all the coroner's jury wanted to know. The coroner's jury did not go into the attendant facts, but found that the burns, inflicted by some persons unknown, caused the death of the young, handsome, thrifty, Bridget Cleary. Had not the body been discovered, the world might never have heard of the Ballyvadlea case!

The inquest was held in a vacant house near where the body was found. After the conclusion of the proceedings, not a single human being, male or female, clerical or lay, would lend any assistance to give Christian burial to the body. Horror of horrors! *The police had to bury Bridget Cleary's corpse that night, by the light of a lantern, in Cloneen churchyard.* We shall find the Maynooth theologians, in a later chapter, arguing that "the existence of motion proves the existence of a necessary being apart from the world." Fudge! I tell them that they will have to answer for this case and the Lisphelan case, I hope and pray, when they are confronted with that "necessary being."

With regard to the police, let me say that it is because of their action in cases like this and the Lisphelan case, now about to be described, that I shall never be found saying a word against the Royal Irish Constabulary, no matter what views I may hold about the expensive character of its establishment. The policemen act like Christians, at any rate; and they stand between us and barbarism in such cases as this.

It was now, *after the discovery* of the body, on the second day of the magisterial investigation, that all the dreadful facts of the Friday night's doings were divulged by Johanna Burke. The end draws nigh at last. The prisoners were returned for trial to the Clonmel Assizes in July by the presiding magistrates, Colonel Evanson, R.M., and Mr. Grubb, J.P., after a prolonged investigation, during which "the 'cuteness and coolness' of the accused were manifested more than once. Addressing the jury, Judge O'Brien, himself a Roman Catholic, and not a nominal one either, said: "This

case demonstrates a degree of darkness in the mind, not of one person, but of several, a *moral darkness, even religious darkness*, the disclosure of which had come with surprise on many persons." One would hope so! But the leniency of the sentences also, it may be truly said, came with surprise on many persons. The charge of murder was withdrawn by the Crown prosecutor! Cleary was therefore found guilty, not of murder, but of manslaughter, and was sent to penal servitude for twenty years; Patrick Kennedy, found guilty of wounding, "the most guilty of all, except Michael Cleary," in Judge O'Brien's opinion, got five years' penal servitude; John Dunne, the least contemptible of them, got three years' penal servitude; William and James Kennedy, a year and a half's imprisonment each; Patrick Boland and Michael Kennedy, six months; and when Mary Kennedy's turn came, the Judge said tearfully, "I will not pass any sentence on this poor old woman."

Thus ends this tale of "moral darkness, even of religious darkness, not of one person, but of several," the events of which took place, not in Darkest Africa, but in Tipperary; not in the ninth or tenth, but at the close of the nineteenth century; not amongst Atheists, but amongst Roman Catholics, with the Rosary on their lips, and with the priest celebrating Mass and administering absolution and extreme unction in their houses.

Ah, my readers, Ireland is not the merry country which people think, which Protestant Irishmen like Lever and Lover have painted it; or the abode of half-humorous, half-contemptible braggarts, as Thackeray saw it. It is a sad, a gloomy, a depressed, a joyless country, for the bulk of its peasantry. Hence it is they leave it. When the heart is sad, and the mind clouded in ignorance, and oppressed by darkest fears and mystery, there can be no humour, no gaiety. There is, I have always believed, more real gaiety of heart in one coster on the Old Kent Road, than in all the Catholic peasants of Munster.²

"The wind blows east, the wind blows west,
And there comes good luck and bad;
The thriftiest man is the cheerfulest;
'Tis a thriftless thing to be sad, sad,
'Tis a thriftless thing to be sad." - CARLYLE.

² The synopsis of the case given in the foregoing chapter is founded on the admirable reports of the *Irish Times*, extending over a long series of days, at long intervals of weeks and months, and on personal interviews with parties well acquainted with all the circumstances.

The Burning of Bridget Cleary

I had the pleasure of doing the post-performance interview with Tom McIntyre after the An Grianan production of his play, "What Happened to Bridgie Cleary?" during yet another excellent Earagail Arts Festival. Funny what goes through your mind when engrossed in captivating theatre.

With the Patrick MacGill Festival coming up next week (don't forget Com Melly's book launch on Monday) I was transported back some 22 years to Fall River, Massachusetts, where Patrick's daughter, Patricia and her husband, Owen, took me to visit her father's grave and on the same day showed me the house of the infamous axe murderer, Lizzie Borden. Remember the rhyme - "Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. And after that when she was done, she gave her father forty-one". Bridget Cleary was called "the last witch burned in Ireland" and she was immortalised in a children's rhyme: "Are you a witch or are you a fairy, Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"

On March 15, 1895, twenty-eight year old Bridget Cleary, a cooper's wife, disappeared from her cottage near Clonmel in County Tipperary. Immediately, strange and lurid rumours began circulating the neighbourhood about what had happened. Some said she ran off with an egg seller, others supposed it was an aristocratic foxhunter who had taken young Bridget away. Swirling amid rumours was the barely whispered, but widely held, belief that Bridget had gone with no mortal man; rather, she had gone off with the fairies. The mystery deepened when seven days later her body was discovered, bent, broken and badly burned in a shallow grave. Within a few days, the unimaginable truth came to light: for almost a week before her death Bridget had been confined, ritually starved, threatened, physically and verbally abused, exorcised and, finally, burned to death by her husband, Michael Cleary, her father and extended family who confused her bronchial medical condition with a "fairy dart." They had all become convinced that "their Bridgie" had been taken from them and her fairy-possessed body left behind to deceive them.

She was a stylish dressmaker with additional independent income from keeping hens, who eschewed the customary shawls and scarves of her peers for hats and cashmere jackets. Her husband was a cooper from a neighbouring town who also had a good income. That, along with their childless state, had made them relatively well-off compared to their neighbours and family. The Cleary's were friendly with their neighbours - an "emergency man", or caretaker for the landlord who had moved into a farm after a family was evicted during the land wars of the early 1890's. These neighbours were shunned by a small community resentful of such opportunism. Bridget did the shopping for them and may have been the young husband's lover. She was out delivering some eggs and hoping to get payment owed from her uncle, and caught a cold that possibly developed into TB on her two-mile trek home. Over the next week Bridget's condition worsened, yet the doctor, a drunk, refused to come, while the priest stayed 20 minutes and merely gave the last rites. Soon Michael Cleary and Bridget's uncle, Jack Dunne, a seanchai well versed in herb lore, began to circulate the story that Bridget had been taken by the fairies, and the woman in the bed was a changeling. Some herbal cures were prescribed and forced down Bridget's throat - she was also manhandled and held over the fire on Thursday, March 15, while being repeatedly asked if she was indeed Bridget or a changeling. Several family members assisted, and neighbours were present the evening before her death. Several more tests were conducted by her male relatives to see if she was truly Bridget - including throwing urine and chicken droppings on her.

By the next morning, she appeared to recover and was up, dressed and out of bed the following evening, when neighbours came at her request to verify that she was better, and not a changeling. After the neighbours left, seemingly still not convinced that she was truly his wife, Michael Cleary tried to force Bridget to eat three pieces of bread before he would

give her a cup of tea- she ate two and insisted on the tea. He waved a burning stick in her face, causing her clothing to catch fire. She passed out, and he threw paraffin oil on the “changeling” and burned her to death, all the while screaming that she wasn’t his wife, that his wife would appear riding on a white horse at a ruined hill fort the following evening, when he would cut the cords that bound her with a black-handled knife. On 14 March they held her over the fire to drive the spirits out, and on 15 March Bridget’s husband set fire to her nightgown, throwing on lamp-oil to make the fire burn more fiercely. “She’s not my wife”, he told the assembled people.

“You’ll soon see her go up the chimney”. Brandishing a kitchen knife at her brothers, he forced one of them to help him carry her to a shallow grave. Shortly afterwards, some men reported to their local priest that young Bridget Cleary, who was known to have been ill, had been burned to death by family members, including her husband, in a case of fairy exorcism. The priest in turn went to the police, who found Bridget’s charred body and arrested nine family members, neighbours and friends in connection with the incident. The subsequent trial became a weapon in the hands of Tories opposed to Home Rule for Ireland. After all, how could one grant political autonomy to a people still so in the grip of superstition? Michael Cleary was sentenced to 15 years after which he emigrated to Canada. Tom McIntyre told me an intriguing story from the Clonmel area some time ago when a young man (possibly a Canadian) was observed in the vicinity of the Cleary household only to disappear again. Did Michael re-marry and have a family? I would strongly recommend Angela Bourke’s “The Burning of Bridget Cleary” and also worth a look is “The Cooper Wife is Missing” by John Hoff and Marian Yeates.

What fascinates me about the Bridget Cleary story is that it happened just over a hundred years ago - in my grandparents time - so that we can’t dismiss it simply as some aberration from the Dark Ages.

This is what an 1895 publication, “Gaslight”, had to say of the burning, an event which provided sensational headlines throughout these islands at the time. “It seems, then, that whatever explanation we accept of the beliefs which led to Bridget Cleary’s death, we cannot suppose that it was the purpose of these men to murder her. The account given of the matter by all the witnesses is too fantastic and too uniform not to be genuine. We cannot imagine that they, by pure chance, invented a course of reasoning to excuse primitive superstition, nor is there the smallest evidence to show that any of those motives which, for most part, lead to murder were influencing, or had influenced, any of the actors. The story is too strange not to be true. That such superstitions should still be believed in a Christian country, and by men who by religion are Christian, is appalling enough; but the remedy for such a state of things is not to be found in the hangman’s noose, nor yet, perhaps, in the convict prison, and one cannot but feel that it would be in the spirit of that wise and merciful law which ordains that boys under a certain age may not be hanged for capital offenses to spare these men, even if they are condemned; for children they are if, as can, I think, be proved, they have acted under the influences of such superstitious fears, as surely as the savage who fears his own shadow is a child. It is as impossible for educated and unsuperstitious people to appreciate the enormous force which such beliefs exercise on untutored minds as it is for a heathen to estimate the immense powder of religion in determining the conduct of a man. But if, as this paper has tried to show, they killed, but not with intent to kill, still less should the extreme penalty be inflicted.”

Staying with Festival Theatre - “Amajuba - Like Doves We Rise” runs in An Grianan. On the night I attended it received three standing ovations and I would recommend that you mortgage your house to see it.

Courtesy of the Donegal Democrat Frank Galligan

“Are You a Witch? Are You a Fairy? Are You the Wife of Michael Cleary?”

Megan Messinger

Fri Jan 23, 2009 11:06 am 6 comments

Holly Black and Ted Naifeh’s graphic novel *The Good Neighbors: Kin* came out a few months ago, Holly’s first foray into the medium but not into the subject of fairies with attitude. As I’d expect from the author of *Tithe* and *Ironside*, the creatures in *Kin* are familiar from ballads and folktales: girls with wings, swanmaids, a sprite called Tam, even the nickname “the good neighbors.” They are capricious and high-handed, but bound by strict rules of conduct, just as British Isles fairy lore would have them. When Holly’s character Rue starts seeing these fairies around town, she wonders how much more she can take—after all, her mother disappeared not three weeks ago, and now her father has been implicated in the crime. *Kin* isn’t precisely a happy story, but Rue still has it pretty good; when I saw Holly speak in November, she said that her jumping-off point for *Kin* lay in a real-life murder case. In March of 1895, in rural County Tipperary, Ireland, police found the badly burned body of 26-year-old Bridget Cleary in a shallow, wet grave. The story of the ordeal that led to Bridget’s death and the court case that followed is told in two books, Angela Bourke’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* and Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates’ *The Cooper’s Wife is Missing*. The books agree on the bare facts of the case:

March 4 – Bridget Boland Cleary walks from Ballyvadlea to Kyleneagranagh on an errand and complains of a headache when she returns home.

March 5 – Bridget is confined to her bed, ill.

March 13 – After being asked several times, Dr. William Crean finally calls on Bridget and pronounces her condition not serious. He leaves some medicine. Father Cornelius Ryan also calls and administers the Last Rites (just in case). This is a lot of activity for one little cottage, and a crowd of neighbors and relatives gathers. That night, they assist Michael Cleary in giving Bridget some herbs that are supposed to act against fairies, threatening her with a poker when she is reluctant.

March 14 – Michael Cleary walks to Kylatlea to get more herbs against fairies. Along with Bridget’s father and four of her cousins, he forces her to drink the herbs boiled in new milk,

and asks her three times if, in the name of God, she is Bridget Cleary, the wife of Michael Cleary. Bridget's father asks her three times if, in the name of God, she is Bridget Boland, daughter of Patrick Boland. It is unsure whether she answers "yes" each time or if her answer at some point fails to satisfy them. They feed her more herbs, which she tries to refuse. They shake her, slap her and throw urine on her, and then they carry her into the front room and put her on the fireplace grate—but this is not the scene of her fatal burning. Later, Bridget's cousin Johanna Burke would testify that the fire was low, too low to even boil water; Bridget's nightgown is later found with only a small scorch mark on it. Even the threat of fire, however, was supposed to make a possessing fairy spirit give up its host body, or make a changeling reveal its true form and fly out the window or up the chimney. Neither happens, but the men bring Bridget back to the bedroom anyway. Word comes that Michael Cleary's father has died, but he does not walk the eight miles to the wake.

March 15 – Father Ryan comes to the Cleary cottage again to say Mass. That evening, Bridget gets up, dresses, and goes into the front room to have tea with Johanna Burke and her cousins, the Kennedys. Michael Cleary refuses Bridget anything to drink until she has eaten three bites of bread and, with each bite, said that she is Bridget Boland Cleary. When she refuses the third bite, Michael knocks her to the floor and strips her clothes off except for a chemise; he grabs a log from the fireplace and holds the brand in her face, telling her she must eat the third bite or he'll force it down her throat. A spark catches her chemise on fire.

Michael throws paraffin oil on her, yelling at her cousins that it's not his Bridget and they mustn't leave the house until his Bridget comes back. The door is locked, the key in Michael's pocket.

Bridget is dead. Michael threatens to stab Patrick Kennedy unless the young man helps him wrap the body in a sheet and bury it. They take a shovel, later found by a policeman with an oily handprint on the haft, and carry the body to the corner of a nearby field. Michael Cleary maintains that the real Bridget will meet them at the Kyleneagranagh fairy fort three nights hence, riding a gray horse.

There are innumerable Irish folktales that deal with fairy changelings and how to ward off fairies. Bridget's walk to Kilenagranagh on March 4th may have taken her near its fairy fort, or *ráth*, the raised round foundation of an ancient building believed to be a favorite haunt of the fairies. The fact that she came back and fell ill is another changeling belief: when they take a human, they leave a sickly or old fairy in its place, which is why children with birth defects were often thought to be changelings. If someone went missing and was then found dead, it might be a dead fairy or bundle of sticks enchanted to look like the missing person; Ted Naifah's drawing of this is one of my favorites in *Kin*.

Michael was anxious to have Father Ryan come see Bridget; the priest made two visits but was asked two or three times more than that. Even though official Church policy was that there was no such thing as fairies, priests were known to encourage people to turn to the Church when they feared fairy involvement. The mass, holy water, the Eucharist, the sign of the cross and priests themselves were good fairy deterrents. *The Cooper's Wife is Missing* includes the story of the priest who was suddenly surrounded by fairies on his way home one night. They asked him if they would have a share in the Kingdom of Heaven, and said that if they didn't like his answer they would tear him to pieces. He said, "All right, but first let me ask you a question—do you believe wholeheartedly that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and died for all our sins?" At the question, the fairies shrieked and tore off into the night, and priest continued home.

The first night Bridget's family tried to drive the fairy out themselves, they drew on fairies' fear of fire and cold iron and brought a hot poker into the room. With the same thought they carried Bridget to the fire grate, and according to the stories, when the changeling left, it would fly out the chimney or the windows, but it could come back in the door if they weren't careful. Fire, faith and cold iron could drive them away, as could urine, hen's dung and certain plants. The loved one might return at once or might need to be rescued, as in the ballad "Tam Lin," from a procession of mounted fairies. Michael told the Kennedy brothers that Bridget needed them to wait at the Kilenagranagh fairy fort, and when she rode by, bound to a gray horse, they must cut her down with black-handled knives and hold on to her. He took his tale from various stories, a couple of which are related in *Cooper*, and he and the Kennedys did go and wait at the fort.

The Irish peasantry was afraid of fairies. They were mischievous, destructive and jealous of mortals; their curses stuck and their gifts turned sour. They were supposed to be able to rub any object on their bodies and produce a magic shilling, which sometimes disappeared

overnight and sometimes returned to its owner's pocket. Both Johanna Burke and Michael Cleary report that, while Bridget was ill, she asked to see a shilling that Johanna had. When Johanna gave it to her, Bridget put the hand with the coin under her blankets and looked as though she rubbed the coin on her leg. She denied it when they asked about it. Both Johanna and Michael might have been lying about the incident, but Bourke thinks it may have happened. She raises the question of why Bridget would have teased them so but has no answer.

It was a shocking and bewildering crime, no less in 1895 than it is now. In an attempt to make sense of Bridget's murder, both *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* and *The Cooper's Wife is Missing* address the prevailing issues of the day: rural evictions and unrest, the Catholic Church's efforts both for and against Irish nationalism and the widening gulf between the "old Irishry" and the British model of a modern citizen.

The contextual chapters in both books are mostly interesting, although sometimes they spend a long time for relatively little payoff in relevance. *The Cooper's Wife is Missing* is guiltier of rambling, although its section on the subsequent trial is well filled-out and includes details of the prosecution's tactics that I found interesting; at first, they were trying to discredit all fairy lore and even implicate the Catholic Church in Bridget's death for closing its eyes to pagan superstitions. That tack got ix-nayed quickly, however. I also like that *The Cooper's Wife is Missing* includes fairy folklore, providing a richer framework in which to try to understand the stories that shaped Michael Cleary's beliefs; *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* is rather sparse in that direction. On the other hand, *Cooper* sometimes takes its style too far. I nearly put the book down several times after encountering passages like this:

A similar thought that Bridget may have willingly gone off with some fairy prince disturbed the jealous husband even more. Bridget Cleary was his wife and belonged to him. Only he had the right to possess her, and he'd be damned in hell before he allowed some fairyman to be riding off with his wife. These thoughts must have obsessed Michael Cleary as he paced back and forth in front of the fireplace (244).

Cooper authors Hoff and Yeates get swept away by parts of the story, sometimes telling it from the inside. I wasn't always sure what to believe, and I would have floundered even more

if I hadn't gotten a solid idea of events from Bourke, whose conjectures are sociological rather than narrative and more clearly separated from what she can prove. She has access to what people said at the trial and what newspapers wrote, and even though it's counterintuitive to explore such a personal crime from the distance of Church, state, and history, those are also matters of record more than what we really want to know—what was Michael thinking? What were any of them thinking? That's gone forever, and maybe it's because I read Bourke's *Burning* first, but I felt like her detachment is out of respect for Bridget and even Michael and the minor players. She writes,

The kitchen in Ballyvadlea was another crucible: a microcosm of a larger world in which political and economic issues exerted inexorable influences on the lives of individuals. Like the people of...Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, the people of Ballyvadlea in 1895 were playing out a drama whose larger parameters were not of their own making. (234)

Look—there is no excuse, no reason, for Bridget's murder, whether or not she was having an affair with the egg man or visiting fairy forts, and there were many men like Michael Cleary who managed not to kill their wives, no matter what fairy beliefs they or their neighbors still held. Still, it happened, and we can look back and try to understand why without glamorizing the violence just because it was done in the name of something mysterious and romantic. And the fairy lore *is* interesting. In her graphic novel, Holly Black wonders, what if it were true? What if Bridget did get taken by the fairies? But she gives that plot to her protagonist, Rue, and lets Rue research Bridget Cleary at the library. "I think about Bridget Cleary," Rue says. "I think about how we all think we're safe with our families."

6 Comments

1. **Mikah McCabe** ([Fri Jan 23, 2009 11:53am](#))

It's interesting to read this now, after I recently read about the high number of cases of "bride burning" in India. One of the most popular stories of Hindu myth involves a "trial of fire" for Sita, wife of the god Rama, to prove her purity. The details are kind of strange, and definitely easy to lose in the English translation, but the gist of it is: to prove that, after a demon kidnapped Sita, she refused him, she had to basically be burned by the god of fire. She is

restored unsinged after, and everything's good again! ...until the killing of women by fire becomes a common practice for a number of twisted reasons in the mainly-Hindu India. It's so awful that superstition can get so out of hand that it can cover up an entire murder – just because every witness can be led to believe it wasn't murder. Seriously, awful husbands should not be given these excuses – in any nation – to set fire to their wives.

2. **MacAllister** ([Fri Jan 23, 2009 11:55am](#))

The Bridget Cleary case is, indeed, both fascinating and chilling – in part because it was so relatively recent. For those interested in reading more, there's [Lisa Spangenberg's essay about Bridget Cleary](#), from 2007.

3. **MikiM** ([Fri Jan 23, 2009 1:18pm](#))

There was a documentary based on the Bourke book back in 2006: [Fairy Wife](#)
For more on Irish folklore, there's always [Eddie Lenihan](#), as heard in this [radio documentary](#).

4. **Adrian Sud** ([Fri Jan 23, 2009 2:31pm](#))

The issue of fictions and folklore being taught as reality has always been and will always be a problem—clearly it rests on each person to place the absolute and immovable divide between this world and all fictive ones so that only—or at least mostly—the real world's rules effect our actions. There is a distinct parallel to our own country right now: Irish then and to some extent now, were seen as extremely superstitious and susceptible to folklore, their folklore was at fault for their actions. If only the Church could clean up their folklore with wholesome Anglican Christianity, they'd be all set! Today we view younger adults 15-25 as uniquely susceptible to fabricated worlds, and therefore if only we could regulate the media that reaches their eyes and ears—we could put a measurable dent in the number of killings in our country. The issue here is not that fairy tales were written, or that we have stories of Djinni or Demons or Witches or even Mafia Bosses and Dark Jedi. The real issue is that some people can't place the line between reality and fiction correctly, or that some people seek to use these stories shift blame from themselves for their own intentions. In short—I don't think wicked and/or broken people are a preventable issue. As a slight aside, Sita's trial by fire can be read [here](#) — Ram was being a jerk, yes, but it was Sita who requested that they build a pyre. Wikipedia's (a dubious source, I know, but I don't expect to be quoted) [article on bride burning in India](#) says that it's a form of 'dowry death', which is when a husband murders a

wife for her family's refusal to pay an additional dowry. So this has many more broken parts of India's culture involved than Sita's test of fidelity.

5. [Medievalist \(Fri Jan 23, 2009 3:15pm\)](#)

The contemporary news paper reports of Bridget Cleary's death were very much couched in terms of "those [backwards/superstitious/quaint/Catholic] Irish. If you have access to a good library, or JStore, this article reprints contemporary newspaper coverage: "The 'Witch-Burning' at Clonmel." *Folklore*. Vol. 6, No. 4. (Dec., 1895): 373-384.

On [URL=<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-587X%28189512%296%3A4%3C373%3A%22AC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>]JStore[/URL].

6. [rhona \(Sun Sep 22, 2013 4:06pm\)](#)

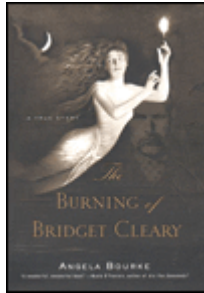
Absolutely right: there can be no excuses for what Michael did, whatever motive was behind it. I think that the fairy thing wasn't an obvious conclusion to jump to even for someone in that place and time and especially not for someone who had been educated and lived in other places. I think he probably wanted rid of Bridget because she was clever, articulate, and apparently barren, and his passions boiled over to produce the horrific chain of events that took place. I think by the end he was so good at self-deception that he probably even convinced himself, egged on by the idiots who apparently did nothing to stop him. It is shameful that he and his co-conspirators got away with it, and I hope Bridget haunted him till the day he died!

October 8, 2000

The Fairy Defense

Two books examine a murder in rural Ireland for which the accused blamed the little folk.

By DAVID WILLIS McCULLOUGH

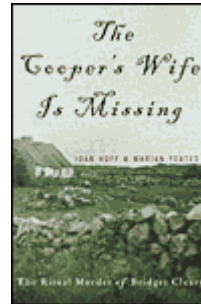


THE BURNING OF BRIDGET CLEARY A True Story.

By Angela Bourke.

Illustrated. 279 pp. New York:

Viking. \$24.95. Basic Books. \$26.



THE COOPER'S WIFE IS MISSING The Trials of Bridget Cleary.

By Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates.

Illustrated. 458 pp. New York:

Did anyone ever consider the death of Bridget Cleary to be a simple matter of a husband killing his wife? The story was well known. It was covered, often in minute detail, in newspapers throughout Ireland and England. And with good reason: from the very beginning, a few days before St. Patrick's Day in 1895, when Bridget was reported missing from her home in rural Tipperary, there were attention-grabbing aspects of the case, details that indicated this wasn't just another murder. Michael Cleary, who made his living as a cooper, first claimed that his wife had been taken off by the fairies. Before her badly charred body was found in a shallow grave, he insisted that the woman called Bridget was not really his wife but a changeling that had been substituted in her place. The real Bridget, he said, would soon be found at a nearby fairy ring riding a white horse.

As is so often the case in Ireland, there was a political issue involved. Generally, the more a newspaper was against Irish home rule, the more its coverage emphasized all that business about the fairies. How, asked the English and their loyalist Irish friends, could a people who still believed in evil spirits be trusted to govern themselves in the modern world? As for the Irish nationalists, some of whom had been promoting an interest in folklore and legend, the less said about fairies the better. The mutilated body of a country woman was not what William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and their circle had in mind when they went out among the poor asking for lyrical stories about wee folk in the heather.

But there was indeed a body to reckon with, and a lot more murder suspects than just Michael Cleary. Soon there were arrests (nine of them, including that of Michael), followed by trials and prison sentences. The story itself became part of Irish folklore. Bridget Cleary was called "the last witch burned in Ireland" and (like America's Lizzie Borden and her ax) she was immortalized in a children's rhyme: "Are you a witch or are you a fairy, / Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"

Now, more than a century later, in one of those coincidences that seem to happen so often in publishing, two new books set out to analyze both what happened in the Cleary cottage in 1895 and what the outside world made of it. The core of each book is the extensive contemporary newspaper coverage of the case, but each book -- one of which can be considered Irish, the other American -- uses the source material in a very different way. Angela Bourke, author of "The Burning of Bridget Cleary," is a senior lecturer at University College, Dublin, who is especially interested in the folklore elements of the case, and in the psychological and social implications of believing in fairies at the turn of the 20th century. "The Cooper's Wife Is Missing" is by Joan Hoff, director of the Contemporary History Institute at the University of Ohio (and the author of "Nixon Reconsidered" and "Law, Gender and Injustice"), and Marian Yeates, who has a Ph.D. in American history. Apparently, their main goal is to present Bridget's death in the larger context of what was happening in Ireland at the time. Bourke's book was published earlier in England, and the American authors have had the advantage of being able to read it and note some points of disagreement.

Both books suggest that Bridget may have had a secret lover, but suspect different men. Both agree that Bridget was not well even before her husband accused her of being possessed. Bourke thinks Bridget may have had pneumonia, while Hoff and Yeates opt for tuberculosis, which then had a somewhat shameful reputation. Hoff and Yeates see an anti-Catholic strain in the prosecution argument that Bourke doesn't mention. But both books agree on the basic facts of the case as it was revealed in newspaper accounts of the trial testimony.

The Clearys were not quite like their neighbors. They were childless and, although Bridget was a local girl, they had lived in far larger towns than the nearby villages of Drangan and Cloneen. They may also have been richer than their neighbors. Coopers were well-paid craftsmen, and Bridget brought in extra money as a seamstress (she even owned a Singer sewing machine) and by selling eggs. The key to the mystery about her death lies in what happened during the week or so before she was declared missing. A doctor had been called but did not turn up for several days. A priest arrived promptly and administered the last rites.

Some sort of trial or ritualistic ordeal seems to have gone on in the Cleary cottage, and it was attended by a substantial number of people. Bridget's father was there, as were her aunt and numerous cousins and neighbors. There was an old man with a knowledge of herbalism and even a true local rarity, a Protestant couple. Bridget was repeatedly asked if she was a fairy and tested to see if she would act like one. She was held over the kitchen fire in an effort to drive the spirit out. At least that was the testimony of the eyewitnesses. The next evening, after the priest returned and said Mass, something less ritualistic happened and Bridget was soon reported missing.

Bridget herself is a puzzle. When, in the midst of her ordeal, she declared that her husband "was making a fairy out of me," was it a cry for help? Was she simply teasing him? Or did she perhaps believe she was being possessed? When she asked for milk to drink (fairies were known for their fondness for milk) and then pretended to steal the shilling that paid for it (just as a fairy would have done), could she have been mocking her tormentors' fears? Or was it a sign that she was indeed not herself? When she accused Michael of having a mother who had run off with the fairies, was that the final provocation that led to her death (as Bourke suggests) or just a familiar taunt? Was she simply making a macabre joke? Could she have come to believe that she really was a changeling? Depending on what you want to hear, Bridget can seem to be fearful or deluded -- or a high-spirited teaser whose defensive jokes began to sound dangerously like mockery.

Bourke's tightly constructed and authentically dramatic account sticks close to the details of the case. While acknowledging the political implications of the press coverage of the murder and embarking on a few short detours (such as a glimpse into the trial of Oscar Wilde, taking place at the same time in London), her focus remains on the crime and on the role of folk beliefs in a rural society that was gradually moving from oral tradition into literacy.

Even with all its meticulous footnotes, there is little that's tidy about "The Cooper's Wife Is Missing." Reading Hoff and Yeates's book might be compared to spending a long and fascinating evening in a busy Tipperary pub. One of the men at the bar is retelling the juicy details of a local murder while the other regulars keep interrupting with stories of their own: about the great Charles Stewart Parnell or the bishop of Cashel, who was unusually outspoken in his nationalism, or a much-loved local poet who had been imprisoned for his anti-English activities or the town of Clonmel's championship rowing team or the tale of a possessed bagpiper -- even about the 1895 St. Patrick's Day parade in Boston.

It says a lot about Bridget Cleary's enigmatic story that it can bear so much freight, from scholarly folkloric interpretation to breezy social history. "The Cooper's Wife Is Missing" has the almost gossipy richness of a sprawling panorama, but it could be exasperating for a reader who expects simply to hear about the chain of events leading up to a bizarre disappearance in rural Ireland. "The Burning of Bridget Cleary" is a more powerful reconstruction of the crime, but Bourke might have made a stronger case for the value of folklore research if she had strayed a bit more from the events in the Cleary cottage.

At the murder trial in the market town of Clonmel, charges against some of the accused were dropped, some reduced. Four of Bridget's neighbors were found guilty of "wounding" and given brief sentences. Michael served 15 years for manslaughter, then sailed for Montreal.

As for the opening question about a simple explanation for Bridget's death, there was one observer who saw it as a perfectly ordinary example of premeditated murder. He was the judge who heard the case in the Clonmel courtroom, and it seems likely that he was the only one there who thought so.

David Willis McCullough's latest book is a historical anthology, "Wars of the Irish Kings."

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The Burning of Bridget Cleary, Part I

POSTED ON [JULY 20, 2014](#) BY [ROISIN](#)

This appeared in North Clare Local in May.



Bridget Cleary

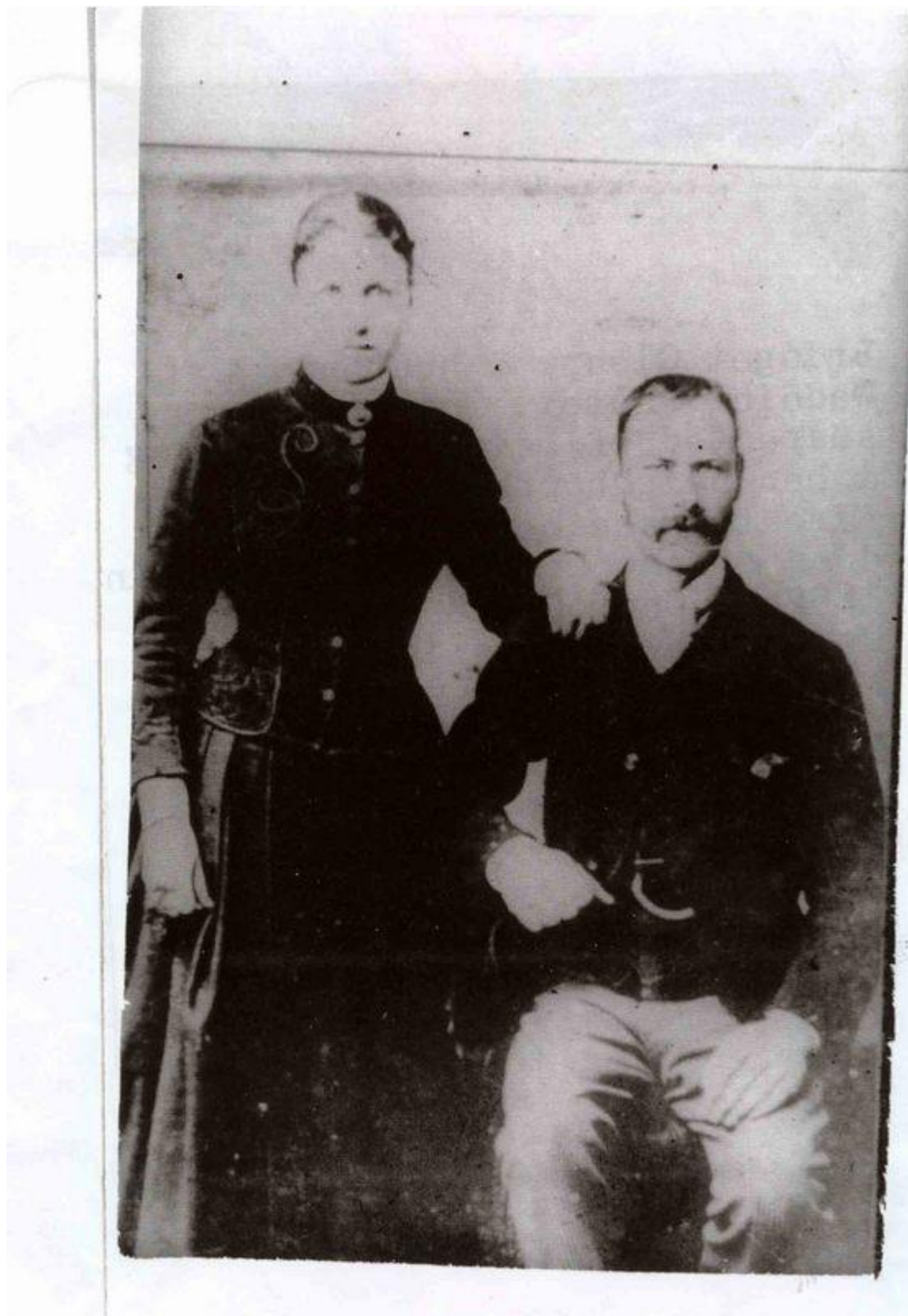
While of course 1895 is out of living memory for even the most senior of us, in some ways it really wasn't that long ago. It was an era where mass communication, aided by the telegraph and photography, was beginning to come into its own. The car, although a pipe dream for virtually everybody, had been invented. So had radio, although it would be some decades before it became accessible. Cinema was in its infancy. In short, it was a modern era, and not one of witch-burnings.

Yet a witch-burning supposedly occurred in Co Tipperary that March. This was largely a media label. As I have pointed out in a previous column, belief in witches was never particularly strong in the Gaelic tradition. The name stuck though, and Bridget Cleary is sometimes called the 'last witch burnt in Ireland'.

Last month, we saw that changelings- fairy substitutes for humans- were generally thought to be associated with babies and children. Children with developmental disorders were at high risk of being labelled as changelings. Bridget Cleary, however, was a completely normal 25-year-old woman.

Bridget Boland was born in 1870 (or thereabouts) to a poor labouring couple. She was bright and ambitious. During her education, she discovered a talent for sewing, and she became a dressmaker. While working in Clonmel, she met Michael Cleary, a cooper. Michael and Bridget married. During the early days of their marriage, they lived apart while Michael continued his

trade in the town. Soon, however, they moved back to Bridget's home townland of Ballyvadlea. They resided in a labourer's cottage that was very comfortable by the standards of the time.



Bridget and Michael Cleary

Bridget kept hens and the money she received from selling eggs, along with her dressmaking, made her financially independent. Angela Bourke, in her excellent book on the case, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*, states that such female financial independence was often resented by husbands, especially when the income could outstrip a man's weekly wage for labouring. But Michael Cleary was not a poor labourer, and the couple were doing well. There had been rumours, fanned eagerly by some of Bridget's cousins, that Michael had been unfaithful while working in Clonmel. From that, we can deduce that things were not always ideal between the young cooper and his in-laws.

Early March 1895 was blustery and cold, living up to the old adage about March coming in like a lion and going out like a lamb. Bridget had gone to her father's cousin, Jack Dunne, to deliver some eggs, passing the fairy fort at Kylenegranagh on the way. She caught a bad chill and ended up with a fever, possibly a heavy flu or pneumonia.

It was serious enough to warrant a call from both the priest and the doctor, but Jack Dunne and the rest of Bridget's extended family reckoned something else was afoot, and that Bridget had been replaced by a fairy changeling. Herb cures were obtained from a man called Denis Ganey, and other rituals were undertaken, including dousing her with urine. Finally, on March 15, after a mass was performed in the house, things came to a head. Bridget became 'wild' again and refused to finish her meal, although she was physically better. Michael reportedly held her down, forced her to eat, and then brought a poker and burned her with it. In a rage, he decided to 'get the fairy' out of her for once and for all. Bridget's cousin, Johanna Burke, who turned Crown witness to avoid prosecution for her part in the murder, said she saw Bridget bang her head off the floor, while her chemise began to singe. Whether this was enough to kill Bridget Cleary, we will never know. Mary Kennedy, Bridget's aunt, said she heard Michael declare, "I believe she is dead." He then seized paraffin oil, threw it on his wife's prone body, and set her ablaze.

It must have been an agonising and terrifying death. Perhaps worst of all, Bridget had pleaded futilely that she was not a changeling constantly during her last days, but the pleas fell on deaf ears. The people who were supposed to love her most, her family and husband, ended her life cruelly and without mercy.

How could such a thing have happened? Did the culprits really believe they were ridding themselves of a supernatural impostor? Or was it all a convenient front for a murder motivated by decidedly mundane reasons? Next month I will cover the aftermath of the murder, and the trial.

But in the dead of the night of March 15, Michael and Bridget's cousin, Patrick Kennedy, dragged her burnt corpse and buried it in a shallow grave nearby. It became known that Bridget Cleary was away with the fairies.

The cover-up had begun.

The Burning of Bridget Cleary, Part II

POSTED ON [JULY 20, 2014](#) BY [ROISIN](#)

This appeared in the North Clare Local in June.



Cloneen graveyard, where Bridget rests

Last we saw of Michael Cleary, he was dragging his wife Bridget's body to a remote spot in Co Tipperary in the dead of the night. But this was no ordinary murder. Bridget Cleary had been burnt, possibly alive, because it was thought she was a fairy changeling.

Over the next week, it became known in the townland of Ballyvadlea and beyond that the *real* Bridget Cleary was away with the fairies. Sooner or later she would come riding out of the fairy fort at Kylenagranagh on a white horse. Michael kept vigil at the fort for three days, sometimes joined by Bridget's relatives. In the meantime, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) were making their own, more mundane, investigations.

The police discovered Bridget's body on March 22 and charged nine people in connection with her disappearance and death.

The trial began on April 1 and hearings ran for six days. Denis Ganey, the fairy doctor, was released without charge, his advice on cures dismissed as causing no harm to Bridget. As Angela

Bourke says in her book *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, “the court had found the fairy-doctor and his traditional healing neither culpable nor sinister, merely irrelevant.”

The jury found Michael Cleary guilty of manslaughter that July, and he served 15 years in Maryborough (now Portlaoise) Prison. Patrick Kennedy, and Bridget’s relative, Jack Dunne, were also found guilty and were sent to prison.

It was the era of seemingly interminable debates about the validity of Irish Home Rule. It is unlikely that the Bridget Cleary case had any real political influence, however it was eagerly seized on by Unionist newspapers in Ireland and Britain. It was proof of a superstitious Catholic population, no better than pagans or the ‘Hottentots’, a South African tribe correctly known as the Khoikhoi. Such people could not be relied onto rule themselves.

But the case was far from that simple. As stated last month, Bridget and Michael were well educated and prosperous. While Bridget’s father, Patrick Boland, was an elderly man and illiterate, and Bridget’s cousins had had varying fortunes, it could be supposed that Michael Cleary was above falling victim to superstition.

Maybe then, he had used the cover of fairy belief to murder his wife. It’s said that Bridget was proud, glamorous (not for her the shawls of other wives, instead she designed her own hats) and not afraid to speak her mind. These were deadly traits for an Irishwoman of her era, and gossip surrounded the couple. Last month, we saw how Bridget’s family suspected that Michael was having affairs in Clonmel. There were also rumours about Bridget’s own faithlessness. Some said she was having an affair with a mystery man she sold eggs to; others named William Simpson, a young emergency-man (an enforcer for evictions, an incredibly unpopular job). Simpson himself proved to be an invaluable resource to both the RIC and the media throughout the case.

That the Clearys talked to Simpson and his family was unusual enough and would indicate a certain respect for authority and even British rule. In the era of boycotts, Simpson would have been up against a stone wall in the locality. Indeed, Bridget’s funeral was boycotted, and “not one civilian attended the burial, and the rites of sepulture were performed by four police-constables,” according to *The Times*. Given the importance of death in Irish culture, this was the greatest insult of all.



Michael Cleary at the time of his arrest (via NYU)

Even more telling were the couple's childlessness. Despite being married for almost eight years, Bridget had never had a child. In a pre-contraception era, this would mean that the Cleary's physical relationship was non-existent or that either Michael or Bridget was infertile. Either state of affairs could have led to rancour and resentment which may have exploded within Michael on the night of March 15.

Pre-meditated murder is a possibility. However, Michael could have easily let the illness take its course; it certainly would have been easier than burning her. There is also the matter of him keeping vigil at Kylenagranagh. It seems he believed that Bridget would really come back.

Michael was not neglectful. He visited the doctor several times, walking to Clonmel to do so, and consulted the priest and Denis Ganey. These were not actions of man who wanted his wife to die. Likewise, his behaviour in prison was impeccable, only receiving one minor reprimand during his sentence. Following release, he emigrated; first to Liverpool, and then to Montreal; nothing is known of his later years, and he did not come to further official attention.

Angela Bourke paints a picture of a man under stress, barely sleeping, goaded by his in-laws, who snapped under extreme pressure, killing his wife under what we would term today diminished responsibility. Almost 120 years on, we will never know the exact truth.