



The Cooper's Wife Is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary

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In 1895 twenty-six-year-old Bridget Cleary disappeared from her cottage in rural County Tipperary and remained missing for several days. At last her body was discovered, bent, broken, and badly burned in a shallow grave. Within a few days, her unimaginable story came to light: for almost a week before her death she had been confined, starved, threatened, physically and verbally abused, exorcised, and finally burned to death by her husband, father, aunt, cousins, and neighbors, who had collectively confused a simple flu with possession by the fairies. In *The Cooper's Wife Is Missing*, Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates try to make sense of this outlandish, unfathomable, medieval "trial" and murder. Drawing on firsthand accounts, contemporary newspaper reports, police records, trial testimony, and a rich wealth of folklore, they weave a mesmerizing fireside tale of magic, madness, and mystery. This is narrative history at its evocative best.

The Cooper's Wife Is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary Details

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Wendy says

A fascinating but slightly uneven read.

The author draws links between the publicity around the trial and its relation with contemporary events around Irish Nationalism and Home Rule. Which I suppose are valid, but the rather dry political history probably intended to provide context really doesn't gel with the way the story of the fairy trial and ordeal that took place in that cottage over those nine days was written. It's kind of like two books were sort of smooshed together.

It's still a fascinating and uncomfortable read, but if you find yourself wanting to skip the political history of Parnell's adulterous affair, the development of gaelic sports clubs and their overlap with the anti-Unionists, and who the bishop was related to and get back to the actual "story", go ahead.

Fishface says

Much more detailed (and grisly) than THE BURNING OF BRIDGET CLEARY, but also takes the reader through some unbelievably loooooooooong detours through Irish political history that -- as near as I can tell -- have no bearing at all on the story. The detours into Irish folklore have much more bearing, but are treated almost as interesting footnotes rather than as factors that led directly to Bridgie's horrible, horrible death.

Siobhan says

The book is half history of the Irish Home Rule struggle and half the story of the murder of Bridget Cleary in 1895, who was believed by her husband to be a changling, after being taken by the fairies. I have to admit to skimming through some of the longer political discussions, but overall the struggle for autonomy was an interesting history and the story of Bridget was fascinating as perhaps the last witch burning in the modern world.

Keena says

Fascinating

Heather G says

If you are interested in Irish History this is at times a very interesting book. If you are reading it just for Bridget Cleary it is a very dry and monotonous book. Plus the part about the hounds was completely

pointless.

David says

I have combined my review of this book with that of "The Burning of Bridget Cleary" by Angela Bourke - it's here: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

Bottom line: skip this one, which is a bloated mess, and read Angela Bourke's book instead.

Jaime says

I don't remember what made me buy this book, but it sat on my shelf for about a year before I read it. Bridget Cleary is suspected of fraternizing with fairies in Ireland about 100 years ago. To determine whether she is enchanted, Bridget is subjected to a series of tests and trials, which eventually lead to her death. The description of the courtroom proceedings is fascinating, as the laws of the government are pitted against long-held beliefs and folklore of the countryside.

Barbara says

In 1895, an Irish woman, Bridget Cleary, was believed by her family and neighbors to be possessed by fairies. They tried for 9 days to purge the fairies from her body, and finally burned her body in an effort to rid her of the bad spirits. For this they were tried and convicted. Interwoven with the story of Bridget Cleary are long well-researched passages explaining the political, socioeconomic and religious conflicts of Ireland -- bringing together details about Ireland's wishes for political autonomy, the subjugation of the Irish peasants by English landlords, the conflicts between paganism and the church, and the melding of history and folklore.

At times the narrative bogs down in historical explanation of the confluence of events that created an international cause célèbre. Overall, the narration provides a fascinating glimpse into late nineteenth-century Ireland.

Suzie Diver says

Reads like 2 different books - the story of Bridget Cleary is one and the other is the political history of Ireland in 1895. I read the whole book expecting the authors to bring those two pieces together and it never happened. Disappointing.

Heidi The Hippie Reader says

"Are you a witch, are you a fairy, are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"

In March 1895, after walking the fabled "fairy fort" of Kylnagranagh Hill in Tipperary County Ireland, Michael Cleary's wife, Bridget Boland Cleary, returned home ill with a fever and headache. Michael Cleary thought she was exhibiting signs of fairy abduction. And he was determined to get her back.

What happened next highlighted the clash of paganism and Catholicism, and the ushering out of old superstitions to make way for the modern era. After days of abuse, he eventually burned Bridget until she died because he believed she had been replaced by a fairy.

"... they continued to feed her herbs and to shake, slap, and swing her while she 'screamed horrible' and they shouted: 'Away with you. Come back, Bridget Boland, in the name of God.'" pg 191

The Cooper's Wife is Missing gives nearly complete context of Ireland in this era and the political and social pressures during the time period.

The crime was shocking in its brutality but also the stated motive. The press had a field day. It was 1895, the world was on the brink of technological, social and political change. And yet, they wrote, these rural Irish peasants still believed in fairies or practiced witchcraft. (Depending on which publication you chose to read.)

And it wasn't just perpetrated by Michael Cleary. Bridget's own family and neighbors participated in the "fairy trial" that led to her death. Nine people were found guilty at varying levels of culpability for the crime.

"As the police led him away, he shouted, 'I am innocent.' Cleary maintained it was not his wife he burned but a fairy." pg 361

The Cooper's Wife is Missing jumps back and forth, giving the reader the history of Ireland, fairy lore and what historians believe happened to Bridget Cleary. That was my only complaint with this read, some of the story repeats itself, especially during the testimony at the trials.

But, overall, highly recommended for fans of true crime and history. This book has both of those in spades.

Steph (loves water) says

When I picked this book up, I thought it was going to be a story of yet another poor woman burned for practicing "witchcraft" in Ireland. I found it to be so much more than that...a well-written, well-researched book about the ancient culture practiced pre-Celt settlement, the development of the Catholic Church in Ireland and subsequent colonization by England. Professor Hoff shows us the roots of what became the IRA in the twentieth century and how a murder and trial of a woman based upon superstitious beliefs became a political and religious tool that set the stage for a modern day Ireland.

Linda says

Poor Bridget Cleary, killed for her belief in fairies. Bridget's husband believed that she became a changeling, her body inhabited by an evil fairy spirit while her own was taken to live in the other world. As a result, her husband, with some friends and relatives, attempted to drive out the evil spirit, and in doing so, burned Bridget to death. The narrative in this history is chilling in its detail.

Interspersed with this incredible account are more prosaic chapters covering the history of Ireland around the turn of the 20th century. Belief in the spirits of folklore, very much alive in spite of the efforts of the Catholic church to eradicate it, was one of the reasons given for withholding home rule from Ireland..

James says

For me, one thing held this book back from being great, and that was the long winded history that the author uses to relate the story. While much of the history and information is very interesting and extremely relevant, the focus of the event, which is the alleged fairie possession of Bridget Cleary in the early 1900s and the brutally botched exorcism her husband and family attempt to perform on her, is lost in much of the tedious setting details within the story. There is plenty of great history in here and its really worth a read for anyone interested in history or nonfiction. With this bizarre and gruesome event taking place so short ago, it hits an extra poignant note. The story itself, in a strange way, also portrays the hostile dynamic of Ireland's oppression and struggle as it moved into the latest, and arguably most violent phase of its struggle for free rule. Real wild stuff if you can get through the layers of history.

Kathleen McRae says

An interesting story with much history of Irish fight for nationhood or even self rule. The conditions of Irish peasantry was a sad existance and the people were essentially christian but many people still had belief in the old pagan rites and very little knowledge of why things happened. These happenings were often attributed to superstitions and this story shows that plus the complicity of the church and the english overlords in keeping the people ignorant and unlearned

Chris says

I first heard about Bridget Cleary when I read *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, Nymphs, and Other Troublesome Things*. A few weeks later, I saw a copy of *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*. If you haven't read that book, don't read this one.

Bridget Cleary was burned to death by her husband and other families, supposedly, because her husband believed she was a fairy changeling. The trial was a sensational one. Joan Hoff and Marion Yeates raise an interesting connection between the trial and Irish Nationalism. It is an interesting idea, but one they don't fully connect, leaving the reader at times to draw the line between the dots as it were. Additionally, the large amounts of background that this thesis calls for are not fully integrated into the trial. It is over 70 pages in before the authors get to the Clearys.

I also had problems with some of their conclusions. They, rightly, challenged assumptions made by other authors, in particular Burke, but then leap to conclusions along the same lines and with as little, or little, proof.

They also do three things that really threw me. In her book, Angela Bourke speculates that Bridget had an

affair with a man called Simpson. The authors of this book dismiss that and put forward another man, a fellow egg seller (no, eggs from chickens). They reject Simpson because he was protestant and, therefore, he and his wife must lack fairy belief. Yet later, his wife takes part in one of the rituals to free Bridget from the fairies.

What I also was slight confused and upset about was the repeating of rumor, a story that seemed current only after Bridget's death. They admit that there is no proof that it happened, but since it fits what they see to be Bridget's character (and we really don't know much about Bridget), they'll treat it as fact.

Huh?

But what really got me was the bit in the note section. The authors say that they dismiss the idea of spousal abuse because they didn't want to present Bridget as a victim. I'm sorry, but wasn't she burned, wasn't she killed by her husband, doesn't that make her a victim? Additionally, if the majority of fairy stories they relate have to do with women and child who do not act normal, and if Bridget challenged the status quo as they claim, then perhaps there was a bit of spousal abuse there? They seemed to have not fully ingested the work that is based on folklore.
