

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

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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

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 Kylenagranagh 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

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 Kylenagranagh. 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

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 traveling 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

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

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 Times* 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 deemphasize 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

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 most 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 Flesh. 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).

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 childrearing 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

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 15<sup>th</sup> 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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