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The burning of Bridget Cleary: newspapers and oral tradition

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Introduction

In March 1895, when 26-year-old Bridget Cleary was burned to death in her own kitchen near Fethard, her body was hastily buried and a story concocted to account for her disappearance. Her family and neighbours, using the idiom of oral legend, said she had been taken away by the fairies of nearby Kilenagranagh Hill and a changeling left in her place. Some of them claimed that it was this changeling and not the real Bridget which had been burned.

Over the previous days, as Bridget lay ill in bed, the story of fairy abduction had been taking shape. Her husband, Michael Cleary, assisted by several male neighbours, had touched her with a hot poker, drenched her with urine, forced her to drink concoctions of herbs boiled in milk, and held her over the kitchen fire – asking insistently whether she was in fact Bridget Cleary or a fairy changeling.

An inquest was told that this treatment was part of a traditional cure for fairy abduction and that, although some people present had found it distressing, they had done nothing to stop it. The treatment was believed to have succeeded, but sometime after midnight on Friday, March 15 Michael flung his wife on the floor before the fire, brandished a piece of burning wood before her mouth and demanded that she say her name three times. When she failed to answer to his satisfaction he doused her with lamp oil and set her ablaze.

According to one witness, Bridget's cousin Johanna Burke, "the house was full of smoke and smell" and those present were terrified.¹ At about 2 a.m. Cleary asked Johanna's brother Patrick Kennedy to help bury the body. They wrapped it in a sheet and carried it some quarter of a mile from the house. On March 22, following a week of rumour, speculation and extensive search, the body was discovered by the police buried in swampy ground. In the meantime Michael Cleary had spent three nights at the nearby fairy fort or rath of Kilenagranagh, apparently in the expectation of seeing his wife ride out on a white horse and rescuing her from the fairies.

By the time the body was discovered, 35-year-old Cleary and nine of his neighbours were in police custody. Reports from various newspapers covered the trial the following July in Clonmel courthouse, where prison sentences ranging from six months to 20 years were handed down. Had Cleary been found guilty of murder as charged, he would have been hanged; but, with the judge's approval, the jury brought in a verdict of manslaughter instead.

- 1 -

Bridget Cleary's story, elicited in a court of law and extensively covered by journalists, provided sensational copy for the local, Dublin, and London newspapers. Nationalist editors in Ireland were at pains to distance themselves and their readers from the events they described, but the anti-Irish press seized on them as propaganda.



Representing a young woman as innocent victim and her tormentors – the men of her own community – as dull-witted peasants, these newspapers constructed a narrative which juxtaposed the incomprehensible, primitive superstitions of a colonized people with the rationality and enlightenment of Victorian British justice. Nationalist papers protested, but newspapers of all persuasions polarized the forces at work: tradition against law; country against town; men against women. In the process, the gender opposition which was clearly central to the woman's torture and death was subordinated to and read as a metaphor for the relation between colonizer and colonized.²

But the newspaper narratives of Bridget Cleary's death were not the only accounts available. Oral tradition, however, was drowned out by a version propounded in print culture, so that a narrative which might have made sense in some contexts came to be regarded as madness, a cause of embarrassment. In its place was constructed an account which showed Irish men as misguided savages and Irish women as victims or innocent bystanders.

The oral narrative that grew up about the death of Bridget Cleary emerges from a view of gender relations which has long been driven underground. Reading Bridget Cleary's death in all its complexity therefore requires that we decipher several layers of discourse. The newspaper accounts (the most easily available) are heavily influenced by colonialism, and secondarily by romantic Celticism, its off-shoot.

These written discourses present oral tradition as archaic and unchanging. In local reaction to Bridget Cleary's death, however, we find legend makers actively at work, constructing a narrative designed to contain and comprehend violent events, while holding at bay the forces of the intrusive and inquisitive centralized State. In the very moment of her death a narrative seems to have been at work whose terms may become more comprehensible to modern readers if they are understood as metaphors for jealousy, conflict, and rage.

One hundred years later the account given by the law courts and newspapers remains the basis of several renderings of Bridget Cleary's story.³ But new questions emerge. On the one hand, a series of recent events in this country, some of them involving trusted public figures, others revealing appalling mistreatment of women and children, have led to a radical shifting of social paradigms.⁴ At the same time, postcolonial and feminist scholarship has reexamined received narratives, asking by whom they have been constructed and what is revealed by their logic and their silences.

Bridging the space between these phenomena is a movement among creative writers and scholars in Ireland to reread the discourse of oral tradition, particularly as it reflects women's and children's lives, with the transitions, gaps, and contradictions they contain.⁵ Such a rereading of



Michael Cleary's cottage as it is today (1998). (Photo: copyright M. Bourke).

the oral narrative of Bridget Cleary's death, based on an acceptance of fairy legend as a subtle and many-layered art form, can illuminate the issues which were at stake in 1895, both in the Cleary home and in the wider world of Anglo-Irish relations.

The first reports of Bridget Cleary's death were carried in local newspapers. Differences emerged between unionist and nationalist treatments, and when Dublin and London papers took up the story a colonialist rhetoric of "savagery" and "barbarism" began to be employed. I shall discuss later the elements of fairy belief tradition contained in the reports, but will first concentrate on their reception in ever-widening circles at greater and greater distances from rural Ireland, where oral legend could be understood on its own terms.

On Wednesday, 20 March 1895, *The Clonmel Chronicle* carried the following short item:

Gone with the Fairies

A good deal of excitement has been caused in the district about Drangan and Cloneen by the "mysterious disappearance" of a labourer's wife, who lived with her husband, a farm labourer, in that part of the country. The poor woman had been ill for some time, and a few days ago she told her husband that if he did not do something for her by a certain time "she would have to be going." An old woman who had been nursing the sick woman was sitting up with her as usual one night last week, and as she puts it, the invalid was "drawn" away. Search has been made everywhere and the police have been communicated with, but up to this afternoon no trace of the missing woman had been discovered. The country people entertain the opinion that she has "gone to the fairies!"

The *Clonmel Chronicle* was one of two newspapers published each Wednesday and Saturday in Clonmel, a town then with a population of about 10,000. Unionist in sympathy, it supported the Tory government in London which had taken office the previous year. Its rival, the *Nationalist and Tipperary Advertiser* (hereafter the *Nationalist*) presented the other side, appealing to the Catholic population and supporting the cause of Irish Home Rule.⁶

The *Nationalist* for 20 March reported the woman's disappearance. As befitted a newspaper aimed at the Catholic population, it adopted a less distancing tone than the *Clonmel Chronicle*. Nevertheless, its readers would have been drawn more from the class of town merchants and prosperous tenant farmers than from among the labourers, so although it assumed a certain acquaintance with popular tradition about "fairies" or "good people", it placed itself firmly on the side of "rational belief", against "fairy quackery", and looked to the authorities for the elucidation of the mystery.

Mysterious Disappearance of a Young Woman The Land of the Banshee and the Fairy

What would read as a kin to the fairy romances of ancient times in Éirín, is now the topic of all lips in the neighbourhood of Drangan and Cloneen. It appears that a young woman named Cleary, wife of a cooper, living with her father and husband in a labourer's cottage in the townland of Ballyvadlea, took ill a few days ago, was attended by priest and doctor, and believed to have been suffering from some form of nervous malady, she suddenly disappeared on last Friday night, and has not since been heard of. Her friends who were present assert that she had been taken away on a white horse before their eyes, and that she told them when leaving, that on Sunday night they would meet her at a fort on Kylenagranagh hill, where they could, if they had the courage, rescue her. Accordingly, they assembled at the appointed time and place to fight the fairies, but, needless to say, no white horse appeared. It has transpired that her friends discarded the doctor's medicine, and treated her to some fairy quackery. However, the woman is missing, and the rational belief is that in the law courts the mystery shall be elucidated. I need not say that the authorities have their own notions of the matter, but I shall reserve further comments until events more clearly develop themselves.

The following Saturday (23 March) both newspapers reported that, following informations sworn before a local magistrate by Bridget's cousin Johanna Burke and William Simpson, caretaker of a nearby farm, a number of men and one woman had been arrested and charged with ill-treating Bridget Cleary. The search for the missing woman continued, and the *Nationalist* carried in its second edition a stop press, "The Body Found", with a description of its condition and a report of the inquest.

During the following weeks, while witnesses were examined and suspects arrested, newspapers in Ireland, Britain, and the United States took up the story. Tory papers followed the line taken by the *Clonmel Chronicle* but with less inhibition, interpreting Bridget Cleary's death as evidence of barbarism and savagery in rural Ireland. Nationalist and liberal opinion constructed a more sympathetic view, wavering between condemnation and repudiation of those responsible for the crime and, in London, wistful attempts to understand it in terms of what has come to be called "Celticism" – a romantic view of Irish (and Scottish, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish) people as driven by emotion, sometimes to extremes.⁷

The London correspondent of the *New York Times* reported the case on Sunday 31 March. "As might be expected, the barbarous episode near Fethard, in Tipperary, of a woman being tortured to death by her husband and her male relatives in the process of expelling a witch that had taken possession of her body is being gravely cited by the anti-Irish papers here as evidence of the mental degradation and savagery of the Irish peasant population."

Home Rule was being hotly debated in 1895, when its achievement seemed to depend on Irish people's ability to prove themselves worthy of it in the eyes of Britain. Tory propaganda characterised all colonized peoples as children, whose wise schoolmasters would decide when they were ready to govern themselves. This view was reflected in English periodicals, which had long depicted the Irish as ignorant, superstitious, and simian.⁸ But after the Famine of the 1840s, a prosperous Catholic middle class of grazier-farmers and traders had emerged who were at pains to distance themselves from such images, pushing them off instead, when they could not be completely dispelled, on to the rural labourers, the class which had suffered most in the Famine.

In the post-Famine years the propertied middle class accumulated land and commercial assets and dictated a repressive social morality based on a newly centralized, authoritarian, and patriarchal Catholicism which worked hand in hand with the institutions of the State. Social problems were increasingly brought under State and Church control; the Irish landscape still



Cloneen (old) cemetery, where within the area marked by the four unmarked stones Bridget Cleary was buried after dark by the R.I.C. (Photo: copyright M. Bourke).

displays the hospitals, orphanages, workhouses, jails, asylums, and Magdalen homes, through which Victorian society regulated those people who could not easily be contained within its categories or who deviated from its norms of respectability. Many of these institutions were staffed by religious sisters, whose numbers increased enormously during the nineteenth century, as did the number of convents built.

The values of this middle class were those of literacy, rather than orality; English rather than the Irish language; shop-bought rather than homespun clothing; “devotions” and novenas in the recently built, imposing Catholic churches rather than “stations” in private homes or outdoor “patterns” in honour of local saints. Their daughters were educated in convent schools, learning French, fine needlework, deportment, and etiquette.⁹ The middle-class’s response to colonization was not unusual: they were appropriating the culture of the colonizer, although their version was not Protestant but Catholic. For “respectable” Catholics, such as the readers of the *Nationalist*, stories of fairies, the *banshee*, or the pooka were a thing of the past – quaint relics of an earlier, less civilized time.¹⁰

The story that Bridget Cleary had gone away with the fairies corresponded to a model familiar to the Catholic middle class in the verbal art of their servants, and perhaps of their old people, but when it was used as propaganda against them, they needed urgently to repudiate it. The *Nationalist* expressed their reaction in no uncertain manner. Under the heading “The Ballyvadlea Murder Inquiry ... Tory Slander Again,” the paper protested at the treatment of the story in a Dublin paper. It contrasted the “spartan” and “intelligent” conduct of the Crown witnesses, Johannah Burke and her 11-year-old daughter Katie, with the savagery and barbarism imputed to the local people by the *Dublin Evening Mail*. It placed itself and its readers firmly on the side of law and order, repudiating the “dark” and “druidical” elements which led the Tory paper to compare the moral and intellectual conditions of South Tipperary with those of Dahomey.

In Ireland, British administration was at the peak of its centralized efficiency in 1895. Any suggestion that Bridget Cleary’s treatment was “normal” in the colonized culture would have been profoundly damaging to native middle-class interests. It followed that the oral discourse which surrounded her death was so thoroughly repudiated as to preclude its thoughtful appraisal.

– 2 –

Tory newspapers in Ireland and England seized on the Cleary case as an illustration of the brutality of rural Irish men, deploying a rhetoric established in the 1860s to condemn the activities of the oath-bound Irish Republican Brotherhood known as the Fenians. They presented Irish women – Bridget, the victim; her cousin Johanna, chief witness for the Crown; Johanna’s daughter Katie, and her elderly mother, Mary Kennedy (tried and found guilty along with the men but released by the judge) – as innocent, pure, and/or in need of protection by agents of the State. The *Nationalist* reported approvingly on the evidence of Johanna Burke and her daughter Katie.

Among their own community, however, their position was more problematic. Johanna Burke was at first arrested along with others who had been present in the house while Bridget was carried to and from the kitchen fire, but she seems to have made a choice that was not available to her male relatives. In the heavily gendered environment of colonization a woman could escape punishment by allying herself with the colonizer – in this case by turning Queen’s evidence. Johanna’s extensive testimony implicated three of her own brothers in the killing.



All four brothers received prison sentences, including Michael Kennedy who was in the house only briefly but was deemed guilty because of his presence. But the price Johanna paid for acceptance, by the wider world of print and the forces of the State, was the loss of her place in her community. She needed police protection, moving from the area, and when the census was taken in 1901, her daughter Katie was a domestic servant in a Protestant household several miles away.

The same paradigm of colonial femininity which could more easily imagine Johanna Burke as helpless witness than as engaged participant or complacent accessory influenced the media view of Bridget Cleary as victim. Here, however, another set of discourses comes into play. It was not enough that the colonized female should be helpless. She must also, in order to be marked positive, be erotically appealing and exotically mysterious.

The *Nationalist's* first report of Bridget's disappearance compared it with "the fairy romances of ancient times in Erin." Use of the archaic and poetic "Erin" in preference to the more usual "Ireland" signal led the influence of Celticism. "Erin" is a misty far away and long ago, an image personified as female and sustained by the contemporary popularity of both medieval Irish literature in translation and verbal art from contemporary oral tradition.

The 19th century had seen a huge growth in the investigation and publication of folk traditions, and the places where folklore was collected and studied were (not by coincidence) the same wild, remote and picturesque landscapes so beloved of the romantic gaze: Sicily, Tuscany, the Highlands of Scotland, the Welsh mountains, the west of Ireland. This process had begun with the publication in 1760 of MacPherson's poems attributed to Ossian; the fact that they were largely spurious did nothing to diminish their popularity. By the time of Bridget Cleary's death fairies were highly fashionable among the reading public of London and Dublin.

As the century ended, scientific advances and a long period without major war gave reason for optimism about the future, but publication of oral narratives as texts betrayed nostalgia for older ways. Curtin's *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* appeared in 1890 and his *Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World* in 1895. W.B. Yeats, the self-styled "last romantic", published *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in London in 1888, *Representative Irish Tales* in 1891, *Irish Fairy Tales* in 1892, and *The Celtic Twilight* in 1893.

Lang's *Blue Fairy Book* was published in London in 1889; and the *Yellow, Green and Pink Fairy Books* followed by 1897. In 1883 the Folk-lore Society, founded five years earlier, began publishing its *Folk-Lore Journal*. In 1890 that publication merged with the *Archaeological Review* to form *Folk-Lore*, which in December 1895 published a sober, unsigned account of the burning of Bridget Cleary by direction of the society's council, "so as to preserve the relevant facts in a form accessible to scientific students."¹¹

It was in the interest of members of the "Celtic" races, particularly the more privileged among them, to accept elements of Celticism. Irish writers could reasonably collude in fostering an image of their essential nature as ethereal and fey when the media alternative was the apelike image propounded in English periodicals. Opposed to the characterization of the Irish as apes was a nationalist convention that portrayed them as images of integrity and beauty. "Pat" was the idealized Irish man – handsome, thoughtful, and responsible.

"Erin" was simply the "Hibernia" of *Punch* appropriated from the colonizer's iconography.¹² Such a representation of the Irish feminine was more prescriptive than descriptive. Carol Coulter has argued that under colonization in Ireland indigenous patterns of gender relations were progressively devalued and driven out of public sight to emerge much later in forms of women's resistance that might appear novel to metropolitan feminists. In fact married women above the poorest class had a high degree of decision-making power and financial independence in rural Ireland.



The stately, sad figure of Erin, large-eyed and long-haired, although drawn from earlier Irish tropes about land and sovereignty as female, was an invention of the colonial process. It was particularly beloved of Yeats, one of the chief proponents of romantic Celticism.¹³ In 1893, two years before Bridget Cleary's death, he published a poem called "The Stolen Bride" (later titled "The Host of the Air"), which remarkably anticipates the story told in rural Tipperary about Bridget and Michael Cleary. The central figure of this poem is a bride with "long, dim hair," whom the fairies sweep away before her husband's eyes. It may well have influenced the treatment of the Cleary case by the newspapers.

Readers of the reports of Bridget Cleary's death would have learned from Yeats and other writers to equate Irishness, and oral tradition in particular, with mystery and breathless emotion. This expectation seems also to have influenced the progress of the trial, leading to a verdict of manslaughter rather than murder.¹⁴ Justice O'Brien (the unpopular "Peter the Packer" of nationalist tradition), who presided, addressed the jury in terms that recall another *Punch* cartoon, which shows Britannia consoling a willowy and weeping Hibernia and protecting her from a simian, stone-throwing Irish man.

O'Brien's address (quoting from *Macbeth*) left no doubt that the law would chivalrously intervene to defend a helpless woman and avenge her on the inadequate males of her own community:

"A young woman in the opening of her life was put to death – a young married woman, who suspecting no harm, guilty of no offence, virtuous and respectable in all her conduct and all her proceedings – from those of all others who were bound to protect her, from the hands of her own husband, who swore at the altar to cherish and protect her, and from her own father, has met her death under circumstances which remind us of the lines –

Pleading like angels, trumpet-tongued,
Against the deep damnation of her taking off."¹⁵

In creating the erotically mysterious personae of "The Host of the Air" and later works, Yeats had drawn on Celticism's two major sources: contemporary translations of medieval sagas from Irish manuscripts in the libraries of London, Paris, and Dublin, and oral legends which he had heard in Sligo. He had not simply left them as he found them, however. Both medieval sagas and oral legends are highly laconic in tone, designed for public performance, not private consumption. The emotionalism of Yeats's "Caoilte tossing his burning hair and Niamh calling 'Away! Come away!'" in "The Hosting of the Sidhe," was a nineteenth-century innovation but had become part of London's idea of what "Celtic" meant.

Local people told journalists that Bridget Cleary had been taken away by the fairies of Kilenagranagh and would emerge from the fairy fort riding a white horse. This was an articulation of recent painful events in terms of a metaphorical or euphemistic discourse which had long been used in the close-knit communities of rural Ireland as a way of dealing with the marginal and the transitional. Oral rather than written, it had the advantage of ephemerality, of allowing opinions to be expressed and information to be conveyed in a highly coded and unattributable way.

Legends about fairies, also called "good people" and "little people", are never written down, except by scholars or other outsiders to the groups for which they are a medium of exchange. They arise apparently artlessly from conversation and deal with the actions of real people in real places and real time.¹⁶ Tellers may insist that the events they recount really happened, or they may disclaim all responsibility, explaining that "the old people used to believe such things."



The cowshed in which the inquest on Bridget Cleary was held. (Photo: copyright M. Bourke).

Fairy legends are intimately linked to the features of a known landscape, particularly to dangerous, marginal or conspicuous places within it. Slievenamon, the mountain near which Bridget Cleary lived, rises some 2,000 feet from a plain of rich agricultural land, dominating the landscape for many miles around. It had been described as “one of the three or four most famous of Irish hills,”¹⁷ and its name occurs often in stories and songs. Literary and oral traditions preserve the idea that Slievenamon, like other conspicuous hills, is an outpost of the otherworld. Its name – “The Women’s Mountain” – probably derives from a persistent idea that that world is ruled by women.

Michael Cleary told his neighbours that he expected to find his wife in a “fairy fort” at Kilenagranagh, a much smaller hill. Fairy forts – circular earthworks known to archaeology as early medieval dwelling places – are also known as “forts” or “raths”.¹⁸ They are sites of avoidance, overgrown and undisturbed, metaphors for areas of silence and circumvention in the social life of the communities which tell stories about them. They are places out of place; their time is out of time.

Central to the repertoire of fairy-legend tellers is the idea that the fairies take people away into these forts, that they abduct healthy, happy members of the community and leave sickly, withered, cantankerous changelings in their place. Sometimes men are taken, sometimes even cows; but most changeling legends concern women and children, and anyone who enters a fairy fort will emerge changed, if at all. Here gender differences are underlined. Men who return to ordinary life often possess new musical or medical abilities, while, with the exception of midwives, women who return or are rescued are usually mute, injured, or mutilated.

Among the legends in the Irish Folklore Collection at UCD are many which tell of women abducted by fairies and rescued by their husbands’ violent actions.¹⁹ Michael and Bridget Cleary and their neighbours would have heard such legends often, for the same stories were current all over rural Ireland.

The many fairy legends which tell of women in childbirth being swept through the air are vividly metaphorical: narratives of passage – analogous to rites of passage.²⁰ Some reflect the dangers and anxieties of childbirth and the fact that women do sometimes die or almost die. They also reflect the anxiety surrounding the whole question of human fertility, already compromised by late and selective marriage.

It is hard not to see in such stories a coded aggression against women.²¹ Extreme violence – by fire or metal implements – is one of the most conspicuous features of changeling legends, always connected to the reported abhorrence by fairies of both fire and iron. Bridget Cleary's is the only case I know in which an adult woman has been treated as a changeling in fact rather than in fiction, but there are several factual accounts of child-changelings being placed on red-hot fire shovels, one of them in South Tipperary only eleven years earlier.²²

The anxieties of social life might find expression in changeling accusations,²³ but might also give rise to claims of changeling status. Some fairy legends may certainly be read as expressions of the loneliness and alienation of young women married by the decisions of older men.²⁴ A woman had a certain amount to gain, in terms of privacy, prestige, and sanction for subversions of her social role, if she admitted or claimed to have been "away with the fairies."

It was suggested at the time of her death that Bridget Cleary herself had said she was going with the fairies, and the court heard that she had told Michael that his own mother had been "away" with them. This may have been a way of taunting him, of demanding privacy, or of claiming some esoteric knowledge shared by women but not by men.

To see how the narrative of fairy abduction may have empowered Bridget Cleary for a while but then become a rationale for her torture and killing, it is necessary to consider how she and Michael were situated in the socioeconomic environment of rural Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. From the point of view of contemporary unionist commentators they belonged to Catholic rural Ireland, that great reservoir of superstition and credulity, and sinister "Fenianism."

Commentators with a more intimate knowledge of Irish society distinguished sharply among classes and identified them as landless labourers, a description less than adequate. Bridget and Michael Cleary were turning their backs on an older way of life. It is important to consider what may have been the price exacted for that by others whose choices were more limited.

The Clearys had no children, although they had been married over seven years and both were relatively young. Had they been landed farmers, this would have been an economic and social as well as a personal disaster. In most cases they would have been living in his family's house, hoping to "keep the name on the land," and Bridget would have brought a dowry or "fortune" of cows to "buy" her place.²⁵

In such circumstances, it might well be in the interest of a husband, perhaps under pressure from his family, to decide that the woman who shared his bed but had produced no heir was not his wife and to use the excuse of a fairy changeling to repudiate her, maybe even allowing another son to marry and inherit the land.²⁶ Bridget Cleary was not an outsider marrying in: she lived where she had grown up, surrounded by father, aunt and cousins. Her father told the court that, far from being an economic liability, she had been his only support.

Most sociological research has focussed on farmers and shopkeepers; but the Clearys were neither. They had come from the class of landless farm labourers for whom life was changing faster than perhaps for any other group in Irish society. The spread of literacy, the change from the Irish to the English language, and the increased influence of State agencies in the countryside all made them less dependent than their ancestors on agricultural subsistence work. Some (but by no means all) of their generation and background had been to school, learned to read, become proficient in trades, familiar with consumer products, and comfortable handling money.

The Clearys were a modern couple, much more upwardly mobile than their neighbours or Bridget's relatives. Michael was a cooper, and unlike almost all his elderly neighbours and



many of his contemporaries about whom information was gathered at the time of the trial, he was literate. The *Irish Times* described him as a “respectable and good-looking man,” although with “a rather wild look about the eyes.”

Witnesses described Bridget as a very nice-looking young woman. Evidently too even in illness she took care of her appearance. During most of the two days before her death she wore a nightdress and a “chemise”; the nightdress, made of striped flannelette, was produced in court. But on the night of her death she got up and, with help from Mary Kennedy and Johanna Burke, dressed in clothes her husband handed her: “a red petticoat and navy-blue flannel dress, green stays and navy blue cashmere jacket,” according to Johanna Burke.²⁷

Black stockings were found on the body, and one gold earring, suggesting that her ears were pierced.²⁸ Her bed had sheets; one was used to wrap her body for burial. Ten or fifteen years earlier it had been commonplace to describe the Irish rural labourer as living in squalor, dressed in rags. This description did not apply to the Clearys.

Bridget had trained as a milliner and dressmaker and also kept hens and sold eggs.²⁹ She seems to have been in charge of the household budget, for Johanna Burke stated that as she lay in bed on the night of her death Michael handed her a coffee canister, saying there was twenty pounds in it (about £1,000 in today’s terms): “She tied it up and told her husband to take care of it, that he would not know the difference until he was without it. ‘She handed it to me and told me to put it in a box under the bed, which I did.’”³⁰

The Clearys’ house alone would have been enough to mark them as different: it was a new “labourer’s cottage”, a slated, two-bedroom dwelling (which is still habitable over 100 years later) of a type built under the Labourers (Ireland) Act of 1883, a vast improvement on the earlier housing of the rural working class. Significantly, one of the early accounts of the case reported that the house was on the site of a “rath” or fairy fort.³¹ This may well have been the case; the modernizing forces of Victorian colonial power were notoriously indifferent to traditional pieties.

But such a label would suggest that the Clearys did not subscribe to the same values as their neighbours and that they paid little heed to fairy belief. If Bridget did claim to have a special relationship with fairies as the newspapers suggested, she may have been either attempting to placate hostile neighbours by submitting to sanctions they invoked, or using their uneasiness about the site of her house (perhaps itself a coded expression of resentment) to increase their own prestige.

If anyone appeared marginal and therefore vulnerable in the community depicted in court, it was Michael Cleary. He had come into the area from Killenaule, about eight miles away, and had been living childless among his wife’s people for about six years. Their neighbours told the court (and Michael insisted) that he and Bridget had an excellent relationship, but the fact remains that she died through his violent action.³²

It is difficult at this remove to speculate with confidence about the reasons behind that action; but several possibilities present themselves. On the evening of her death (March 15) Bridget was up and dressed and sitting in the kitchen with her husband. Several neighbours were present. To Tom Smyth, who asked how she was, Bridget replied “that she was middling, that he was making a fairy of her now.” Mary Kennedy said, according to her own testimony, “Don’t mind him, Bridgie; don’t be that way.”

Johanna Burke gave the following description:

They were talking about the fairies and Mrs. Cleary [Bridget] said to her husband, “your mother used to go with the fairies, and that is why you think I am going with them.”

Then he asked her, "Did my mother tell you that?" She said she did, adding 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 his wife should eat them before he would 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 of bread saying "If you don't take it you will go." He flung her on the ground, put his knee on her chest and one hand on her throat and forced the bread and jam down her throat, saying "Swallow it. Is it down, is it down?"³³

According to her own testimony, Burke tried to reason with him, but he stripped Bridget's clothes off, "except her chemise," and began her final torture with fire. It is possible that Bridget was taunting her husband with talk about fairy abduction and that this was the last straw which made him finally act with such violence.

Her suggestion that his mother "used to go with the fairies" may have meant that she suffered periods of depression or mental illness, that she was a liar, that she neglected her children or her household duties, or that she was unfaithful to her husband. Several interpretations are available, but the idea of stigma is common to all of them. While Bridget was ill, news had been brought to Michael of his father's death in Killenaule, but he had not gone to the wake.

According to the earliest reports of Bridget Cleary's disappearance, she herself had said that she was going with the fairies to Kyleneagranagh, where Michael waited to see her ride by on horseback. Witnesses told the court that she had said she would stay with him then "if he was able to keep her."³⁴ They may have been lying, or Bridget may have been using the idiom of fairy legend to assert her independence and autonomy or perhaps to protect herself from a violent and impulsive man.

At one point during her torture, witnesses said she sat on the side of her bed and said "The Peelers are at the window. Mind me now," in answer to which Michael took up "a certain utensil" and threw what was probably urine on her and on the window. (The Peelers, called after Sir Robert Peel, were the police). Bridget may have attempted to keep her husband in line by appealing, if only in imagination, to the forces of the State as well as to the unseen power of local oral tradition.

Hubert Butler has suggested that jealousy about a possible affair between Bridget and an egg merchant, mentioned once in testimony, may have been what drove Michael to such a pitch that he convinced himself of her fairy possession and killed her.³⁵ Fairy legend is rich in resources for the oblique discussion of sexuality. Michael's mother's being "away with the fairies" could have meant that he was conceived outside his parents' marriage.

In any event Bridget used to go walking alone on the low road near the fairy fort of Kyleneagranagh, and although that seems innocuous enough, it was thought worth mentioning at the trial, perhaps as an indication of disaffection with her marriage. It would certainly have been enough to mark Bridget as somehow more independent or headstrong than some of her neighbours could accept.

But there may have been another factor at work. Dr. Crean, the local doctor, told the inquest he had visited Bridget during her last illness and diagnosed "slight bronchial catarrh and nervous excitement"; but local tradition in Tipperary asserts that she was suffering from tuberculosis.³⁶ Particularly in poor areas, tuberculosis was a highly stigmatizing disease in the late nineteenth century, much as Aids has been in our time, and could be referred to euphemistically through fairy legend.

If blame had to be assigned and a scapegoat elected, Michael Cleary was the obvious candidate. Already perhaps the focus of envy in the area because of his relative prosperity, he

was without relatives there once Bridget was dead. When the statements of Bridget's father, Patrick Boland, and her aunt, Mary Kennedy, were read out in court, Michael cried out in protest:

I would make an objection to that statement. There is not one word of truth in it, and, if I am to get justice between them, they are all one. If I will not get justice here I will get it in heaven. They are all one there, and no one of them has told the truth. They are all a lot. They are after doing their best, and their father is the worst to do the like of that on me. If I am going to get justice – I don't care whether I will or not – I will get it in another place. It is their badness and dirt. I did not do it, but they did it, and burned her.³⁷

"They are all one," he says – meaning apparently that the Kennedys, mother and sons, with their sister Johanna Burke, his dead wife, her father, and John Dunne, another neighbour, were all related. Already alienated in some way from his own family, he seems to have felt himself excluded by his wife's relatives, several of whom had walked the eight miles to his father's wake while he did not.

Contemporary and later commentators have read Bridget Cleary's death as a story about categories of people, about beliefs held or not held as though controlled by a two-way switch. But belief in the supernatural works much more like a sliding switch than one with on/off settings: credulity is increased by stress, and social pressure can produce behaviour whose whole social message is ostensibly about inner conviction.

Bridget and Michael Cleary were members of a class and a local community, but they were also individuals in a society which increasingly rewarded individuality. Poised between the modernizing forces of the centralized State and demands for conformity from traditionalist members of their own extended family, they were knocked off balance by Bridget's illness. Dependent on neighbours for such simple necessities as milk and laundry, they seem to have lost control of the symbolic world in which they lived.

Conclusion

The telling of fairy-belief legend is, among other things, a way of handling social deviance and stigma, a vocabulary and a system of metaphor through which to contain the sort of tensions that Victorian administrators preferred to house in grim four-storey buildings. It is not surprising, given what we know about responses to colonization, that those who embraced a town-centred respectability with its promise of access to the modern world should have preferred not to be reminded of the rural and the oral by Cleary. In 1895 newspapers reported that during the trial of Michael Cleary and his fellow defendants in Clonmel, "on each visit to the Court during the taking of the depositions the prisoners were 'groaned and hooted at vigorously' by large crowds which followed them on their way back to gaol."

From Clonmel, with its two convents, its breweries, flour mills and tanneries, its barges on the Suir and its important railway junction, Ballyvadlea, less than 15 miles away beyond Slievenamon, must have seemed at once far away and uncomfortably near. It was too close to be exotic, too distant to be relevant.

During Bridget's illness, Michael summoned both Dr. Crean, the doctor from Fethard, four miles to the southwest, and a "herb-doctor," Denis Ganey, who lived in Kylatlea – about the same distance in the opposite direction on the slope of Slievenamon.³⁸ These two practitioners represent the conflicts at work at the time of Bridget Cleary's death: between the scientific,



middle-class optimism of the modernizing nineteenth century, with its roads, railways, and newspapers; and the increasing isolation and marginalization of those still invested in an older, oral culture, who lived mostly far from main roads.

Michael's trade and education would have predisposed him to consult the doctor, but evidence given in court suggests that he felt himself under pressure to seek a traditional remedy as well. John Dunne, a 55-year-old neighbour and cousin of Patrick Boland, seems to have been particularly insistent on the rituals of changeling banishment.

Most modern commentators have seen Michael Cleary as the most "superstitious" of the people involved in his wife's death, the most credulous about the existence and agency of fairies. In fact, he was the one person involved in her torture who had not grown up in the vicinity of the fort at Kilenagranagh. He had worked for several years in Clonmel and might well have been psychologically marginal to his wife's community by virtue of his exposure to its more urban culture and money-based economy.

Faced with his wife's troubling illness, he was apparently not strong enough to hold out against his older neighbour, John Dunne, who insisted that its causes were not natural. He went to the herb doctor and brought back the prescribed remedy – quite possibly against his own better judgment and, having so far invested in "fairy quackery," did not know how to withdraw.

Stories about women taken away by fairies and rescued by violence were told all over rural Ireland about the time of Bridget Cleary's death, but the implementation of the actions they described would have been a last resort, a way of keeping troublesome women down. Even then, contained within a fictional framework, those actions would have something of the nature of ritual or play and could stop before visible damage was done.

Michael's outburst in court accused Bridget's relatives of conspiracy against him. In fact, they seem to have aided and abetted him in all but the actual murder of his wife. They accompanied him along the road of credulity paved by fairy legends, but instead of leading him to the neat conclusion of fiction and an honourable exit they abandoned him to the consequences of his anger and frustration.

Bridget was thought on the night before her death to have recovered – in fact to have been recovered. Then something made Michael, acting alone, commit his last act of violence. I have already suggested that this "something" was her reference to his mother's having been "away with the fairies." It was after Bridget had been burned – in what I read as an act of blind rage and frustration – that Michael took refuge in the elaborate narrative of the white horse and her expected reappearance.

He told Johanna Burke that he would pretend to be crazy, and in fact a form of insanity defence did work for him. However, his waiting for three nights at Kilenagranagh was probably not so much a cynical pretence as a performance, expressing his isolation and his horror – to the point of insanity – at the consequence of his acts.

Like most stories, the one told at the time of Bridget Cleary's death drew on narratives already known and perhaps partly believed. Under other circumstances, it might have served as euphemism or as a coded discussion of the issues and personalities involved in Bridget Cleary's fate.

But the seriousness of the crime and the efficiency of Victorian State agencies and means of communication meant that it was told far beyond the community where it had been composed. A narrative, developed as commentary on gender relations in domestic contexts, was suddenly freighted with the politics of the wider society and, in the process, its finely woven web of observations on marriage and women's lives was lost.

Had Bridget Cleary not died of her burns, there might still have been an oral narrative about

her. With time, however, it would have become more fictional and less factual. Had Michael and Bridget continued to live in the area, the narrative might have explained why they were set apart and perhaps why they had no children; women abducted by fairies were often said to be infertile afterwards.

Had Bridget's body not been discovered it could have provided a reason why Michael was avoided or an inducement to him to leave the area. The story would have joined other narratives in marking Kilenagranagh Hill as a significant place, and at that point the names of the protagonists might have dropped out. Later it might have been told in other communities and assigned to other families, other "fairy forts".

But Bridget Cleary did die, and at least one of her neighbours – significantly the tenant of an evicted farm and therefore an outsider in the community – was sufficiently disturbed to inform the police. So the forces of the State became involved and, instead of oral narratives which ascribed agency only to supernatural forces, which could be revised with every telling, and which would dissipate with time, written reports were prepared whose contents continue to be perused over 100 years later.

Instead of a story, the public was given a report on a story – a written meta-narrative not only about Bridget Cleary's death but also about the desired death of fairy legend as a way of thinking and speaking: an uncentralized, anti-authoritarian discourse whose elements and structures were anathema to the linear accounts of cause and effect favoured by both newspapers and courts of law.

The story of Bridget Cleary's abduction by fairies itself became a shibboleth, revealing a cultural outlook which had become deeply unfashionable. Many households in South Tipperary still possess copies of the newspapers published in 1895 which carried reports of the death of Bridget Cleary and its investigation, but until recently few people have been willing to talk about it.

The oral legend aborted in the making did have the effect of preserving Michael Cleary from the gallows. But in general, rather than protecting those present from responsibility for Bridget Cleary's death, it made them figures of repudiation and ridicule, guilty not just of one crime but of a worldview that threatened to taint a whole country.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Where not otherwise stated, information on the Bridget Cleary incident is based on contemporary reports in the *Irish Times* and other newspapers. See *Irish Times*, 27 Mar. 1895.
2. For discussion of gender in the context of colonialism, see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); for the relevance of this argument to Ireland, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), chap. 3; and Carol Coulter, *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women, and Nationalism in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993).



3. See Hubert Butler, "The Eggman and the Fairies", in his *Escape from the Anthill* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1986), 63-74; Richard Jenkins, "Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance among the Irish Peasantry", *Ulster Folklife* 23 (1977); 33-56, rev. in Peter Narvaez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York/London: Garland, 1991); Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, "The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland", in *The Good People*, 199-214; Thomas McGrath, "Fairy Faith and Changelings: The Burning of Bridget Cleary in 1895", *Studies* 71 (summer 1982); 178-84; Carlo Gébler's novel *The Cure* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994); Pat Feeley, "The Burning of Bridget Cleary", RTE Radio 1 Documentary, 10 Apr. 1995; Tony Butler, "The Burning of Bridget Cleary: The 100th Anniversary", *The Nationalist*, 25 Mar., 1995, 21.
4. In January 1984, 15-year-old Ann Lovett died giving birth outdoors before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Later that year the discovery of the body of a newborn infant with stab wounds led to the inquiry known as the "Kerry Babies" case (see Nell McCafferty, *A Woman to Blame: The Kerry Babies Case* [Dublin: Attic Press, 1985]). Numerous cases of child sex abuse by clergy came to light during the 1980s and the 1990s; the then bishop of Galway admitted being the father of a 17-year-old son in Connecticut. In 1992 a 14-year-old pregnant schoolgirl was prevented from travelling to England for an abortion, illegal in Ireland; (see Ailbhe Smyth, *The Abortion Papers: Ireland* [Dublin: Attic Press, 1992]). In the same year a young woman in County Kilkenny brought charges of incest and severe physical abuse against her father. In 1994 the Irish government fell when delays in processing child sex-abuse charges against a Catholic priest were brought to light.
5. See, for instance, the poetry of Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Wake Forest, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1990), and *The Astrakhan Cloak* (Wake Forest, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1992); Eilís ní Dhuibhne's short story "Midwife to the Fairies", in her *Blood and Water* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993), and her play *Dún na mBan trí Thine* [The (Fairy) Women's Fort is on Fire], performed by Amharclann de hÍde at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, 1994; Angela Bourke, "Bean an Leasa: ón bPiseogaíocht go dtí Filíocht Nuala ní Dhomhnaill", in *Leath na Spéire*, ed. Eoghan Ó hAnluain (Dublin: An Clóchomar, 1992); 74-90, and "Fairies and Anorexia": Nuala ní Dhomhnaill's "Amazing Grass", in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 13 (1993); 25-38.
6. Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill had been defeated in 1894.
7. See L.P. Curtis Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), chap. 9; and Cairns and Richards, 47-48.
8. See Curtis (n. 7), *passim*.
9. See Mary Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur* (1937; rept., Cork and Dublin: Mercier, 1973), 98 *passim*; Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987); Margaret MacCurtáin, "Fullness of Life: Defining Female Spirituality in Twentieth-Century Ireland", in *Women Surviving*, ed. Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1990), 233-263.
10. See Carbery, 157-66, and compare S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 100-20.
11. See "Witch-Burning at Clonmel." The romantic approach reflected the continuing influence of James MacPherson's spurious and widely translated *Poems of Ossian*, while the scientific owed much to Darwinism and to the studies in comparative philology undertaken by the Grimm brothers in Germany. For the work of the eighteenth-century theologian Johann Gottfried von Herder, with its emphasis on "das Volk" and on the concept of national character, see Jennifer Fox. "The Creator Gods: Romantic Nationalism and the En-Genderment of Women in Folklore", *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (October-December 1987); 563-72. Cities, of course, have folklore too, but this was not studied until much later.
12. Curtis, 75.
13. See Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chap. 4.
14. *Irish Times*, 6 July 1895.
15. *Irish Times*, 5 July 1895.
16. Folktales or fairy tales, on the other hand, begin and end with formulaic flourishes like "Once upon

- a time" and concern themselves with an escapist, fictional world of wonders and magic.
17. Butler, 63.
 18. Fort, or rath, in Irish (sing.) is *lios*, or *sí*, or some variant of those names. Lysaght quotes Jenny McGlynn describing the "Rusheen", where many fairy encounters occur in her stories as "a bit of a hill with a rath on top of it, covered with bushes" (p. 30).
 19. Seán Ó hEochaidh, Séamus Ó Catháin, and Máire Mac Neill, *Fairy Legends from Donegal* (Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1977).
 20. Angela Bourke, "The Woman Who Flew through the Air" (paper delivered at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1991).
 21. On coding, see Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures," in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan N. Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1-29.
 22. See *Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 1884, and E.S. Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales, an Inquiry into Fairy Mythology* (1890). See Joyce Underwood Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children", in *The Good People*, 251-83.
 23. See Jenkins, "Witches and Fairies".
 24. See Bourke, "Bean an Leasa".
 25. Richard Breen, "Dowry Payments and the Irish Case", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 2 (1984); 292.
 26. Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, 1937, 92.
 27. Butler, 66.
 28. Johanna Burke testified that on the day after Bridget's death Michael found the second earring. Raking through the ashes of the fire he called to her, "Hannah, I have got one of poor Bridget's earrings", *Irish Times*, 29 Mar. 1895.
 29. McGrath, 178.
 30. *Irish Times*, 27 Mar. 1895.
 31. *Nationalist*, 23 Mar. 1895.
 32. This is a common perception of husbands in cases of domestic violence.
 33. *Irish Times*, 27 Mar. 1895.
 34. The idea that a person taken by the fairies could be rescued by being pulled from the back of a white horse is common in Irish folklore and has entered literature in English through the ballad "Tam Lin"; see E.B. Lyle, "The Ballad *Tam Lin* and Traditional Tales of Recovery from the Fairy Troop", *Studies in Scottish Literature* 6 (July 1968); 175-85. Compare Alice Munro's story, "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass", in her *Friend of My Youth* (New York: Knopf, 1990).
 35. Butler, 63-74.
 36. Tony Butler, "The Burning of Bridget Cleary: The 100th Anniversary", *Nationalist*, 25 Mar. 1995.
 37. *Irish Times*, 8 Apr. 1895.
 38. Kylatlea is probably derived from *Coill an tSléibhe*. "Wood on the mountainside". This is not a village but the name of a sparsely populated area, called townland in Ireland.