

Murder most impure that rocked a nation

THIS summer one hundred years ago a murder trial captivated Ireland and confirmed Edwardian England's worst fears about the dark side of the Irish peasant's psyche.

The killing of Bridget Cleary on March 15, 1895, was to become a cause célèbre in the Ireland of the day in a way reminiscent of the Kerry babies case in the mid 1980s. Everyone had their own theory and even today in parts of

PHIL MacGIOLLABHAIN looks back one hundred years to the macabre killing of a young woman in County Tipperary that captivated all of Ireland.

Tipperary there are still doubts voiced over the safety of the conviction.

The London Times of March 26, 1895, reported "...a shocking occurrence, recalling the barbarities practised in the

Middle Ages, upon prisoners charged with Witchcraft, at Ballyvadlea, a village situated on the slopes of Sliabh-na-mBan in Co. Tipperary. It would be incredible if the account were not substantial by the sworn evidence of witnesses. Two men and a woman are charged with causing the death of a woman of 27 years of age named Bridget Cleary, wife of a cooper, by forcing her as she lay ill from influenza to drink noxious potions prepared for her by a herbalist and then seizing her and roasting her on a fire under the supposition that she was a witch..."

A witness testified to the fact that the words "come home Bridget Boland!" (the maiden name of the victim) were invoked in the apparent belief that the injuries inflicted upon the woman would, somehow, bring back the "real" Bridget who, the court was told, her assailants believed had been carried off by the "good people", "the fairies".

Counterfeit

It was put to the accused in court that this "ceremony" was in fact a cruel counterfeit of a superstitious ritual concocted to murder Bridget Cleary.

These appalling acts were performed in the house of the victim's father. They happened as her husband stood by and aided the "working of the spell".

The dead body of the victim, with the stomach burst through, was found in a ditch after a week. An inquest was held and the physicians concluded Bridget Cleary had died on the fire. Her attack of influenza had not been serious. She was a healthy young woman and her organs, so far as they were not burned, were sound. By direction of the coroner, the jury only found a verdict as to the cause of death. A full magisterial inquiry was established.

'Medicine man'

The prisoners, including the "medicine man" and the dead woman's husband and father, were remanded without bail.

In all ten people were brought before Colonel Evanston and Cambridge Grubb, resident magistrates at Clonmel, on March 27, 1895, at a specially convened court.

The charges read that they had murdered a woman called Bridget Cleary by burning her.

The prisoners also included a local "herb doctor", Denis Ganey. Initially, Ganey was charged as an accessory after the fact, but the case against him was discharged due to lack of evidence.

The court heard the evidence of a Mrs. Burke. She testified that she had been nursing Bridget Cleary, who, she told the court, had been suffering from "nervous excitement and a mild attack of bronchitis".

Mrs. Burke stated to the court that Bridget Cleary's husband became convinced that his wife had become a witch and was possessed by an evil spirit.

Held

She testified that the "herb doctor" gave Mr. Cleary herbs which he then administered to his wife. She said that the other accused men held Bridget Cleary down while her husband forced her to take them. Mr. Cleary then called on her, in the name of God, to admit that she was not his wife. She was held over the fire to make her say this.

These proceedings were repeated the following night when her husband knocked her down, stripped her of her clothes, poured paraffin over her and set her alight. He told onlookers that this was not his wife that he was burning but a witch and that she would disappear up the chimney. He said that this was how he

funeral was boycotted by all her relations and neighbours. Not one civilian attended the funeral. The pall bearers were RIC constables. There was no hearse — the coffin was borne by a common cart. The reason for this marked lack of respect for the passing of a well known and well liked local woman by her friends and relations was that no-one believed that the RIC were carrying the body of Bridget Cleary to her final resting place.

Belief

The London Times of March 29 reported:

"The fact is, however, that the people believe — or perhaps with a view to defence of the prisoners affect to believe — that the real Bridget Cleary will come back, riding on a white horse sent by the fairies, and if they can succeed in cutting the reins of the horse, they will secure her. With this object there are persons on watch on

The court heard from witnesses how the woman had been held over the fire by her relatives and made to state that she was Bridget, wife of Michael, daughter of Patrick. Despite answering all their questions confirming who she was, her ordeal continued until she died.

Withdrawn

On July 5 at Clonmel assizes, the capital charge of murder was withdrawn by the Crown. All of the accused were subsequently found guilty of manslaughter, with the exception of Mrs. Kennedy and the boy called Ahearn, who was described by his counsel as "a delicate boy of about 16". The only evidence against him was that he had held the handle while Cleary had forced herbs down the throat of his dying wife.

The prisoners were sentenced as follows:

Michael Cleary, 20 years' penal servitude; Patrick Kennedy, five years' penal servitude; John Dunne, three years'; William Kennedy, 18 months'; and Patrick Boland and Michael Kennedy six months' penal servitude each.

What makes the macabre story of Bridget Cleary's death all the more remarkable is not that it happened at all but that it happened only a 100 years ago, some 250 years after the Salem trials in Puritan Massachusetts and in a country that escaped the worst excesses of the witchcraft hysteria of the late middle ages.

One thing that the Cleary case did have in common with both Salem and the tidal wave of killings that swept Europe and Britain in previous centuries was that the victim was a woman.

That her tormentors were men who had been placed in positions of power of her by the male law makers of Church and state is also no coincidence.

Perhaps this sad tale, apart from being the death rattle of a folklore that revealed its dark side, should also be viewed as a milestone in the annals of misogyny that can have no place in anyone's new Ireland.

'He told onlookers that this was not his wife burning but a witch and that she would disappear up the chimney. That was how he'd get his wife back'

would get his wife back.

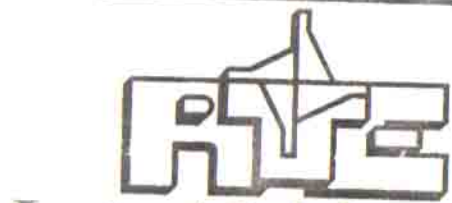
He rolled a sheet round the charred body and, with the aid of one of his co-accused, buried his wife's body in a dyke near his house.

The remains were discovered a week afterwards by Sergeant Rodgers of the RIC.

Bridget Cleary's funeral took place on March 28, 1895, at Cloveen, Co. Tipperary. The

the mountains one of whom is specially provided with a sharp knife to cut the reins."

On April 2 at Clonmel, Michael Cleary (her husband), Patrick Boland (her father), Pat Kennedy, James Kennedy, William Kennedy, John Dunn, William Dunn, Denis Garvey and Mary Kennedy were all charged with the "wilful murder" of Bridget Cleary.



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The evening will start with a 'Black Velvet' reception - courtesy of Guinness - be followed by the awards presentation by Irish Ambassador Joseph Small, a four-course dinner, and entertainment featuring an exclusive London performance by Frances Black.

Three leading Irish charities will benefit from the evening: Co-operation Ireland, The London Irish Society (for The Irish Centre, Camden) and The Safe Start Foundation.

To obtain tickets, priced at £65 each, contact:

Co-operation Ireland, 150 Buckingham Palace Road, SW1W 9TR. Tel.: 0171-730 5553.

London Irish Society, 24 Warriner Gardens, Battersea, SW11 4EB. Tel.: 0171-622 7429.

Or The Safe Start Foundation, 71 Cricklewood Broadway, NW2 3JR. Tel.: 0181-452 0181.

The names of this year's award recipients will be announced in our issue of March 18.

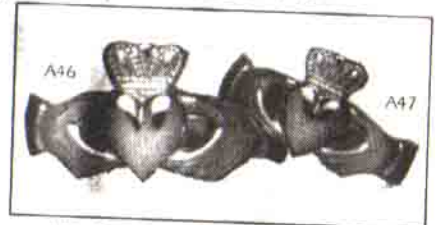
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