



The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story

By Angela Bourke

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In 1895, Bridget Cleary, a strong-minded and independent young woman, disappeared from her house in rural Tipperary. At first her family claimed she had been taken by fairies—but then her badly burned body was found in a shallow grave. Bridget's husband, father, aunt, and four cousins were arrested and tried for murder, creating one of the first mass media sensations in Ireland and England as people tried to make sense of what had happened. Meanwhile, Tory newspapers in Ireland and Britain seized on the scandal to discredit the cause of Home Rule, playing on lingering fears of a savage Irish peasantry. Combining historical detective work, acute social analysis, and meticulous original scholarship, Angela Bourke investigates Bridget's murder.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In March 1895, Bridget Cleary became ill. Her husband, Michael, and a number of neighbors and relatives became convinced that she was a fairy changeling and tortured her to death. This grisly true story forms the basis of Angela Bourke's outstanding narrative *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, in which the whole context of this "crime" and its punishment is sparely and powerfully laid out. Bourke's style, judgment, and eye for detail are superb. There are scenes in this book of appalling vividness--in particular, the chapters concerned with poor Bridget's end. The closed room, the men yelling questions at her, trying to force her to eat herbs boiled in milk (if she could eat them, then she might be the real Bridget and not the changeling), manhandling her; "lifting her body and winding it backwards and forwards, yelling, 'away with you; come home, Bridget, in the name of God!' while slapping her." On March 14, they held her over the fire to drive the spirits out, and on March 15, Bridget's husband set fire to her nightgown, throwing lamp oil on her to make the fire burn more fiercely. "She's not my wife," he told the assembled people. "You'll soon see her go up the chimney."

This is a chilling story, one that stays with you, creepily, long after you have finished reading. Like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, it seems to open itself to a wide variety of interpretation, and Bourke's balancing of old-world superstitious Ireland against the new rational nation about to be born is expert. These events may be a hundred years old, but they come over as frighteningly contemporary. --Adam Roberts, *Amazon.co.uk*

From Publishers Weekly

A wonderful example of narrative cultural history, this text examines a pivotal moment in Irish history, through folklore and language. In 1895, Bridget Cleary, of Ireland's County Tipperary, caught a bad cold which her husband interpreted as a sign that she'd been taken by a "fairie." "She's not my wife," Michael Cleary said, "she's an old deceiver sent in place of my wife." After trying to treat her with herbs, "first milk" and urine, Michael burned his wife to death. When her body was discovered in a shallow grave, the Royal Irish Constabulary, who saw her death as evidence of Ireland's backwardness (and hence justification of the British colonial presence in the region) rounded up a band of men and tried them for murder. As she pieces together the details of these events, Bourke (senior lecturer in Irish at University College, Dublin) tells the history as a deeply rooted collision of cultures: the accused Irish believed that they'd justifiably snuffed out a fairy changeling; the British authorities called it murder. Fairies, Bourke argues, held an important place in 19th-century Irish culture, but fairy scares were often evidence of larger personal and social conflict. In Bridget Cleary's case, she may have been the victim of unresolved marital trouble (she was barren, opinionated and financially self-supporting). Found guilty of manslaughter and sent to prison, Michael Cleary, upon his release in 1910, emigrated to Canada, but the legend of Bridget Cleary lives on in a Tipperary children's rhyme: "Are you a witch or are you a fairy, / Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?" This thoughtful and disturbing book gives the legend a new, more complicated cultural life. (Aug.)

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From Library Journal

In spring 1895 in Ireland, some men reported to their local priest that young Bridget Cleary, who was known to have been ill, had been burned to death by family members, including her husband, in a case of fairy exorcism. The priest in turn went to the police, who found Bridget's charred body and then arrested nine family members, neighbors, and friends in connection with the incident. The subsequent trial became a weapon in the hands of Tories opposed to Home Rule for Ireland. After all, how could one grant political

autonomy to a people still so in the grip of superstition? Of the two new books that examine this case, Bourke's is the more readable. Bourke, a lecturer in Irish at University College Dublin who has published journal articles on the Irish fairy tradition, exhibits a more balanced grasp of the story and a greater intimacy with the culture than Hoff, an American academic who has written books on Nixon and Hoover, and coauthor Yeates, a freelance writer of family histories. Frustratingly, Hoff and Yeates take almost 100 pages even to get to Bridget. Because Bridget's murder offers a window into the changing world of Irish peasantry in the late 19th century, her tragic but fascinating story will interest many. Bourke's book would suffice for public and most academic libraries, though Hoff and Yeates's would be a useful additional title for larger Irish collections. DCharlie Cowling, SUNY at Brockport Lib.

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Users Review

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