Biddy Early's Limerick Connections

Introduction

The *Limerick Chronicle*, dated Thursday July 29th, 1869, records one of the most unusual events ever to have taken place within the environs of the city.

We understand that a marriage of an extraordinary kind was celebrated this week in Limerick by one of the parish priests. That of an old woman, known as Biddy Early, who resides near Tulla and who among the peasants, has the reputation of a witch or sorceress who could cure all kinds of diseases. Such was her fascinating power over a fine young man ... that she succeeded in inducing him to become her fourth husband.

The couple were married at St. Mary's Church in Limerick, on July 27th, 1869, by Richard Scott P.P. in the presence of Cornelius McNamara and Susanna McNamara. The Wedding Certificate mentions that the ceremony took place "according to the rites and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church" with the names of the betrothed being Bridget Connors (née Flannery) and Thomas Meaney, from Limerick.

The first account of Biddy Early's life appeared in 1903 and was followed by Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory's "Visions and Beliefs in The West Of Ireland" (1920). Indeed, her name and reputation as a healer and woman of spells was set to grow with the passing years. Even today pilgrims from home and abroad continue to seek her intercession by visiting the ruins of her former home, in Clare. More than a few of these pilgrims are from Limerick, for it has often been said, that the name, Biddy Early, is better known in these parts than almost anywhere else in Ireland.

Historical Background

Biddy Early was born in 1798 in the townland of Lower Faha, County Clare, the only child of John Thomas Connors and Ellen Early. Her mother made clothes spun from local flax for which the area was then famous. She also passed down to her daughter a deep knowledge of herbal cures.

Her mother's growing reputation as a 'healer' led Biddy to keep her maiden name of Early'. She used such ingredients as moss taken from a local mill stream, dandelions, seeds of flax, cat mint, turnips, thyme tea, nettles, potatoes, apples and honey for ailments like coughs, colds, wounds and scalds.

Biddy gathered these ingredients before sun-up to ensure that the dew was still on them. This was reminiscent of earlier 'Alchemists' who regarded dew as a 'secretion from dawning light' - a key ingredient of the 'Philosopher's Stone' - said to cure all ailments and to grant its owner eternal life.

Biddy was known to wear grey homespun clothes and a white linen bonnet. She was small but attractive. She may not have been able to read or write but some have suggested that she knew the language of the gypsies called 'Shelta' and spent time, in her youth, with the fairies (Sidhe). She was classified then as being a Spéirbhean (fairy woman). Indeed, Clare, at that time, was said to be a haven for the supernatural and to be one of the most haunted places in all Ireland.

In the 18th and 19th centuries 'Fisheogues' were rife in the area and a woman with red hair (the colour of Judas' hair) was regarded as being an omen of bad luck both for her family and for her neighbours. For example, it was said that such women could steal your butter at churning time. One invocation, stated:

If you meet a woman with red hair first thing in the morning take three steps backwards, otherwise you will have bad luck for the rest of the day.

Biddy was also described as being aloof as a child but the need to maintain the secrets of the healer's art may well have been the reason for this. When she was 16 years old both her parents died, her mother of malnutrition and her father, soon after, of typhus.

She was forced to leave her home as she could no longer pay the rent and moved in with relatives North of Slieveannore. They were childless but had no time for this strange girl with her talk of the fairies.

Biddy soon fell out with the woman of the house and left, spending some time travelling the roads of Clare. Despite this, she met her future husband Pat Malley in 1817 and moved happily to Gurteenreagh.

Biddy never charged a fee for her healing services fearing that her powers would be taken from her if she did. Instead, people made donations of food or more commonly Pottin made in private stills. The visitor was always made welcome with a drink and the warmth of a fire. She healed both animals and people missing potions, which were then placed in small bottles for her clients to take away with them following a visit.

Biddy was said to have had a 'Magic Well' near her home from which healing waters could be drawn - a belief that resonated with the water gods of pre-Christian times. It was even believed that she could cure the wrath of the fairies who might be angered by the violation of their ancient Raths (Ronabouts).

She also made predictions by looking into a 'Magic Bottle' but warned others against doing the same, fearing that they would go mad, or even die, as a result. Biddy knew who was coming to see her before they arrived and would not meet them if they had consulted a doctor previously an act which indicated a lack of faith in her powers.

Her first husband Pat died when she was only 25 years old and she married his son John with whom she is said to have had a son, called Paddy. No one knows where Paddy went (he may have died in famine times or emigrated) but he left the house at some point. There was also talk of a brother called Paddy whom, some say, died in infancy.

Her second husband died when she was 42 years old in 1849 and she subsequently married Tom Flannery, a labourer and a native of Quin. At this time she moved to his cottage on Dromore Hill, overlooking what is now called 'Biddy Early's Lake'.

Tom Flannery died when she was 70 years old (on June 25th, 1869) and she lived with Limerick man, Thomas Meaney, from 1869. He also died within one year of moving in. The fact that she outlived all her husbands is often credited to the plentiful nature of alcohol in her home.

In old age it is said that Biddy became cranky and absent minded and this may have contributed to her association with
‘Witchcraft’. She died peacefully on April 22nd, 1874, having asked neighbour Patrick Loughnane to fetch a priest, to give her the last rites. She was subsequently buried in an unmarked grave, in Feakle.

This was similar to Limerick-based poet Brian Merriman (1749–1805) who wrote the famous ‘Cuirí An Mhear-Oiche’ (The Midnight Court). Neither of them got on very well with the Catholic Church during their lifetimes. Indeed, some even say that Biddy is buried close to his grave.

The Source Of Her Powers

The area where Biddy was born was noted for supernatural associations being the home of the Fir Bolg and Tuatha Dé Danann. There was also much bloodshed in 1708 following the rising of that year.

The defeat of the legendary Tuatha Dé Danann by the Milesians or Sons of Mil, marked the transition from Paganism to Christianity in Ireland. However, the arrival of St. Patrick in 432 A.D. did not herald the complete destruction of pagan belief.

Paganism and Christianity merged into a duality of belief which could see women like Biddy Early as both objects of worship, in the form of the Wise Woman, ‘Sceilidh Gli’ or symbolic evil epitomised by the ‘Caillcloch’, Witch or Changelinga’s. ‘Tartais’.

The process of divining future events is known as ‘Scrying’. It was used by French clairvoyant Nostradamus (1503-1566) and by astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I John Dee (1527-1608) who were both alchemists and seekers of new age wisdom in the ‘philosopher’s stone’. Biddy, herself, used a ‘Magic Bottle’, which she kept wrapped in a shawl, to heal and make predictions.

This ‘Magic Bottle’ was often described as being either ‘blue’ or ‘black’ in colour and to have carried a dark liquid with healing qualities. The folklore surrounding it and other stories concerning Biddy Early were recorded by well known Limerick antiquarian, Dolly Stewart, in an article for the Limerick Chronicle, in 1953. In one story, told to her, by a Mr. Rochford from Monaleen, she relates:

Biddy’s brother (Paddy) was a ‘Spíal’ or ‘wandering labourer’ and in the course of his wanderings was employed by a farmer near Bruff in the County of Limerick. One morning he went out early to bring in some cattle to take to the Fair when he saw three men carrying a coffin with great difficulty. He went over to give them a hand (putting) his shoulder under the coffin and when eventually the men signalled to lay it down beside a fort, they handed young Early a bottle saying that as long as he had it he would never want for anything. Sometime later he went home to Feakle to stay with his sister, Biddy, but he fell ill and died, leaving his ‘Magic Bottle’ to her and it is from that time that her reputation as a ‘wise woman’ started to spread.

In another variant of the tale she recalls:

Perhaps the best known story of the Bottle concerns her brother (Paddy). He had an inordinate love of dancing and when he was stopped at the crossroads one night by some strangers and asked if he would accompany them to a dance, he did so without hesitation, wondering to himself, how a dance could have been organised so near home without his having been aware of it.

To his astonishment his new found friends brought him across fields to a disused house where there were a number of people standing in a circle mocking a pale beautiful girl and after watching for some time, to his horror, young Early saw that she was dead and blind and dumb. He was filled with pity for her and wondered how he could rescue her from her tormentors. Suddenly, a cock crowed and the fairy host, for such it was, vanished, leaving the girl standing in the middle of the floor.

In another account it is Biddy, herself, who located the bottle, in 1817, after helping a farmer in Bruff, called John Browne, who was the recipient of some bad luck as a result of drawing earth from what was once a mixed Catholic/Protestant graves yard. Biddy appears to have extracted the Bottle from the ground after being told where to dig.

Alternatively, Biddy may have got it from her only son (also called Paddy) who spent several years, it seems, in the company of the fairies, thence the phrase, to be ‘away with the fairies’ (Sidhe). He is said to have played hurting as a child with the fairy host and may well have been a ‘Changeling’.

The fairies duly rewarded his excellence at the game by giving him a ‘Magic Bottle’ telling him ‘We thank you, take this [Bottle] and give it to your mother. She will know what to do with it’. When he returned home he gave this to Biddy but vanished myster-
Biddy Early's cottage as it looks today  (Courtesy of Google Images)

Biddy Early for a cure. Before he said anything Biddy said 'Go home, you are too late' and so poor Johnny Scannell pined away and died.

Biddy often used the 'Pagan concept of 'Transference' to pass an illness from a human to an animal, such as a horse, which would then die on the victim's behalf. Could this have worked against Biddy who was seemingly powerless to save any of her own family, including four husbands, from early death?

'Transference' meant that the original sufferer was able to recover at another's expense. It is easy to see how this might have been seen to work, as an infected person could recover completely (or for a short period) while another person is infected, after contact with the original sufferer. Shamans' or healers might also try and take the illness into their own bodies, a method that required a great deal of courage and faith.

On one occasion Biddy warned a client that a cure would lead to the loss of something in return - it was later said that her only son, Paddy, duly died as a result.

In another case two brothers consulted Biddy about a number of cattle that had gone missing. Biddy told them where to find the animals but warned: 'You would be better off if they were never found.

Soon after they got home from recovering the beasts a row broke out between them over the ownership of the cattle, blows were struck and one brother killed.

In the medieval world the fairies were capable of firing 'elf shot' (arrows) which carried disease into the human body. 'Spirtes' or 'Spirits' could also enter the body in the guise of liquids, smoke or scents. Indeed, cases of epilepsy were often seen as proof of this 'fairy blash'.

Such beliefs cannot be dismissed as mere delusion. As late as 1950, for example, it was publicly announced that the fairies had appeared in force at Ballymanyt and had actually demolished portions of a new house, just erected there, by Limerick Corporation.

Likewise the closure of the 'Ferensia' manufacturing plant at Annacotty, in Limerick, in 1977, was credited to the destruction of a 'Fairy Fort', which had clearly infuriated the 'Ferensia Fairies'. Indeed, the Company's Managing Director, Dr. Tiede Herrmann, was kidnapped on his way to work in October 1975 and freed only after a siege lasting 38 days.

The Limerick Leader newspaper later reported that none other than Mavee Hilly, the wife of then President of Ireland, Patrick Hillery, blamed the company's misfortunes on the fort's destruction. For Biddy Early, likewise, ours was a 'parallel world' to the fairy realm and humans would suffer if they ever offended their 'fairy host'.

A Life Of Conflict

The ancient system of Brecon Laws, which offered Irish people a measure of social protection, had been destroyed by cen-
uries of war and conquest. It was replaced by a belief in the supremacy of the capitalist model and by the philosophy of ‘amoral familism’ that sought to maximise self-interest. As a result, Biddy Early often found herself in conflict with those symbols of authority that existed around her. These included, landlords, the police and judiciary, doctors and some priests.

Following the deaths of her parents and after months of travelling the roads Biddy secured employment and living accommodation on the Clare estate, of a Limerick-born landlord, called Sheehy, in the townland of Carheen.

She lived in, and paid rent for, a small thatched cottage, working as a domestic servant doing menial jobs, washing floors, scrubbing tables, dusting and so on. It is said that her unmarried master abused her. At this time she appears to have been tutored in reading and writing, by a male labourer, called Tom, who brought books to her cabin each night.

At this time, also, her reputation for cures continued to grow using local herbs, flowers, barks and mosses. However, Biddy always kept secret her family procedures on how to gather the ingredients at certain times of the year and at different stages of growth.

By the winter of 1816 Biddy had been 18 months living on the Carheen estate when the landlord decided to raise the rent, making it hard for the tenants to survive. Biddy organised a petition to the landlord and was evicted as a troublemaker as a result.

On foot of a court order, on a cold winter’s morning, Sheehy and his henchmen came to evict her. Biddy stood calmly in the doorway and warned: “You Sheehy, your bones shall not be found to receive a Christian burial but even I shall be laid to rest on hallowed ground.”

That very night, three other evicted tenants had set fire to the cottage of a smallholder called Toulby, made their way, with lighted coals, to burn the tenant out. They met a maid called Nell Canny along the way but Biddy told them not to bother her, as she might prove useful later. The men murdered Sheehy and burned his house around him. No trace of him was ever found, to bury, as Biddy had warned.

Toulby was later arrested after a patch of burned grass was found outside his cottage door. He was tried in Limerick Court but the maid, Nell Canny, gave evidence that she had taken coals from Toulby’s fire, to light the master’s fire, that morning. He was, therefore, released without charge.

By the 1890s and 1890s agrarian violence was rife in the countryside around Feakle. One group led by a relative of Biddy’s, called ‘Mick the Moonlighter’.

Mick told Biddy that he had accidentally killed Alderman William Sheehy (the brother of the previously slain landlord on Biddy’s Carheen Estate). However, he said that he had only intended to injure him and now wanted to leave the country. Mick had been a tenant on a 20 acre farm owned by William Sheehy but he was given 18 days to get out because of his role in a secret society. He ignored the warning and was given a second notice despite paying his rent.

The ‘Crowbar Gang’ was sent down and after a fierce fight, evicted Mick, razing his home to the ground. Mick sought revenge and one night he headed for the landlord’s house. He saw him in the sitting room with his wife and daughter. He was about to shoot him when a servant, called McCaw, grabbed Mick just as the landlord was coming out.

Two volleys were fired by ‘Mick the Moonlighter’ killing Sheehy outright. After hiding in a cabin, on the Moors, Mick went to see Biddy, who advised him to avoid Ennis and Ennistymon where the ‘Pecker’ were waiting for him. Instead, he went to the village of Lisagore and took a fishing trawler from there to Kilrush, thereafter, he sailed for America with his girl friend following him later.

A few weeks passed and the police arrested Biddy’s husband, Tom Flannery, a sympathiser of Mick’s, based on the word of informers. On November 13th, 1860, at a meeting held in the Grand Jury Room of Ennis Courthouse, a trial took place under the Right Honourable Lord Iachuin.

The prease and public were excluded from this trial dealing with the murder of Alderman William Sheehy, on October 23rd, 1860 at Ayle. A reward of £150 had been offered for information leading to the murderers’ apprehension and conviction.

Martin Minogue had been arrested on suspicion of complicity in the murder and remained in Ennis Gaol together with Tom Flannery. However, they were ably defended by Mr. Cullinan who directed them not to speak. They were both later released as the chief culprits had fled the country and no information was forthcoming.

In 1863, however, Biddy was brought to Ennis Courthouse and charged with witchcraft under the 1863 statute. The police raided her home frequently but could not link Biddy directly to agrarian violence or to the possession of illegal spirits. The charge of ‘meddling with Witchcraft’ was later dismissed, for lack of evidence, as once again, witnesses against her, refused to testify.

Sometimes, however, Biddy did manage to solve a few crimes, herself. The following story came from Rathcarril, Templeglantine, County Limerick:

An uncle of my father had a couple of sheep stolen from his lands and he could not trace them so he went to Biddy Early and told her his story. She brought him to a kind of mirror, which she had in the backroom and told him ‘look into the mirror’ and there he saw a man with two sheep in the middle of the mirror. Who was the man but a neighbour who was in want and whom he never suspected? He was satisfied to know what happened to his sheep so he thanked Biddy Early came home and did nothing more about it.

The next story from Moyreen, Ballybahaill, County Limerick, has a happier ending:

My grandmother was a Sheehan woman from Glin. Actually, she was born on the roadside near Kildimo, her father and mother going to Limerick at the time on a ‘pillion’. Well! She got a present of two calves when she was a young girl and a fine morning they disappeared off the lands. Her brothers consulted Biddy Early and her loss and Biddy said: ‘The people that are coming every morning to the house sympathising with you on the loss of your calves are the people who carried your cattle. They are going by boat today from Limerick. Harry on or they will be gone. They rushed back to Limerick and went to the boat where they found the missing cattle.'
Doctors appear in a number of stories concerning conflicts with Biddy Early.

That Biddy should live in a house rented from a Limerick doctor was rather ironical and whether it was for non-payment of rent or professional jealousy. I do not know, but the good doctor made up his mind to have her evicted and duly sent down some men from Limerick to throw her out on the roadside and tear down the cottage. Biddy stood inside her doorway defying the men and warned them, 'Whatever will be the first to put a bar to the house, he'll remember it.' In spite of this threat one of the men stuck a crowbar in between two stones in the wall and fell over in an awkward manner and broke his thigh. Needless to remark, the other men did nothing further about knocking the house but returned to Limerick with their injured companion.

Later, in another effort to get rid of her Dr. Murphy had Biddy brought to Court. 'Fairies and all', as someone remarked, when she turned up with her Black Bottle in her hand. Doctor Murphy got an order to have her evicted and she spent some time in Ennis Workhouse. Strange to relate, shortly after this, the house in which the doctor lived in Limerick caught fire one night and was burned to the ground. The Doctor was trapped inside and all that remained of him when daylight dawned was one charred foot that was found in a corner.

Biddy had a very summary method of dealing with visitors she did not wish to see. They simply did not reach her cottage. One Dr. Foley came from Ennis to remonstrate with her but he was led astray and it was beyond Ballylee [that] he found himself.

Many Bishops and Clergy left the country following the Banishment Act (1697) under fear of execution for treason. Previously, the Penal Laws (1695) were implemented in Ireland barring Catholics from important offices. Until repealed, by the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), the Catholic Church, remained largely silent on the issue of Biddy Early.

From this date, however, their interest in her activities began to grow. Indeed, the church routinely condemned such people under the Homilies of St. Eloi (1674).

Biddy was repeatedly criticised in sermons, given at local masses, so she gave up attending church regularly. However, she did advise local people to listen to the clergy. Nevertheless, she had run-ins, over an eight-year period, with various priests who did not want people to go to her. This hostility was, to some extent, based on the fact that her home had developed a dubious reputation for music, drink and merriment over the years.

Biddy Early was also strong willed and cut her own swathe through life. Many envied her ability to stand up to the great powers of the day. In conflicts with the clergy, for example, she frequently used her powers to humiliate those clerics who threatened her.

Invariably, the frightened priests begged her forgiveness and the undoing of a spell keeping them from leaving for home. In one case a priest came to her in plain clothes — surely one of the few occasions in which a priest is depicted as working 'under-cover'. Biddy recognised him immediately, though, and sent him on his way.

Despite this, Biddy Early received the last rites from Fr. Andrew Connellan when she died on April 22nd, 1874. It was also reported that the same man threw her 'Magic Bottle' into the lake nearby — whether under instruction from Biddy or of his own volition. 27 priests were said to have attended her funeral. Cryptically the parish priest left us with these words:

We thought we had a demon amongst us in poor Biddy Early but we had a saint and we did not know it. She gave us information that will save both ourselves and our people to the end of time. She often got herself into trouble to save me of my own tribe.

Conclusions

Biddy Early loved the company of others and by all accounts her home was a place of music and merriment throughout her life. She lived successively with four men, all of whom appear to have been well provided for, by her good works.

Her name has maintained an interest and notoriety down to the present time but our understanding of her is slowly changing. The real person is only now emerging out of the mists of time.

Despite her being a Clare icon many stories about Biddy Early involve Limerick people with whom she was clearly well connected.

Indeed, the Bard of Thomond eulogised her final moments thus:

Before she died at Kilbarron side,
She warned the neighbours firmly,
That they must throw in the Lough below,
The bottle o'Biddy Early.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Tulla Library, Google Images, Ms Gouttie Madden and St. Mary's Church, in Limerick, for the photographs reproduced here.

REFERENCES

P Dollard, "Was Biddy Early Really A Witch?" Letter to The Limerick Chronicle (1953)

Eddie Lenihan, In Search of Biddy Early, Mercer Press, (Cork 1987)

Samantha Novick, 'Ferrenia Closure To Be Recalled', Limerick Leader (October 24, 2007)


Joseph A. Robbins, Feed And Mail - A History Of The Insane in Ireland, The Institute Of Public Administration, (Dublin 1986).


Dolly Stewart, 'Biddy Early-Famous "Witch" Of Clare' (Part One), Limerick Chronicle, October 3, 1953

Dolly Stewart, 'Biddy Early-Famous "Witch" Of Clare' (Part Two), Limerick Chronicle, October 10, 1953.

The entry of marriage (in Latin) showing the names of Bridget Connors and Thomas Meaney who were married (in 1689) at St. Mary's Church in Limerick

(Courtesy of St. Mary's Church, Limerick)