



Witchcraft in Irish Folklore

We profile
BIDDY EARLY
from Co. Clare
who had a great
reputation as a healer

(Image: Buzz)

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Witchcraft

Witchcraft is the practice of magic, often involving spell work, ritual and a connection to nature, but the term has different meaning across cultures and time periods.

Irish witchcraft was historically rooted in ancient Celtic paganism with practitioners often called wise women or fairy doctors serving as healers and advisors who used herbal remedies and connections with the spirit world. These people were respected members of the community until the influence of Christianity and the subsequent witch trials, which lead to the death of some of these women.

Ireland had very few convictions for these women, mainly through lack of evidence and the support they received from their communities. One of these was a woman from Clare by the name of Biddy Early who had a great reputation as a healer. Wise women practiced herbal medicine, used charms and rituals and processed a deep knowledge of land and its natural properties something that is still very evident today. The Irish Times published an article in 2017 about Ireland's most famous witches, noting that these powerful women had one thing in common *"they were women who refused to conform"*.

Biddy Early – What do we know about her?

Biddy Early was born in lower Faha, Co. Clare during the rebellion of 1798. She was the only child of John Thomas Connors and Ellen Early. The family lived in poverty with eviction being a constant threat. When she was sixteen years of age both her parents passed away and Early entered a workhouse. Before her mother died however, she had passed on her knowledge of herbal medicine to Biddy. This knowledge would prove to be the basis for Biddy Early's fame.

Early held a respected place in her community for the most part. Where she lived was a superstitious place, where pishogues were employed to bring bad luck onto neighbours. Wise women such as Early were brought to lift these curses from the poor. She would also use herbs and local plants to cure diseases and other afflictions for locals and their animals. As G.H. Kinan put it: *"She relied on herbs not just charms."* She had a practical-based knowledge of healing. Generally no payment would be given, except occasionally some food. Her home was a social place where local people would feel welcome. However it was widely known that Early had a distrust of most figures of authority, some of which manifested from her experiences of evictions. Unsurprisingly the Catholic Church did not hold her in high regard. In penal times the powers the Church possessed against wise women were restricted. Yet in 1829 with Catholic Emancipation, the Church became a force to be reckoned with in Ireland. It vehemently opposed all forms of heresy and would do all in its power to try to demolish it. A non-professionally trained healer represented exactly this sort of heresy. It should be noted that a 'witch' healer was often the only general practitioner available to people who did not have access to hospitals or doctors. Wise women's remedies included painkillers as well as anti-inflammatory and digestive aids, which all still hold their place in modern pharmacology. While healing through prayer was sanctioned and in the control of the Church, charms (which were thought at the time to be as effective as prayer) were not.

And so Biddy Early joined the thousands who were accused of witchcraft. She was tried in Ennis in 1865. In the end most of the people who accused her withdrew their testimony and she had the majority backing of the peasant population. Early was lucky to have been acquitted, unlike a great number of peasant women in the rest of Europe. In the witch hunts, the Church explicitly legitimised the doctors' professionalism, denouncing non-professional healing as acts equivalent to heresy. *"If a woman dare cure without having studied, she is a witch and must die."* (Malleus Maleficarum). But of course the vast majority of women were not permitted to study. Regardless of the intensity of the witch trials, they did not manage to wipe out the lower class woman healer; instead her name was tarred as superstitious or malevolent.

Source: Womensmuseumofireland.ie



Hallowe'en is said to have influences from Christian belief. The English word Halloween comes from All Hallows Eve, being the evening before the two holy days of November 1st & 2nd All Saints and All Souls Day where we remember and reflect on all those that have gone before us. We welcome the end of the harvest plus the beginning of winter or the dark half of the year. It is also when the veil between earth and the spirit world is at its thinnest and this can allow some of the spirits to return.

It is a time for celebration and many young people mark it by trick or treating. They dress up in costumes and go from house to house hoping to receive a treat. The many traditions of Hallowe'en vary throughout the world.

Sources:
The Irish Times
Wikipedia

