



The Doctor's Wife Is Dead: The True Story of a Peculiar Marriage, a Suspicious Death, and the Murder Trial that Shocked Ireland

Andrew Tierney

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A mysterious death in respectable society: a brilliant historical true crime story

In 1849, a woman called Ellen Langley died in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. She was the wife of a prosperous local doctor. So why was she buried in a pauper's coffin? Why had she been confined to the grim attic of the house she shared with her husband, and then exiled to a rented dwelling-room in an impoverished part of the famine-ravaged town? And why was her husband charged with murder?

Following every twist and turn of the inquest into Ellen Langley's death and the trial of her husband, *The Doctor's Wife is Dead* tells the story of an unhappy marriage, of a man's confidence that he could get away with abusing his wife, and of the brave efforts of a number of ordinary citizens to hold him to account. Andrew Tierney has produced a tour de force of narrative nonfiction that shines a light on the double standards of Victorian law and morality and illuminates the weave of money, sex, ambition and respectability that defined the possibilities and limitations of married life. It is a gripping portrait of a marriage, a society and a shocking legal drama.

'An astonishing book ... a vivid chronicle of the unspeakable cruelty perpetrated by a husband on his spouse at a time when, in law, a wife was a man's chattel' Damian Corless, *Irish Independent*

'Opens in gripping style and rarely falters ... fascinating and well researched' Mary Carr, *Irish Mail on Sunday* (5 stars)

'Truly illuminating ... Tierney's exploration of the case's influence on Irish and English lawmaking and literature is particularly intriguing, drawing comparisons with Kate Summerscale's similar work in The Suspicions of Mr Whicher' Jessica Traynor, *Sunday Times*

'Riveting ... meticulously researched and deftly told' *Irish Examiner*

'A nonfiction work with the pulse of a courtroom drama ... Tierney's book is a moving account of Ellen Langley's squalid last days, but it's also a study of Famine-era Irish society. Men dominate, be they grimly professional gents in tall hats and grey waistcoats or feckless scoundrels using women as chattel' Peter Murphy, *Irish Times*

'A dark tale of spousal abuse, illicit sex and uncertain justice, set against a backdrop of poverty and privilege, marital inequality and the deep religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. Tierney is an archaeologist, and his skill in unearthing the past is on display as he digs deep into the historical record of a murder case so shocking and controversial that it was debated in parliament. ... Tierney writes with passion ... and deftly weaves a plot that's filled with surprising twists and turns' *History Ireland*

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Date : Published February 23rd 2017 by Penguin Ireland

ISBN : 9781844883929

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Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Crime, True Crime, History, Mystery, Cultural, Ireland

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Mairin Delaney says

This book would have been absolutely enthralling if I was from Nenagh, Co Tipperary, or its environs. I think I would have hung onto absolutely every word and place name etc. It's a very detailed book and I found myself glossing over quite a few details because I didn't relate to the places. However, it was a fascinating insight into the subservience of women at that time and to how some people seemed to be very unaffected by the famine. I definitely learned a few things despite the local-ness of the story and would recommend it for that reason. A definite must also I would say for history or legal buffs!

Cleo Bannister says

On 1 May 1849 Ellen Langley dies in Nenagh, County Tipperary the local women gather and stone the house she was living in. Meanwhile Doctor Langley tried to go about the business of removing Ellen's body from the house; he did, she spent two days in the garden.

This is the account of one woman's life, a fairly indistinct figure and her sad demise and one that serves as a commentary on how women were both viewed and treated at this time, with a focus on the laws in Ireland at the time. It is clear, for whatever reason, Ellen Langley had been cast aside by her husband and in 1849 that put her in a very precarious position indeed.

This was an interesting read although the explanation of the convoluted family relations slowed pace of the book with mini-biographies of countless kith and kin, fortunately there are some family trees at the start of the book to assist the reader.

Following these early explanations we then move onto the part of the book which was far more interesting, the inquest where Doctor Langley seems at pains to exonerate himself from the faintest whiff of suspicion of wrongdoing. As a Protestant man of social standing, a man who had attended inquests as an expert witness at previous murder trials (there was far more serious crime in County Tipperary at this time than I'd imagined) it is possible that the Doctor was just pre-empting any rumours, after all the fact that his marriage to Ellen had not been happy in the last few months was no secret. Or his efforts to appear innocent were those of a man who was trying to disguise his guilt?

One of the things that always strikes me about historical true crime is how much faster the wheels of justice tended to move in those days. Archaeologist Andrew Tierney has certainly dug deep to find the documents that detail the court proceedings and has resisted what surely must have been a big temptation to flesh Ellen out with more details than are actually available. As a result she remains a shadowy being which made me feel all the more compassionate for this woman who represents so many of her time.

You can't have a historical account in Ireland without links to the conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants and while this doesn't overshadow the court case it is useful to have the context, if only to gain an understanding of social standing. Alongside that, Ellen died during the potato famine and the author

paints a desperate picture of the effect this had on the local population, the contrast between the rich and the poor being readily apparent.

This is a worthy addition to my historical true crime collection and the arrogance and lack of compassion from some players in the court room, all men of course, women were not allowed at this time, was so blatant it defied belief at times, but there is a lot to keep the reader's attention. And then we get to the ending, court case over, *The Doctor's Wife is Dead* leaves us with a surprise discovery which left me shocked.

Amy says

Review to come!

Helen Carolan says

Excellent read. Tells of Dr Langley who starved his wife to death in the 1840's. It also covers the horrors women were often forced to endure while married and the fact that they had no rights what-so-ever. It also deals with the differences between the wealthy and the Irish peasantry during the famine. Enjoyed this one.

Katie says

I did not enjoy reading this book. The story itself about a man who hates his wife and tries many times to divorce her or cause her death is interesting. However I found the way the story was told to be very boring. The problem is that this book was about a factual event in history and therefore has to be fully historically accurate. This meant that the book was full of a lot of unnecessary information, or waffle, for want of a better word. I love history but this book was too drawn out and it took away from the drama.

Bridget says

I had seen a synopsis of this book and wanted to read it, but I never thought it would turn out to be so timely. As I was reading this, the hearings were happening to determine whether or not Brett Kavanaugh would be made the next Supreme Court Justice, in spite of the testimony against him by Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford, who was assaulted by him as a teenager. Results seem to indicate that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

But on to this particular book. In the mid-1840s, a woman dies at home in Ireland. When her body is moved from the house, there are women outside throwing rocks at the windows, yelling insults to the dead woman's husband. Why? Because it's well-known that he mistreated his wife, and many people in the village find her death suspicious.

Ellen Langley is the woman in question. Her husband is a local doctor, and though they are not wealthy, they have a comfortable life - well, at least he does. For reasons that are murky at best, the doctor not only seems to hate his wife, but actively makes her life miserable - neglecting her, starving her, not providing any real

health care. Eventually she dies, and her body is placed in the cheapest coffin possible, which is left in the garden for two days until it is moved to be placed in a pauper's grave.

Dr. Langley is tried for murder in the death of his wife. Evidence is presented indicating that he more or less made her life miserable from the start, and actively tried to think of ways to get rid of her when he fell in love with a cousin of hers. Letters written in his own hand are brought into evidence and read aloud at the hearing. Other people in the small town in the Tipperary area testify to his terrible behavior and treatment of his wife, his desire to be rid of her, and certain questionable activities on his part. All of this leads to his acquittal, in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary. He goes on to live the rest of his life with another wife, children, and a respectable practice.

The book is interesting because it shows the limited opportunities available to women who were not part of the wealthy class in Ireland during this time. It is also a clear illustration of the difference between the wealthy English in Ireland and the local people struggling to make ends meet.

A really good read, if frustrating and disheartening, especially at the time I was reading it.

Janet Emson says

1849 and Mrs Langley, the doctor's wife, is dead. But why had she been made to live in the attic of her home and why had she previously been sent to live in a poor part of town? *The Doctor's Wife is Dead* follows the trial of Dr Langley and the reactions of family and friends to the treatment of Mrs Langley.

At first I wasn't totally engaged with the book. There are many people to feature in the lives of Dr and Mrs Langley, and it was difficult to differentiate between family members, legal advisors and inquest jury members. In fact I started to read the book then put it to one side for a while. But I picked it up again and found that this time I was wrapped up in the melancholy tale of a wife seemingly cast out by her younger husband.

There is a lot to find interesting in the book. The social morals and ideals of the 19th Century are more immediate when told by way of an actual family. The book manages to veer away from the salacious and whilst the author endeavours to remain impartial, the reader inevitably draws their own conclusions.

The story is just as much a treatise on domestic violence as it is an examination of the place in society women held in the 19th Century. Whilst there are many differences between then and now the tale of Dr and Mrs Langley is still as relevant today, sadly.

Dr Langley appears from the testimony of witnesses and from his own letters, to be a controlling, narcissistic man, who married his older wife for her money. He is conniving and deliberate in his treatment towards her. Whilst domestic abuse was prevalent in the 19th Century, laws were only just coming into being to protect women, and the burden of proof and social stigma attached to any such allegations was still high. Even by today's standards the Langley case is shocking and sad, for contemporaries it would have been scandalous, the details of it even reaching Westminster.

This is an interesting look at a case that is both of its time and of the moment.

Katherine O'Meara Reynolds says

Brilliant research went into this. Very highly recommend, especially if you have a background or interest in 19th c. Irish social history.

Katy says

Originally posted here.

Okay. So this was quite the depressing read. It is a true crime non-fiction about the suspicious death of a doctor's wife in Nenagh, Ireland in 1849. The poor woman was placed in the cheapest coffin available and without a shroud, left to rot in the garden, amongst trash, for two days before being buried in an unmarked grave in the local churchyard. Scandalous and terrible treatment of a loved one's body for the time. Of course, the locals were suspicious that the doctor had poisoned her and the book is about what really happened as the full story is illuminated in the subsequent murder trial.

What was really **depressing** about this book was the fact that it highlighted the painful reality that women of this time period had no rights whatsoever when it came to domestic violence, abuse, or spousal infidelity. Wives were to remain completely faithful to their husbands whilst their husbands could stuff it to anyone they pleased, or abuse their wives however they liked, without persecution. As soon as a wife had an affair, she felt the full force of the law. It was terrible. My goodness.

I didn't enjoy this book as much as I thought I would because I did not particularly like the writing style. It felt convoluted and rushed in places, and there was so many different names to keep track of that I found myself getting confused on more than one occasion. The case presented is shocking, does not have a happy ending, and what exactly happened to the victim is never ascertained. It was kind of maddening really. I can't say I would particularly recommend it.

Disclaimer

I received a complementary copy from the publisher. All opinions stated in this review are unbiased and my own.

Thebooktrail says

Visit the settings in the novel: The Doctor's Wife is Dead

Well this was interesting! A crime I'd never heard of and a location I'd never been to. Two for the price of one you might say – I found it fascinating to read about the time and period in which the crime took place. How doctors were almost forced to attend inquiries, how many coffins were carried out of the doors, how violence of the reforms of the time lead to such bitter disputes and death. As with many of these historical crime, I was amazed and saddened to read of the plight of women.

The role of the famine was a gritty historical backdrop and placed the novel together with the social mores

and the plight of women but what shocked me was that at the centre of all this, a man decided to starve and poison his wife. An unusual crime at best and one that was usually suspected of women. There was a panic about poisons in Ireland at the time we are told and so many inconsistencies with how the body was examined that 2 and 2 soon become 5

The novel not only examines the central crime but takes a good long hard look at events in Tipperary at the time. Ellen's backstory was fascinating and the inquest, as it unravels was gripping. I am fascinated with historical crimes and how they were investigated given that they had none of the technology available to us today.

A recommended read for historical crime fans
