

# Agatha Christie approach solves mysteries of Irish revolution

One night in March 1921, Bridget Walpole did not come home. A small boy found her lying in a ditch, shot in the back of the head, 400 yards from her front door. Police noted the bullet hole through the folds of the shawl on her head, the blue pencil thrown on top of her body, and the words on a piece of paper tied around her neck: "Convicted spy, and all others beware. RIP."

The court of inquiry which investigated her death assumed they had another case of a now-familiar type. She seemed like the others taken from their homes, often at night, and found in the mornings at the side of a road, or in the corner of a field, with a crudely fashioned label; sometimes blindfolded, sometimes with hands and feet bound, sometimes with rosary beads clutched in a dying grasp.

By June 1921, the clerk who filed the records of the courts of inquiry which had largely replaced traditional inquests was simply writing "usual spy notices on body", such was how "usual" this kind of death had become. But when District Inspector Thomas Reilly began to give evidence at the court of inquiry into her death, it became clear Bridget Walpole's was not a "usual" death. He mentioned a life assurance policy, he spoke of "friction" between herself and others in her house; he knew of no



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reason why the IRA would want to execute this woman. He believed the label had been placed round her neck "to avert suspicion from the real culprit".

There were many things that might have aroused the district inspector's suspicions — inconsistent evidence about dates and times, a niece not even stopping to look at the body before rushing back to Tralee for food for the funeral, the failure to notify the police for a whole day after the death. But there was one other reason. So much had been correctly done — the bullet to the back of the head, the label, even the choice of a blue pencil, a colour reported to have been used in

other cases. Ending the message with "RIP" was not usual, however. The IRA signed almost every label it left on men and women it had "convicted" of spying or informing with its own acronym. The label's function was, after all, to warn others not to do what the dead had done, to behold the nature of revenge, the indignity of death on the roadside. The IRA did not implore that its victims rest in peace. For generations Irish nationalists had called down all manner of imprecations on the head of the "spy" and the "informer"; a restful eternal repose was rare among them. So the RIP was a sentiment out of place.

Despite this mistake, no one seems to have been charged with Walpole's murder; hers was just one violent death in the middle of so many others; more than 1,000 since the IRA's war for independence had begun in January 1919.

The best place to hide a murder, if Agatha Christie is to be believed, is among a lot of other murders. Had Bridget been bludgeoned, smothered or stabbed, it could not be passed off as the work of the IRA. To hide her murder among all the others, it had to look

precisely like them. It had to follow the established pattern; to appropriate the disappearance, the wound, the indignities. She had to be killed in a way that could only be recognised as an IRA execution.

So her death suggests there was a pattern to follow, that by this point certain acts of violence denoted certain things. There was a language of violence to be read through the nature of wounds, just as it was there to be read on the crude label tied round the victim's neck.

In the act of imitation, in the attempt but perhaps more in the failure to deceive, Walpole's killers confirmed the bodies of the dead have something to tell us about the nature of Ireland's revolutionary violence. The wounds, the label, the person taken, the body found; this was violence performed to make a point. And the point was to terrify as much as to kill.

By contemporary European standards, the Irish War of Independence was a small war. Deaths like this partly explain why. This was the violence of a small place, where whispered retellings shocked all the more because most people knew who was being whispered about.

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