

# Virginia Tighe and the past life mania of the 1950s

*Phil Egan - August 2022*

When a Denver, Colorado housewife named Virginia Tighe passed away in 1995, the New York Times took note of the event, cheekily observing that her death had taken place, “perhaps for the second time.”

Born in 1923, Tighe had been living in Pueblo, Colorado in 1952 when she famously became the subject of a session with a businessman and amateur hypnotist named Morey Bernstein. After witnessing a session conducted by a professional, Bernstein had become fascinated to the point of obsession with the subject of hypnosis, voraciously reading every book and article he could find on the subject.

At the point he felt he had mastered the rudiments of the practise, he decided to give it a try. Almost immediately, Bernstein began to record a measure of success. Through his power of post-hypnotic suggestion, he was able to cure one woman’s smoking addiction and another’s persistent stutter. As a result, Bernstein was feeling quite comfortable in his new hobby by the time of his 1952 session with the 29-year-old Tighe.

After successfully regressing Tighe back to her early childhood, Bernstein decided to push a little farther.

He was then astounded when Tighe began speaking in a thick Irish brogue, describing the life of a woman born in Cork in 1798 to a local barrister and his wife. She was able to describe her life in Cork from the age of eight, naming several shops in her home area, as well as the name of her later husband and the name of the parish in which they’d been wed.

She said that she had died from a fall in 1864 and could remember watching her own funeral. She told Bernstein her name was Bridey Murphy.

The tale created a sensation across North America, sparking a fascination with the idea of reincarnation and past lives. Told first in a series of articles in the Denver Post Magazine, the Bridey Murphy story was, in 1956, the subject of a book and a movie of the same name – The Search for Bridey Murphy.

The publicity-shy Tighe insisted on being identified only by a pseudonym – Ruth Simmons. People took great comfort in what many viewed as evidence of life after death. “Come as you were” parties sprang up, with guests urged to dress as they might have looked in a past life. Comedians joked about doctors greeting newborns with the words, “Welcome back!” Bars served “Reincarnation Cocktails.”

In the wake of the book and the movie, investigative journalists, scientists, psychologists and other researchers poured into the Emerald Isle in an attempt to verify the Bridey Murphy story.

It turned out that “the search for Bridey Murphy” had not been much of a search at all, other than inside the hypnotized Virginia Tighe’s trance. Although some geographical aspects of her description of Cork proved accurate, no record of either the life or death of Bridey Murphy could be found. The story was filled with factual errors and inconsistencies – the parish where she claimed to have been married - St. Theresa’s – had not yet been built, to cite one example.

The story further collapsed when a Chicago reporter discovered that Tighe, as a three-year-old living in Chicago, had a close neighbour named Bridey Murphy Corkell.

Some psychologists believed that Tighe was the victim of cryptomnesia – incorporating events from her own childhood into fragments of stories heard from Corkell and other Irish Americans during her early days in Chicago.

Happening as it did following nearly six years of carnage during the Second World War, followed by the Korean Conflict and the Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation, the Bridey Murphy story offered hope to a world that had seen too much death and despair.

The storyteller, Charles Dickens, once gave us his own thoughts on the lure of considering the question of life after life:

“All human beings go through a previous life,” Dickens said. “Who knows how many fleshly forms the heir of heaven occupies before he can be brought to understand the value of that silence and solitude whose starry plains are but the vestibule of spiritual worlds?”