

# The Search for Bridey Murphy: Implications for Modern Hypnosis

Melvin A. Gravitz  
George Washington University

The 1956 publication of *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was a noteworthy event for the field of hypnosis. This internationally best selling book, written for lay readers, described several recorded sessions of alleged time-regression to a prior life nearly two centuries before 1956. While subsequent investigations disproved that claim, there were a number of important implications for the science and practice of hypnosis. Although it was concluded that the Bridey Murphy interviews were products of cryptomnesia, the book was a significant factor associated with a resurgence of public and professional interest in the modality.

Key words: Bridey Murphy, cryptomnesia, lay hypnosis, reincarnation

## Introduction

A half century ago, the 1952 case of Bridey Murphy became a landmark event in the history of hypnosis. This instance of purported regressions by hypnosis to a prior lifetime was reported in a book, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, written by Morey Bernstein (1956). His death in 1999 was deemed important enough to warrant extensive coverage in the *New York Times* (Thomas, 1999). The book became an international best seller published in 30 languages; a Hollywood film was based on it; popular songs were written; and a phonograph recording of one session was pressed. Prominent figures in scientific and clinical hypnosis commented on the book (Kline, 1956) that remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for six consecutive months, an accomplishment unmatched either before or since by any other book on hypnosis. The Bridey Murphy phenomenon quickly assumed sociocultural as well as scientific significance.

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Melvin A. Gravitz, Ph.D.  
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences  
George Washington University Medical School  
1325 Eighteenth Street NW, Suite 105  
Washington, DC 20036-6511  
melgra@erols.com

## Background

A successful Colorado businessman, Bernstein had long been interested in hypnosis and such arcane beliefs as clairvoyance, telepathy, and reincarnation. In late 1952, he attended a social function at a friend's home where, because he was known as an amateur hypnotist, he was asked to present a demonstration. The subject was a 29-year old married woman, Virginia Tighe, to whom at her request he later gave the pseudonym of Ruth Mills Simmons to protect her privacy. She had previously impressed him as being an adept subject during two prior hypnosis sessions. During one of those sessions, she claimed to have regressed spontaneously to one year of age with the concurrent retrieval of memories of events that had occurred at that time.

## Hypnotic Induction

Subsequently, during the late evening of November 29, 1952, Simmons (i.e., Mrs. Tighe) met with Bernstein for the purpose of conducting further experiments with hypnotic regression. She was asked to lie on a couch, and a brief hypnotic induction was undertaken based on the classic technique of optical fixation on a flickering candle. A recorder was then activated, and Bernstein proceeded with further instructions which included insistently that she go "back, back, back...until oddly enough you find yourself in some other scene, in some other place, in some other time, and when I talk to you again, you will tell me about it" (Bernstein, 1956, p. 111). He also told her that "there are other scenes from faraway lands and distant places in your memory (and)...When I talk to you again you will tell me about it. You will be able to talk to me about it and answer my questions." Certain aspects of his technique may be considered leading, while the interpersonal situation itself included a number of what are recognized today as demand characteristics.

There are significant transference aspects of such direct instructions, especially if the hypnotic subject were a passive-dependent-suggestible individual who perceived the hypnotist as an authority figure. Furthermore, Bernstein's personal belief in reincarnation could have been communicated to Tighe either overtly or through other channels, such as his reputation in their mutual circle. Expectancy and compliance, therefore, were important factors then as in all hypnotic transactions.

## Bridey Emerges

Tighe soon began to speak in a low, relaxed voice and at times with an Irish-sounding brogue. When Bernstein asked who she was, she identified herself as Bridey Murphy and then described many other details of an alleged past existence. Her birth-date was given as December 20, 1798, and her birthplace as near Cork in Ireland. She further related that she had been named after her grandmother, Bridget, and that she was the daughter of Kathleen and Duncan Murphy. She then reported that at the age of 20 she had married Sean Brian Joseph MacCarthy, after which they had moved to Belfast, where they resided on Dooley Road. After fracturing her hip in a fall while in her early 60s, she had died peacefully and without pain, although an invalid, on a Sunday in 1864 at the age of 66. She added that following her death she had lived a long time "in the spirit world" before her rebirth in 1923 as Ruth Mills in the American state of Iowa (Bernstein, 1956, p. 119). While in a state of "purgatory" after her death

and prior to her reincarnation, she claimed that she had seen and conversed with several persons whom she had known while living in Ireland. The latter included her younger brother who had died “when just a baby,” but who nevertheless was said to have been able to converse with her in English. Bernstein at one point asked Tighe to regress even before Ireland, whereupon she related that she had led a prior life in America, where she had resided with her parents, Vera and John, in New Amsterdam, as New York City was named between 1626-1664.

A total of six hypnotic regression interviews was conducted between November 1952 and October 1953, during the course of which further details of Bridey’s alleged life in Ireland were reported. Although Bernstein in his book claimed that she spoke throughout in a heavy brogue, listening to the vinyl recording of the initial session that is available today revealed that there were numerous times when her brogue became light and even absent (Bernstein, 1956; 1969). She told Irish stories, sang Irish songs, and interjected Irish colloquialisms throughout her accounts. Bernstein was especially impressed by Bridey’s report that she had danced to an Irish tune called, “The Morning Jig,” and he gave her a post-hypnotic suggestion that she would perform that dance, which she then did (Bernstein, 1956, p. 162.).

Throughout the six hypnotic interviews, Tighe always identified herself as Bridey Murphy, and when asked, she nearly always recounted further details about her alleged past life. These were all the more remarkable because Tighe had never visited Ireland and in fact had been born in the United States. In the first session, she told of making a trip to the Glens of Antrim and passing by the Loughs of Carlingford and Foyle, explaining that lough meant lake in Gaelic. She mentioned the full names of a number of friends, such as Mary Katherine and Kevin Moore of Belfast. During the third session, she noted such specifics as reading the local *Belfast News-Letter*; that she lived in The Meadows district of Cork; that there was a women’s apparel shop called Caden House; that her husband taught law at Queen’s University; and that she liked to cook his favorite meal of boiled beef and onions. She spoke of Irish folklore and history, citing a famous warrior named Cuchulain, and she added that her mother had read to her such books as “The Sorrows of Deirdre” and “The Tales of Emer.” When pressed by Bernstein, she almost always added additional details as above.

### **The Investigation of Bridey’s Claims**

In general, the popular press at first reported on Bridey Murphy without critical comment. In Chicago, however, there was at the time competition among several major newspapers for circulation, and objectivity in reporting seems to have been secondary to increasing readership. Pro and con investigations of the Bridey Murphy story were consequently undertaken. One newspaper accepted her story as valid, but because of the strong public interest the *Chicago American* sent a team of investigative journalists to both the Chicago neighborhood where Tighe had lived as a child and to the Irish locales mentioned by Bridey.

These investigators encountered numerous discrepancies based upon on the scene inquiries. Tighe, who had moved to Chicago when she was four years old, had been born in 1922 in Madison, Wisconsin. She had lived there in a white frame house very similar in design to the one described by Bridey as her residence in Ireland. Tighe’s mother’s name was Katherine, and Bridey had given her mother’s name as Kathleen

(clang association?). Other similarities and near-similarities were soon found between Tighe's real life experiences growing up in Chicago and Bridey's accounts of her past life in Ireland. Among others, these included the following:

- A close neighbor whom Tighe knew well as a child was Mrs. Bridie (sic) Murphy Corkell.
- Tighe had an aunt who died when Tighe was a child. That relative came from Ireland and often told her stories about life in her homeland.
- Bridey lived in the Irish city of Cork (clang association to Mrs. Corkell?).
- Tighe as a child had been infatuated with Mrs. Corkell's son, John, and Bridey married a man named Sean, which is Gaelic for John.
- Tighe's uncle recalled that Tighe liked to dance Irish jigs for pennies. Bernstein had considered it impressive that Bridey had posthypnotically danced a jig in his presence.
- Tighe's sister had had a bad fall down a flight of stairs, while Bridey said that her own death resulted from a crippling fall.
- Tighe had a brother who died when she was five, and Bridey said her brother died when she was four.
- One of Tighe's favorite childhood songs was "Danny Boy," which was also Bridey's favorite.
- Tighe liked to eat potato pancakes, as did Bridey.
- According to her foster parents, Tighe imitated a brogue very well, and at times Bridey spoke to Bernstein in a passable brogue.
- Tighe's foster parents had a friend whom she called Uncle Plazz, and Bridey had an uncle with that identical unusual name.
- Tighe, who had naturally brown hair, wanted to have red hair so much when a child that she had once tinted hers that color. Bridey said that she had bright red hair.
- A high school teacher reported that Tighe was actively involved in dramatics and liked to play-act. In those settings, Tighe had memorized several Irish monologues that she delivered in a heavy brogue. In one monologue, she adopted the persona of Bridget Mahon (note the initials B.M.) Another monologue was called "Mrs. Dooley on Archer Road", and Bridey had claimed that she and her husband had resided on Dooley Road in Belfast. Subsequent investigation disclosed that no street by that name had ever existed in Belfast.
- Bridey's husband was Sean Brian Joseph MacCarthy. During the 1950s, the name of United States Senator Joseph McCarthy (sic) was well known. Both the senator and Tighe came from Wisconsin.

A reasonable conclusion, therefore, is that these and other similarities were not coincidental, and Tighe's account can be best understood as the result of confabulation and other distortions of the memory process.

## Discussion

There is an important consideration that should be noted at the onset: The use of hypnosis by lay persons. Hypnosis has long been demonstrated to be an effective therapeutic modality, if applied appropriately and by qualified professionals. If not

utilized properly and with due care, however, the psychological defenses of vulnerable individuals could become unsettled (MacHovec, 1986). While the amateur hypnotist in the Bridey Murphy case reported encountering no problems, the outcome of his “experiments” with his subject could have been detrimental. No preliminary mental status evaluation was conducted, nor in fact did Bernstein have the qualifications to do so even had he wished.

Several hypotheses may be considered in understanding the Bridey Murphy phenomenon. First, is it truly possible to regress someone by hypnosis to a prior existence that may have occurred decades or even centuries ago? That is, is reincarnation a valid phenomenon? Over the long history of hypnosis, such claims have been made, and there are some today who believe that reincarnation and even multiple reincarnations can occur. There is even a present-day supposed psychotherapy based on so-called past lives regression. The scientific and rational evidence in support of such claims, however, is lacking. No matter how strongly a personal or cultural belief system may be held, that is not a substitute for scientific facts. Although there are some studies that claim to validate past-life experiences (e.g., Stevenson, 1975), there has been no supportive evidence; accordingly, regression to a previous life is not an acceptable explanation in the Bridey Murphy case.

A second possibility is that the lay hypnotist who conducted these interviews, and/or his subject, deliberately perpetrated a hoax upon the public. Deceit and fraud have not been absent from some of the claims made for hypnosis, neither during the early years of its existence, nor in modern times; however, no information was available to support the view that a hoax was perpetrated in this case.

It also does not appear that Bernstein, already an affluent businessman, wrote his book for monetary advantage. Although he hypnotically interviewed Tighe between November 1952 and October 1953, *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was not published until 1956. The author and the publisher must have been pleased by the remarkable success of the book that sold more than 200,000 hardcover copies within the first three months and then several million more in soft-cover.

A third possibility is that hypnosis in this instance resulted in the development of divided consciousness, or dissociated identity. Such dissociated reactions during hypnosis have been known to occur in a number of cases before and since Bridey Murphy. Up to and including the 1950s such accounts were rare. Although there are no data that indicate any change in the current incidence of these phenomena (Putnam, 2002), there was a relatively sharp increase in reported cases during the 1980s (Putnam, 1989). However, the Bridey Murphy case lacks the diagnostic criteria for MPD/DID.

There is a fourth possibility that merits the strongest consideration. Tighe’s expectancies, her prior hypnotic experiences with Bernstein, her compliance, transference, acquiescence, and heightened suggestibility, could have set the stage for the subsequent behavior of both the hypnotist and subject in a nonconscious interrelationship in which both parties accepted their beliefs as reality. Considering all the available hypotheses, this last possibility is the most likely explanation: Bridey Murphy was the product of cryptomnesia that was facilitated and reinforced by hypnosis.

## The Legacies of Bridey Murphy

The Bridey Murphy case remains significant for a number of reasons. These were both positive and negative in terms of their impact on the field.

### Negative Legacy

The most negative impact was that the general public and some professionals were led to believe that hypnotically facilitated past-life experiences and reincarnation were valid phenomena. The extensive publicity surrounding the case lent the legitimacy of the printed word to the old but discredited claims of association between hypnosis and the paranormal. That misconception has permeated and clouded the understanding of hypnosis since the days of Mesmer.

Another negative was the dissemination of the erroneous belief that hypnosis can produce powers not ordinarily available in an individual. Despite that mythology, however, modern science has not identified any psychological, emotional, or physiological parameters that are unique to hypnosis. Even so, the book presented extraordinary claims that were false, misleading, and ultimately damaging to the field.

### Positive Legacy

While there were deleterious consequences of the Bridey Murphy experiment, this present writer believes that there were also certain benefits. Foremost was the fact that the widely disseminated publicity stimulated both public and professional interest in hypnosis. Prior to the publication of *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, for example, most scientists and professionals in medicine and psychology knew little of the contributions to hypnosis of such scholars as Clark L. Hull and such innovative clinicians as Milton H. Erickson. While they led the way to today's important developments, the general public was not then, or even now for that matter, aware of their names or accomplishments; but because of the popularity of Bernstein's book, the public became more familiarized with hypnosis.

There was also heightened interest in the scientific community. When Bernstein's book was first published in 1956, hypnosis was not generally acceptable as a legitimate area for scientific inquiry and clinical practice. The exigencies of World War II had resulted in a large increase in the number of qualified military medical and psychological practitioners of the modality. In 1949, these American clinicians and researchers founded the research-focused Society of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis (SCEH). Then in 1955, the British Medical Association recognized hypnosis as a valid technique. As a counter-focus for practice-oriented interests, the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH) was founded in 1958. That same year saw further developments in organized professional hypnosis: Both the American Medical Association and American Dental Association approved the use of hypnosis by their constituencies, and an international society of hypnosis was founded. Although psychologists for many decades had long been prominent workers in hypnosis, it was not until 1958 that the American Psychological Association (APA) recognized hypnosis as a legitimate modality. Despite that development, it was only in 1968 that APA Division 30 (recently renamed the Society of Psychological Hypnosis) was officially approved as an entity within that organization (Council, Gravitz, Hilgard & Levitt, 2000).

When *The Search for Bridey Murphy* first appeared in 1956, the membership of SCEH was quite small and concentrated principally in New York City, and a few other large metropolitan centers. Following the publication of the book, SCEH membership began a significant increase, and ASCH and APA Division 30 were soon founded. The heightened interest in hypnosis stimulated at least in part by the book led more professionals and researchers to undertake investigation and practice in hypnosis, and more patients began to consult clinicians who employed the modality. Data are discussed below to support this conclusion.

As a result of the controversy surrounding the alleged retrieval by hypnosis of past-life memories, increased scientific interest in such phenomena soon developed. This has continued to the present day, and the impact of hypnosis on memory has become an integral area of modern research in psychology, law, and related fields. While memory has long been a traditional area of psychology, the publication of the Bridey Murphy case was concurrent with an increased pace of subsequent investigation.

The uses of regressive and uncovering techniques as treatment strategies were also increased. Until the 1950s, and dating back more than a century prior to that, the typical therapeutic method in hypnosis was direct suggestion for either symptom remission or attenuation. In recent decades, however, that has given way to the development of a broader, more sophisticated, and more flexible spectrum of techniques.

### **Impact on Subsequent Research and Practice**

Publication of the Bridey Murphy case resulted in increased scientific research and clinical practice in hypnosis. Evidence for this conclusion was obtained by utilizing the comprehensive resources of the National Library of Medicine, the preeminent collection of worldwide literature in the life sciences. Comparisons were made between the total number of English-language publications in hypnosis research and clinical practice in a number of temporal periods both before and after Bernstein's book appeared in 1956.

In the five-year period 1946-50, there were 295 publications. That was followed by a drop to 254, or a 14% decrement, in 1951-55. Thus, there was a decreasing trend in hypnosis publications prior to 1956, the year when the book was published; in fact, in 1956, there were only 50 references. Then, in 1957-61 there was an increase to 284 or a gain of 20% over the previous five-year period. In 1962-66, there was another increase to 573 references or a gain of 51% over the prior quintile. To further assess the impact of the Bridey Murphy case, comparisons were made between the decades preceding and subsequent to the appearance of the book. In 1946-55, there were 549 references, while in 1957-66 there were 857. This was an increase of 56%.

On the basis of these objective data, the Bridey Murphy report is one of the significant events clearly associated with an increase in the hypnosis literature in the late 1950s. Other contributing factors included the contemporary emerging interest in mind-expanding technology and cognitive psychology in general. It is a reasonable assumption that in addition to accounts of research, there were similar increases in the clinical practice of hypnosis but such data are not available for comparison.

## Conclusions

The 1956 publication of *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was associated with a resurgence of public and scientific interest in hypnosis that had begun several years prior to then. Although the controversial claim of regression to pre-natal existences was disproved, the case resulted in a number of benefits. Not only did the saga of Bridey Murphy serve to stimulate research and practice in hypnosis, but in a number of related areas as well, including psychotherapy, memory, neuroscience, forensics, and others. What may have been the most significant overall impact of the case was the wide dissemination of the book and film which brought hypnosis to the attention of numerous segments of the public and the scientific communities in the United States and elsewhere.

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