

Mrs McGinty's Dead

1951

[NB: This review contains plot spoilers for this novel]

Set in the early 1950s, the misery brought about by the Second World War is still palpable in what should have been an idyllic English rural setting. It's all ration books, the 'awful 'ousing shortage' for the poor, the 'crippling death duties' for the once rich. There is dreadfully bad food for all: mouldy raspberries and blown tins of corned beef. Even the dogs have mange.

'Our villages, you know M. Poirot, aren't friendly. Evacuees found that during the war.'

Hercule Poirot, being not only a stranger, but also a *foreigner* finds it very difficult to talk to anyone in the small village of Broadhinny, near Kilchester.

Cullenquay, another fictional name, possibly based on Agatha Christie's hometown of Torquay, is 8 miles away. What makes this book worth reading is the humour associated with Ariadne Oliver arguing with Robin Upward, 'a budding playwright', about adapting her detective novel for the stage.

Ariadne Oliver's insights about writing and adapting detective novels are a thinly veiled Christie *crie du coeur*:

'You've no idea of the agony of having your characters taken and made to say things that they never would have said, and do things that they never would have done. And if you protest, all they say is that it's "good theatre". If he's so clever I don't see why he doesn't write a play of his own and leave my poor Finn alone.'

Mrs Oliver, when discussing her detective Finn, Sven Hjerson, with Robin Upward:

'He's sixty.'

'Oh no!'

'He is.'

'I don't see him like that. Thirty-five – not a day older.'

'But I've been writing books about him for thirty years and he was at least thirty-five in the first one.'

Agatha Christie's first Poirot, *The Mysterious affair of Styles*, was published in 1920. Mrs McGinty is set in 1951: thirty years after her first book. One can feel the mixture of pride and loathing Mrs Christie might have felt for Poirot, reading her alter ego's views on the detective from Finland. Ariadne has a wonderful soliloquy:

'Why a vegetarian? Why all the idiotic mannerisms he's got? These things just happen. You try something- and people seem to like it – and then you go on – and before you know where you are, you've got someone like that maddening Sven Hjerson tied to you for life. And people write and say how fond you must be of him. Fond of him? If I met that bony, gangling, vegetable-eating Finn in real life, I'd do a better murder than any I've ever invented.'

The authorial voice pops in again, with Mrs Oliver thinking:

'What a mistake for an author to emerge from her secret fastness. Authors were shy, unsociable creatures, atoning for their lack of social aptitude by inventing their own companions and conversations.'

'I adore people, don't you?' said Robin happily.

'No,' said Mrs Oliver firmly.

At one point Poirot wants to talk to Mrs Oliver and insists on disturbing her when she's writing:

Mrs Oliver: 'Have you got to ring me up just now? I've thought of a most wonderful idea for a murder in a draper's shop. You know, that sells combinations and funny vests with long sleeves.'

'I do not know,' said Poirot. 'And anyway what I have to say to you is far more important.'

'It couldn't be,' said Mrs Oliver. 'Not to me, I mean. Unless I get a rough sketch of my idea jotted down, it will go!'

Hercule Poirot paid no attention to this creative agony, and of course this brilliant plot vanishes before the end of the worthless phone call.

Another way to read this book is looking at the sexual diversity described.

'Sven Hjerson never cared for women,' said Mrs Oliver coldly.

'But you can't have him a pansy, darling! Not for this sort of play. I mean it's not green bay trees or anything like that. It's thrills and murders and clean open-air fun' Robin Upward remonstrates.

In the 1950s "a pansy" was a description of a homosexual, at a time when homosexuality between consenting adults was still a criminal act. The Green Bay Tree was a highly successful play written in 1933 by Mordaunt Shairp. It hints at a homoerotic relationship between a man and his protégée. Mrs Christie also hints at Robin Upward being gay, both in his manner of calling everyone 'darling' and being terribly theatrical all the time. Mrs Upward complacently remarks: 'Robin's as good as a daughter to me. He does everything – and thinks of everything. No one could be more considerate.' Again illustrating Robin's 'feminine' side.

In contrast the Sunday Comet journalist, Miss Horsefall, was "tall, manly-looking, a hard drinker and smoker". Clearly the opposite of a classic feminine character. Other than her appearance, her manners are slightly shocking as she "sat down astride a chair": again the antithesis of a well brought up Victorian lady like Christie. Miss Horsefall is very direct too "Not a very exciting crime from the point of view of the public. No sex appeal about it."

What is very unusual in an Agatha Christie is that the murdered woman, Mrs McGinty, is working class. Usually Christie mysteries, especially from the 1920s and 30s are strewn with titled characters: Lord and Lady Edgware, Sir Oswald Cote, Lord Caterham, and Lady Brent. Occasionally some unfortunate servant gets murdered because they know something, but they are never the main interest of a book, or of

any interest at all. It is clear that the glamour and opulence of the English Country House has been destroyed, along with so much else, by two World Wars.

'Hunter's Close was a solidly-built Victorian house approached by a long untidy drive overgrown with weeds. It had not originally been considered a big house, but was now big enough to be inconvenient domestically.' There is a constant theme in the book of the difficulties in getting domestic help: 'We've no proper servants. Only old Janet,' states Mrs Upward. One wonders what Janet thinks about them!

'Domestics!' Mrs Summerhayes gave a squeal. 'What a hope! Can't even get hold of a daily.'

Mrs Summerhayes runs a chaotic inherited Manor, as a Guest House, just as in the 'The Mouse Trap', published as 'Three Blind Mice' in 1950. Yet again Christie is refining an idea: a young couple trying to make good in a new business adventure without any training or expertise. The Summerhayes are utterly hopeless, but lovable.

Mrs McGinty was a poor 64-year-old widow, eking out a meagre life in a rented cottage by being a cleaner, a charwoman, and taking in a lodger, James Bentley. Christie gives a vivid account of how Mrs McGinty lived and worked hard, through the people Poirot manages, after much coaxing, to talk to. Mrs McGinty earned 1 shilling and ten pence an hour charring – two shillings from *Homeleigh*, the big house. Mrs McGinty's niece lives in a new Council House, and Poirot assesses her on a visit.

'A good wife who kept her house clean and took the trouble to cook for her man. He approved. She was prejudiced and obstinate but, after all, why not?'

The tolerant Poirot wants to find out about Mrs McGinty from her niece:

'She was getting on for seventy, you know, and when she was young they didn't get much schooling.'

'But she could read and write?'

'Oh, of course. Not much of a one for reading, though she liked her *News of the World* and her *Sunday Comet*. But writing came a bit difficult always.'

Although almost illiterate, Mrs McGinty was highly moral. Mrs McGinty 'didn't hold with goings on – and had given up working for an artist and his wife when she discovered they weren't properly married.' 'She wasn't interested in politics, but voted Conservative like her husband.' Mrs McGinty is very careful about money. Poirot discovered she never needed to write letters, since her niece had a telephone: Mrs McGinty could call her up on the rare occasions she required help, and it cost a ha'penny less than putting herself through the difficulty of having to write. "A telephone call from a 'phone box cost 2d. A stamp to write a letter cost 2^{1/2}d."

What is shocking is the contempt with which the women in the village that employed her held Mrs McGinty:

'That class of person always talks a lot,' said Mrs Westherby with distaste. 'One doesn't really listen.'

'She was only a stupid old charwoman' said Mrs Carpenter.

These unpleasant people find it hard to believe the world-famous Poirot has come amongst them to track down Mrs McGinty's true murderer, since they felt she was utterly insignificant anyway. Many of them believe the great detective must have a secret motive for being there. This unsettles the villagers, as, of course, they each have a secret.

There is only one humorously empathic comment from all Mrs McGinty's clients; kind, eccentric Mrs Summerhayes:

'Always on your knees scrubbing. And then piles of other people's washing up waiting for you on the sink when you arrive in the morning. If I had to face that every day, I'd be positively relieved to be murdered. I really would.'

Mrs McGinty was murdered with a chopper, and her 'odd' lodger, James Bentley, has been convicted of the crime, and sentenced to death by hanging. The circumstantial evidence was that Mr Bentley owed Mrs McGinty money for his lodgings and had lost his job. Mrs McGinty's £200 savings had been stolen, but found by the Police, hidden just outside the cottage. Superintendent Spence enlists the help of Hercule Poirot, since the policeman believed that Bentley was innocent. It is a race against time to find any clues that might lead to the verdict being overturned, before Bentley is executed.

Are there any clues? Not many, which is why this book has such a low score. 'There was a faint tinkle of broken glass' Robin Upward dropped a glass when Ariadne Oliver tells him about Poirot:

'He's come here to solve a murder.' This is one of the very few real clues that Robin Upward was surprised and nervous, which is suspicious, but not absolutely rock solid. There then comes the immediate authorial misdirection when Robin 'sounded disappointed. 'But that's all over.'

One of the ironies is that James Bentley himself never bothered to listen to Mrs McGinty properly either, just like most of the people in Broadhinny. James was of a better social sphere, but has come down in the world, reduced to penury after his own mother's death. Poirot bewails the fact that Mr Bentley might go to the gallows because he never bothered to listen or communicate properly with his landlady. However, James Bentley, after much encouragement from Poirot, remembers Mrs McGinty telling him that 'Mrs Upward was too proud and the story in the *Sunday Comet* had something to do with Mrs Upward'. Poirot, oddly, discounts this fact to his cost, and the life of Mrs Upward. Had Poirot acted on this information immediately *Mrs McGinty's Dead* would have been a very short novel indeed.

Mrs McGinty must have recognised someone in Broadhinny, in connection with the *Where are they now?* article in the *Sunday Comet*, about past murderers and their families, just before Mrs McGinty herself was murdered. In the *Sunday Comet* there were four old photos of *Women Victims of Bygone Tragedies*. Poirot's correct hunch is that one of these four criminal women, or their children, were living incognito in the quiet village of Broadhinny. Mrs McGinty from her privileged position as cleaner, had stumbled on the truth, and was killed for it. The solution itself is arbitrary. One could argue for any of the characters being related to any of the murderers, or their

families. The only clue is a psychological one, that Christie chose, subconsciously, the name Kane for the primordial killer, Cain.

Maude Williams, the Estate Agent secretary, was highly suspicious. Maude was one of the few people who befriended James Bentley, and was openly helpful to Poirot. Often in Christies, the murderer befriends the detective in order to be one step ahead. Maude knew the name 'Evelyn Hope' when this information had not been in the *Sunday Comet* article. The reader knows she must be connected with the Eva Kane/Mrs. Craig case. Maude Williams could have been Eva Kane's child. In the end it turns out that she was one of the Craig children, whose mother was murdered by her father and the Nanny, Kane. Maude was 'under cover' in Kilchester, to track down Evelyn Hope [Eva Kane's child], seeking revenge. There was no clue that would differentiate between Maude being Evelyn Hope or one of the Craig children.

The second murder, of Mrs Upward, is well clued. The extreme 'femaleness' of all the stage Props at the murder scene: the lipstick marks left on the second cup, the heavy scent that Eve Carpenter used lingering in the cottage, the three women phoned up by Robin Upward, to come round that evening to visit Mrs Upward, so at least one of them would be a suspect. All this evidence is too suspicious, too obviously framing 'a woman', so it points to a male murderer. If a woman had murdered Mrs Upward after drinking coffee with her, she would have the sense to wash up the cup to avoid identification by her lipstick plastered all over it. Any lipstick-wearing woman would know this. The 'stage props' not only paradoxically implicated a male murderer, but a theatrical one at that.

The final clue, was the planting of the photograph of Eva Kane with 'my mother' written on the back, in Mrs Summerhayes' bureau for Poirot to find. Fortunately for the highly chaotic Maureen Summerhayes, Hercule Poirot is an obsessive-compulsive who cannot help putting things back into drawers in an orderly fashion, *even* in other peoples' houses. There is a fitting humour in Poirot neatly restored order to the bureau drawers each time Mrs Summerhayes charged into the room to look for something else. This is how Poirot knew the photograph had been planted in the bureau draw, because it was not there the first time. Only Robin Upward, who had moved out of his mother's cottage to live at the Manor to keep an eye on Poirot, could have put it there.

Eve Carpenter was very suspicious and unpleasant, but she turns out to be another 'red herring'. Mrs Carpenter was simply anxious to keep hidden her 'unsavoury' past as a taxi-dancer, now she is comfortably off, respectably married to a rich politician. She wishes to keep all her past skeletons as a poor girl being paid for 'dances' firmly in the closet. Superintendent Spence's conclusion is that: 'The war stirred up everyone and everything.....anyone can be a pretty, young war widow.'

Something that is slightly unusual in this book is that Poirot has a failed attempt against his life, which he naturally concludes must be Mrs McGinty's murderer. However, it turns out to be *another* murderer in this tiny village, who thinks Poirot is on to him. Dr Rendell probably poisoned his first wife, and tried to kill Poirot by

pushing him under a train. Poirot was only saved by an alert and strong bystander who hauls him back from the brink. This goes against all the rules of detective story writing! In *Mrs McGinty* there are two different murderers, attempting different targets. However, this gives Poirot and Superintendent Spence the specious idea that they are on the right track, rattling someone's cage. Poirot carried on blindly revealing the *Sunday Comet* article to everyone, so directly causing the murder of Mrs Upward. Ariadne Oliver scores a pyrrhic victory as she'd correctly identified Dr Rendell as a murderer by her 'Woman's Intuition', even though he wasn't the murderer of Mrs McGinty or Mrs Upward.

For ambitious, attractive people the destruction of many paper records in the war was actually an opportunity for a new life, with a clean slate. The unsettling theme of this novel is that many unpleasant pieces of information have been destroyed or successfully hidden by six years of War. No one is who they seem to be anymore.

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