



The Reign of the Molly Maguires

by Arthur H. Lewis

For nearly three decades, from 1850 to 1877, a dread secret society held sway in the hard-coal mining regions of Pennsylvania. During that fearful time the “Molly Maguires” grew so powerful that they could

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commit any crime they wished, secure in the knowledge that alibis would be furnished them, that few witnesses had the courage to testify against them, and that jurymen must acquit them or risk being murdered.

Before the crime was committed, often the victim received a crude anonymous warning, a "coffin notice," signed by a "Son of Molly Maguire." Molly Maguire was a legendary Irish heroine who led the old country's poverty-stricken farmers in revolt against the brutal bailiffs whose task was to collect house and cattle rents for wealthy absentee English landlords.

Poverty and persecution had dogged the Irish for generations, and the potato famine of the dreadful winter of 1847-48 was the final misery. In the great Irish migration to the United States, thousands and thousands of the desperately poor poured into the promised land, their clothes in rags and their stomachs empty.

What sustained them was hope. In the hard-coal regions of America they would have a chance to earn a decent living; they would have religious freedom; their children would have the opportunity to learn to read and write. So went the propaganda spread by American mineowners just beginning to feel the need for cheap unskilled labor to dig and prepare the anthracite that was much in demand for fuel.

After his arrival the Irish immigrant found work—dangerous and backbreaking work. He was paid about seven dollars for a sixty-hour week. With this he might have been barely able to keep his family from starvation—had he not been further exploited.

Most mine operators compelled employees to deal at a "pluck-me," the miners' name for the company-owned store. There, prices were at least 20 percent higher than in nearby towns. Buying was on credit; wages were paid monthly, so that it was practically impossible for workers to deal in stores where cash was required. In addition, if a worker refused to patronize the local pluck-me, the store manager reported this disloyalty to a foreman and the miner was out of work.

Once he got into debt with the pluck-me, the miner usually found himself going deeper and deeper into the hole. Instead of a pay envelope at the end of the month, all he received was a "bobtail" check. This was good for absolutely nothing; it merely showed his current debt at the company store. If he had a large family to feed, a miner was hopelessly enmeshed until his sons were old enough to work and help decrease the debt. The boys usually went to work soon after their seventh birthday—so much for the miner's dreams of educating his sons.

Without doubt, absentee mineowners in the new country were no less guilty of cruelty than absentee landlords in the old. Perhaps in the beginning when individual gangs of Mollies were no more than regulars at some saloon, these embittered, disillusioned men might have been seeking some kind of justice, some recognition that they were human beings and worthy of at least as much consideration as the mine mules. There is a strong likelihood that at the very start of Molly Maguirism, thousands of law-abiding Irish immigrants must have taken a quiet pride in the movement. Here, at least, were some sons

of Erin fighting back when NO IRISH NEED APPLY signs were being posted with increasing frequency at the doors of hiring offices. But later, when the Mollies degenerated into gangs of murderous thugs, they were opposed by most decent Irishmen. Except for a very few courageous citizens, however—mainly Roman Catholic priests—opposition to the Mollies was rarely open. Reprisals against those who spoke ill of the secret society—at one time nearly six hundred strong—were swift. And a man never knew which of his neighbors was a Molly or a friend of a Molly.

During the years between 1862 and 1875 there were 142 unsolved homicides and 212 felonious assaults in one county alone. The victims found murdered or brutally assaulted were usually mine foremen or superintendents who had incurred the wrath of a society member. Reprisal was swift. Hours after a Molly or a friend of a Molly had been berated by a foreman or fired by a “super,” the foreman would have his ears cut off or the super would be shot to death on a lonely road. The act of violence might even happen within sight of a hundred witnesses who had been taught, by bitter experience, to see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing.

The mineowners themselves seldom were victims, since they lived a hundred or more miles from their mines. They regarded the Molly Maguires with loathing rather than fear; what terrified these absentee owners far more than the Molly Maguires was the emergence of labor unions, and these they tried to crush by any means they could.

Those who would defend the Molly Maguires have tried to link them with the labor

movement, but the facts do not bear this out. Hostilities between the Maguires and the operators were not battles between capital and labor as such. While the long, continuing conflict between employer and employee raged, the Mollies remained outside it. The aid these tough men might have contributed to labor's cause was dissipated in senseless crimes of revenge—murder, arson, mayhem. A foreman was beaten, his home burned, the colliery dynamited—not because of basic injustices, which existed in abundance, but simply because a Molly had been fired. That the dismissal might have been for good reason was not considered.

No one in his right mind would deny that the crimes the Mollies committed were unspeakable. To the residents of Pennsylvania's hard-coal counties during that bitter period, the “war” seemed endless. It went on in the streets of cities, a thousand feet beneath the earth's surface, on country roads, and on speeding express trains. For the hated informer there were no boundaries over which to escape from vengeance. The savage arm of the Molly Maguires stretched everywhere—to a lonely Iowa farmhouse, to an abandoned Nevada mining camp, to a ship sailing off the coast of Africa.

But at last the day arrived when law and order triumphed over savage slaughter. It was a warm and pleasant morning, the first day of summer, 1877. On that day, “Black Thursday,” the first of twenty convicted members of the Molly Maguires were marched to the gallows and hanged. It was the beginning of the end of a reign of terror without parallel in American history.

CHECK YOUR READING

- The Molly Maguires was a secret society dedicated to the cause of**
 - Irish nationalism
 - personal revenge
 - workingmen's rights
- The Molly Maguires grew powerful through the use of**
 - physical violence
 - collective bargaining
 - appealing propaganda
- Molly Maguire was**
 - an absentee English landlord
 - a legendary Irish heroine
 - Neither A nor B
- The factor that set in motion the Irish immigration of the mid-1800s was the**
 - closing down of Ireland's coal mines
 - war between Protestants and Catholics
 - failure of the potato crops in Ireland
- The coal-mine operators ran company stores for the workers in order to**
 - make shopping convenient
 - get unreasonable profits
 - sell items at cost price
- The writer suggests that in the beginning, many decent Irishmen regarded the Maguires with**
 - terror
 - indifference
 - pride
- The usual victims of the Maguires were**
 - absentee mineowners
 - labor union organizers
 - foremen and superintendents
- Unlike the labor union organizers, the Maguires did not**
 - attempt to right basic injustices
 - exhibit hostility to employers
 - come from the workingmen's ranks
- The Molly Maguire terrorism was**
 - concentrated in a few Pennsylvania counties
 - found in many parts of the country
 - Both A and B
- According to the writer, Molly Maguireism was brought to an end by the**
 - trial and conviction of many members
 - opposition of law-abiding Irishmen
 - growth of powerful labor unions

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