

## The Molly Maguires: Labor Heroes or Ethnic Terrorists?

Michael Pollock

*Michael Pollock, a post baccalaureate student in teacher education, plans to enter the MA program in history in fall 2001. This paper was written for Dr. Nora Pat Small's Social History Class in the fall of 2001.*

The years between 1863 and 1879 were years of violence, labor unrest, sabotage, and assassination in central Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region. "Black Thursday", June 21, 1877, saw ten Irish-Catholic miners, convicted of the murders of various mine officials, hanged for their crimes and for their membership in the secret order known as the Molly Maguires. A total of twenty men were executed by the close of 1879 for murders dating back to year of 1863. If history is written by the victors, the victors in these conflicts were the predominant institutions of the era. The business community, the political powers, the Catholic Church, and the media had concluded that the Molly Maguires were a secret band of Irish terrorists and thugs. This historiographical essay will contrast two views. One view was an overwhelming condemnation of the Molly Maguires seen during and immediately after the violent uprisings in the anthracite region during the 1860s and 1870s. The other view, shared by most later historians, was that the violence that occurred was to some degree justified by conditions in the mines, and seriously misrepresented by the political, religious, and commercial forces of that earlier era.

The business interests included the coalmine owners and operators, the railroad owners, and the private police and detectives hired to protect their interests. They, along with the press, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and the state government, all portrayed the Molly Maguires as a "band of Irish cutthroats, engaged in violence for its own sake, for money, or for revenge, who terrorized the anthracite region for more than a decade before they were finally brought to justice by a heroic Pinkerton detective."<sup>[1]</sup> The accounts of these events were written during or shortly after the trials, and include the trial transcripts and newspaper reports. Also included are narratives by Franklin B. Gowen, the railroad president and lead prosecutor in the trials, Allen Pinkerton, the head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and F.P. Dewees, an attorney for the coal company. Voices sympathetic to the accused miners or their plight were not found in print.

Later historical works about the Molly Maguires question not only the accounts written during the period, the causes of the violence, and the motives of the Molly Maguires, but their very existence. These historians believe that the Irish conspiracy described by earlier accounts was invented by the industrialists of 1860's and 1870's Pennsylvania to discredit and cripple the fledgling labor movements which threatened their supremacy. In 1995, one historian writes of these events,

By inventing this organization, the employers hoped to quash a budding unionization movement among their disgruntled work forces. In their conspiracy against the labor-organizing coal miners, the operators engaged such disparate allies as a detective agency, the commercial newspapers, the state judicial system, and the Catholic Church.<sup>[2]</sup>

The violent social upheaval in coal rich Pennsylvania began with the influx of Irish immigrants during the pre-Civil War industrial boom. The famine in Ireland between 1846 and 1852, combined with harsh British rule, tenant abuses and evictions, overcrowding, poverty, and widespread anti-Catholicism, led to a massive emigration. Thousands of Irish fled to the promised opportunity of America. Centuries of abuses had led to the formation of secret societies across the Irish countryside as the only self-defense agrarian Irish had to combat murder, land confiscation, and religious persecution. These societies accompanied many Irish laborers who found their way to the booming coalfields of Pennsylvania. The rapid industrialization of the northern United States between 1840 and 1860, combined with the technological advances brought by the Civil War, created an insatiable hunger for coal.

The Irish laborers found the same antagonists in Pennsylvania that they had battled in Ireland, the English and the Scots. "In Ireland they were landlords and agents; in Pennsylvania they were mine owners and mine bosses."<sup>3</sup> If the Irish held the hope that ethnic tensions had been left across the Atlantic on their journey to a new start, they quickly learned otherwise. The mining community quickly divided, socially and physically, along ethnic lines.

The Irish turned to a secret society known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians (A.O.H.) for protection. Violence erupted in 1863 as Irish laborers rioted in opposition to the new federal draft laws, and then extended their protests to

demand better working conditions and wages. Periodically violence erupted over the next sixteen years. Many blamed the Molly Maguires, a radical faction of the A.O.H. named after a violent group of protesters who had roamed the Irish countryside fighting anti-Catholic persecution were blamed.

The murders and beatings in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania can be divided into two distinct periods. “Between 1863 and 1867 no fewer than 57 murders were committed in the area.”<sup>4</sup> Between 1868 and 1874 very little violence occurred. This was also the time during which the first serious miner’s labor group, the Workingman’s Benevolent Association (W.B.A.), was active. Following an unsuccessful strike in 1879, the union collapsed, triggering another series of murders that continued until the trials in 1876. One early *New York Times* editorial declared

The trade unions of England have resorted to murder, assassination and arson, in order to strike terror into the hearts of those who oppose them. This root of evil has been planted on American soil, and in the mining regions of Pennsylvania we see the legitimate fruit.... What better time for the extermination of this foul sore.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Anthony Bimba viewed the violence as a natural response to the working conditions forced upon the coal workers in his 1932 book, *The Real Molly Maguires*.

The horrors of mining were literally indescribable. There were no provisions for safety or proper ventilation within the pits; mine inspectors were unheard of. The health and lives of the miners were at the mercy of the operators who bitterly opposed every move for protective legislation.<sup>6</sup>

The most powerful institutions in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania were the industrial powers of the Reading Railroad and the coal mine owners. Franklin B. Gowen best represents their attitudes during the upheavals of the mid-nineteenth century. By 1862, Gowen had risen from failed independent mine owner, to district attorney of Schuylkill County, in the heart of coal country. He had little impact on the violence attributed to the Molly Maguires during this early period. Gowen went to work for the Reading Railroad and by 1869, following a brilliant presentation to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, he ascended to the presidency of the railroad.<sup>7</sup>

Over the next seven years, Gowen strengthened the monopoly held by the Reading Railroad. He engineered the buyout of the Reading’s only remaining competitor, the Schuylkill Canal. He realized that the final key to dominance of the industry meant securing a steady supply of coal. He used freight rates and the pressure brought by the W.B.A. to run many independent mine owners into bankruptcy.<sup>8</sup> He raised freight rates by 100% for those independent miners who settled with the W.B.A. during the strike of 1871, effectively controlling the entire movement of coal in the anthracite region and forcing the union to agree to his terms. He simultaneously began to secretly purchase thousands of acres of coalfields for the railroad.

Gowen determined that the only roadblock to the Reading’s dominance was the presence of the labor movement. The W.B.A. had gained strength, and the Molly Maguires were again active in the area. He hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to infiltrate the A.O.H. and waged a public campaign tying the non-violent W.B.A. and the A.O.H. to the notorious Molly Maguires. When the detective James McParlan was done, Gowen returned to the role of prosecutor and used the detective’s testimony and that of an informer to seal the fate of twenty Irish miners.

Contemporary accounts of Gowen praise him for his foresight, honesty, enthusiasm, and for his attack on the scourge of the Molly Maguires. He is viewed as the savior of the industry. Later assessments are less kind, portraying Gowen as the devil incarnate, a capitalist opportunist with no regard for the safety and well being of miners. F.P. Dewees, an attorney for the Reading Railroad, wrote the first account of the history of the anthracite region and the early trials published in 1877. “Mr. Gowen was adapted to carry out the ends in view, -- to wit, the maintenance and increase of the power of his company; the regulation of trade; the establishment of law and order; and the protection of the rights and property throughout the coal regions.”<sup>9</sup> Gowen’s attitude toward the miners is well illustrated by Allan Pinkerton’s account of the magnate’s reasons for hiring him in 1873.

What we want is to get within this apparently impenetrable ring; turn to the

light the hidden side of this dark and cruel body, to probe to its core this festering sore upon the body politic.... We want to work our mines in peace, to run our trains without fear of sudden loss of life and property through the malicious acts of the Molly Maguires; we want people to sleep unthreatened, unmolested, in their beds, undisturbed by horrid dreams of midnight prowlers and cowardly assassins; we want the laboring men protected in their right to work to secure sustenance for their wives and little ones, unawed by outside influences; we want the miner to go forth cheerfully to the slope.<sup>10</sup>

Gowen believed that the miners, if free of the influences of both the union and the Mollies, would be content to labor with no complaints about working conditions or wages. The Reading's British stockholders lauded Gowen in 1877, despite the precarious financial condition of the company.<sup>11</sup> A Reading director stated,

He had the difficult task two or three years ago of attacking one of the most terrible and unscrupulous bodies of trades' union bullies and assassins that ever infected any region of the world....The result is that he has now a contented set of men at work who are satisfied with their employers.<sup>12</sup>

These comments show that not only did the capitalists of these times view the Molly Maguires as a terrible threat, but the connection had been successfully made between them and all other labor organizations in the area, most notably the W.B.A.

Deweese also makes these connections as he writes of the mine owners losing the right to operate their businesses as they please.

"the control and management of the mines, the manner of their working, the right to employ and discharge hands, were passing away from the owners and were fast vesting in, not the "Labor Union" proper but the "Labor Union" under the direction of the "Molly Maguires."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time the business interests were intermingling the W.B.A., the A.O.H., and the Mollys, they did everything possible to portray the Mollys as having nothing to do with labor activism, but rather as a group of thugs bent on greed and personal revenge.

Later accounts portray a much different scene in the region, and a much different view of the Molly Maguires. The railroad and coal companies, in concert with the state government passed anti-labor legislation, which suspended habeas corpus laws and allowed the hiring of private police forces. Those added to the burdens of low and fluctuating wages, poor working conditions, and unemployment.

In theory, at least, the powers of this new arm of the law were limited to protection of mine and rail property; but in actual practice there was no limit...When a man was suspected of a crime, the Coal and Iron Police entered his home, by force if necessary and removed the suspect to the county jail. They guarded him, extracted his "confession", and assisted in his prosecution.<sup>14</sup>

Other recent historians view the Molly Maguires and the union as labor heroes, fighting for worker's rights against insurmountable odds. The terrible working conditions in the mines and the secretive activism of the Irish mining community made violence, in the view of many later historians, inevitable and justifiable.

Those designated as Molly Maguires by the coal interests were Hibernians in the miner's union who put up a determined struggle against conditions of starvation and peonage in the coal fields...despite the defeat of the Long Strike of 1875 and the destruction of the Union, the militant Irish miners continued their struggle against bitter exploitation, tyranny, and terror.<sup>15</sup>

The industrialists likewise saw the Pinkerton detective James McParlan, acting as an agent of the railroad and coal companies, as a hero, and by later writers as an agent provocateur and a possible murderer. He spent more than two

years infiltrating the A.O.H., documenting their activities, and finally providing the only key eyewitness testimony at the trials that sent many to jail and twenty to the gallows. George Kaercher, the district attorney for Schuylkill County, addressed the jury in an 1876 trial transcript:

This man McParlan for days and months, while you were pursuing the ordinary avocations of life, was treasuring up day by day the evidence, which at the proper time, and in the proper way, would be introduced into a court of justice, and which would break down and utterly destroy this murderous organization and bring its leaders to condign punishment. He was laboring to insure the safety and security to the community, and to protect you and all of us in the future against the pistol and the knife of the secret assassin.<sup>16</sup>

The question of McParlan's tactics was brought up by the defense during each of the trials, and revisited by historians many years later. Kevin Kenny claims in his 1998 historiography, *Making Sense of The Molly Maguires*, "there was no doubt that McParlan participated in the planning of some of the Molly Maguire assassinations, that he knew about several of them in advance, and that he did little to prevent them or to warn the victims."<sup>17</sup> Anthony Bimba went further in his condemnation of the detective.

It is clear that the Pinkerton agents did not confine themselves to a spy service nor even to the activities of the agent provocateur. When they could discover nothing and invention would not serve them, they actually committed crime and charged it to the miners.<sup>18</sup>

These claims are made based on the testimony of McParlan himself, who boasted during the trial that he had known of the plan and let the killings proceed to accumulate evidence against the Molly Maguires.

The press took an unusually harsh view of the Molly Maguires during the years of violence in the anthracite region. In weighing the balance between ethnic terrorists and labor activists, those reporting the events of these years invariably labeled the Molly Maguires as the former. Labor unrest resulting in violence throughout the industrialized North during these years was looked upon with disfavor. The *New York Times* reported during the trial in 1876 that "the revelations of the doings of the Molly Maguires uncover a state of brutish ignorance and superstition which one might think could not exist in this Republic. The Pennsylvania authorities owe it to civilization to exterminate this noxious growth."<sup>19</sup> The *Philadelphia Inquirer* was no kinder to the miners. "Capital was fettered, honest labor held by the throat, and Red-Handed murderers, Reeking with the blood of their victims, held high carnival over the prostrate form of Justice, blind and bleeding."<sup>20</sup>

Newspapers were a significant factor in the failure of the W.B.A.. During the "long strike" of 1875 the business community's efforts to link the union and the Molly Maguires began to pay dividends. "The principal newspapers in Pottsville outspokenly condemned the striking men, especially as the level of violence increased toward the end of the strike."<sup>21</sup> Because of this violence, the W.B.A. was increasingly identified with the Molly Maguires. By characterizing the labor union as a terrorist organization, powerful commentators ensured its destruction. A short article in the *New York Herald* in June 1877 restates another commonly held view of this era; that the Molly Maguires routinely committed acts of violence against other miners. "Late last night near Mantipoke a party of drunken Molly Maguires attacked a number of miners injuring all of them, more or less. Martin McIntyre, one of the colliers was so badly wounded that he died this morning."<sup>22</sup> If true, this report is the exception. Of the sixteen men reportedly killed by the Molly Maguires between 1862 and 1875, only two were miners, the rest being mine owners, operators, foremen, or local officials.<sup>23</sup>

The newspapers were also partially responsible for the formation of a vigilance committee that may have been led by the Pinkerton detectives, and was responsible for at least two murders. The *Pottsville Evening Chronicle* urged a vigilance committee to string up the Mollys, while the *Tamaqua Courier* called for retribution that was "sure, swift, and terrible."<sup>24</sup> The picture of the events in the anthracite region as painted by the newspapers had a profound effect on how the American public judged these happenings.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians was strictly a Catholic society. The Catholic Church might be expected to have sided with the Irish-Catholic miners during these conflicts, and some local clergy were sympathetic to their plight.

The hierarchy of the Church however, were very critical of the methods employed to secure worker's rights, just as they had been critical of the Irish peasants who had fought the English. "The Molly Maguires in Ireland were known to attack Catholic chapels, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy on both sides of the Atlantic was resolutely opposed to the Molly Maguires, on theological and social grounds."<sup>25</sup> Secret societies were outlawed by the Church and when the connections between the A.O.H. and the Molly Maguires became accepted as fact, the clergy, viewing the Mollys as a dangerous terrorist band, condemned them.

Archbishop James Frederick Wood of Philadelphia, an English Protestant before his conversion to Catholicism, had little in common with the rough Irish-Catholics of the coalfields, and was a bitter opponent of the Molly Maguires from the early 1860s. He referred to the Molly Maguires as a "society rendered infamous by its treachery and deeds of blood --the terror of every neighborhood in which it existed..., the disgrace of Irishman...,the scandal of the Catholic Church."<sup>26</sup>

In 1875 as the W.B.A. collapsed, and as the violence in the area increased, a vigilance committee surrounded a suspected Molly Maguire house in Wiggins Patch and shot three people in retribution for the killing of two mine officials. They had been provided a list of suspected Molly Maguire names by the Pinkerton detectives. A Molly Maguire escaped, another was killed, and the wife of one was accidentally killed. Following this attack, Archbishop Wood excommunicated the Molly Maguires and the A.O.H. His entire message was printed in the *New York Times* on December 23, 1875.<sup>27</sup> Gowen wrote in his summation to the jury on September 1, 1875,

When these assassins, through their counsel, speak of being Catholics, I desire to say to you that they have been denounced by their Church and excommunicated by their prelates, and that I have the direct personal authority of Archbishop Wood himself to say that he denounces them all and that he was fully cognizant of and approved of the means I took to bring them to justice.<sup>28</sup>

Pinkerton confirmed that the Archbishop had been informed of the presence of the detective and his plan to infiltrate the Molly Maguires.<sup>29</sup> Although some local clergy were less vocal in their condemnation, the attitude of the regional and national clergy had an effect similar to that of the press. They condemned the Molly Maguires, turning public opinion against them and eroding their Catholic support.

During the time they were active through the trials and hangings, the Molly Maguires were vilified by the Catholic Church. In future years, the Church accepted the apologies of the A.O.H. for their involvement with the Molly Maguires and once again found the flexibility to ignore their status as a secret society. Historians place most of the blame for the Church's conduct on the coal owners and operators.

The operators used the backing of the Catholic Church to its fullest advantage as a means of rousing the religious prejudice of the masses against the miners... They were offered the alternative, either of giving up their organization and their struggle against the coal interests, or of being cursed and excommunicated from the church.<sup>30</sup>

The Pennsylvania state government viewed the Molly Maguires from a distance and through the field glasses provided by the railroad and the mine owners. Although the Molly Maguires wielded some political influence on the local level, the state had strong economic ties with the coal industry leaders and wanted two results. They wanted an end to the violence, and a steady supply of coal. Legislation was passed which enabled the consolidation of industry in the anthracite region, allowing Gowen's Reading Railroad to purchase coal land, thereby securing a virtual vertical monopoly. They also provided troops during the anti-draft riots and later legalized the use of private police forces to take whatever steps necessary to curb the violence of the labor movement.

These company-directed forces became the feared Coal and Iron police. "While they were given a smattering of proper law enforcement duties, their first duty was to the company; as far as the Irish coal miner was concerned, here was an extra enemy to be fought."<sup>31</sup>

The state was notable for its absence in the court proceedings.

The Molly Maguire investigation and trials marked one of the most astounding



surrenders of sovereignty in American history. A private corporation initiated the investigation through a private detective agency, a private police force arrested the supposed offenders, and coal company attorneys prosecuted – the state provided only the courtroom and the hangman.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the lead prosecutor was none other than Franklin B. Gowen. Gowen's performance in this role is believed to have been the key to the convictions. The written record of the trial was quickly published, and served as a primary window into the nature of the Molly Maguires. "That the railroad president who hired the Pinkertons to spy on the Molly Maguires also served as a prosecutor in their trials is a measure of the type of justice that was being dispensed in the anthracite region in the 1870's."<sup>33</sup>

The years of tumult in the coal counties of Pennsylvania culminated in the violent end of the Molly Maguires. The initial history, written by the courts, the coal companies, the detectives in their employ, and the press portrayed the Molly Maguires as vicious criminals, while their pursuers and prosecutors were viewed as saviors. These sources consider the eradication of the order in the same light.

The reign of the Molly Maguire is over. His record has been made and his acts have passed into history. His was a reign of blood. In the days of his pride and power no monarch was more potent, no Eastern despot more cruel and merciless. He held communities terror-bound, and in wanton malice he defied law, destroyed property, and sported with human life.<sup>34</sup>

Later accounts see the Molly Maguires in many different lights; as labor heroes willing to use violence in self defense; as a myth used by the elite to quell disturbances; as the victims of the greed of the capitalists.

Gowen placed himself in the position to be forever after recognized as "The Attila of the Anthracite," who sent his charging murderous hordes, the coal and iron police, like the ride of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, through the mining patches cutting down, maiming, and killing all who stood in his way.<sup>35</sup>

The violence, murders, arson, and near anarchy which ruled these days are not in dispute. The causes, the culprits, and the motivations remain open to question. In the absence of new evidence about these events the truth will remain elusive. The victors wrote the story, but not necessarily the true story. The differences in historical interpretation are easily understood. The established institutions which condemned the Molly Maguires and largely wrote their history had much to lose from the successful organization of labor. The W.B.A. was a local attempt at forming a labor union and was only beginning to understand its potential when the organization collapsed. Some of the Irish miners resorted to what their own ethnic struggles had taught them. The true nature of the Molly Maguires remains shrouded in mystery, but the struggles in the anthracite region reflected major changes in the American industrial landscape and foreshadowed the growth of the national labor movement.

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[1] Kevin Kenny, "The Molly Maguires In Popular Culture," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14,4 (Summer 1995): 28.

[2] William C. Kashutas, "The Molly Maguires: Fighting For Justice," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 13 (1987) : 5.

<sup>3</sup>Wayne G. Broehl, *The Molly Maguires* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1.

<sup>4</sup>Harold Aurand and William Gudelunas, "The Mythical Qualities Of Molly Maguire," *Pennsylvania History* 49,2, (April 1982): 92.

<sup>5</sup>*New York Times*, 14 May 1876.

<sup>6</sup>Anthony Bimba, *The Molly Maguires* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 21.

<sup>7</sup>Broehl, 108. Gowen, fighting the monopoly label, convinced the court to give the Reading R.R. control over certain East-West rail corridors rather than the Pennsylvania R.R. He was also Irish (non-Catholic), a Democrat, charming, and a resident of the area.

<sup>8</sup>Gowen acted as a mediator between the W.B.A. and the mine owners, getting all parties to agree to a sliding wage scale based on the market price for coal. This put pressure on the owners allowing a consolidation of capital which would eventually doom the union. This also worked to

keep the production at a high level, meaning more tonnage for the railroad.

<sup>9</sup>F.P. Dewees, *The Molly Maguires* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1877), 71.

<sup>10</sup>Allan Pinkerton, *The Mollie Maguires And The Detectives* (New York: G.W. Dillingham Co., 1877), 105.

<sup>11</sup>Despite the monopoly the Reading Railroad and Iron and Coal Co. held, the huge debt Gowen had incurred in buying so much coal acreage had leveraged the company to the hilt.

<sup>12</sup>Broehl, 348.

<sup>13</sup>Deweese, 34.

<sup>14</sup>Arthur Lewis, *Lament For The Molly Maguires* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 36.

<sup>15</sup>Bimba, 11 & 67.

<sup>16</sup>Court Of Quarter Sessions of the Peace for Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, *Report of the Case of The Commonwealth vs. John Kehoe et al.* (Pottsville: Miners' Journal Book and Jobs, 1876), 230.

<sup>17</sup>Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense Of The Molly Maguires* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1998), 200.

<sup>18</sup>Bimba, 81.

<sup>19</sup>*New York Times*, 14 May 1876.

<sup>20</sup>*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 May 1876.

<sup>21</sup>Kenny, *Making Sense*, 172.

<sup>22</sup>*New York Herald*, 27 June 1877.

<sup>23</sup>Kenny, *Making Sense*, 187.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 205.

<sup>25</sup>Kevin Kenny, "The Molly Maguires and the Catholic Church," *Labor History* 36,3 (Summer 1985): 346.

<sup>26</sup>Lewis, 10.

<sup>27</sup>*New York Times*, 11 December 1875.

<sup>28</sup>Court of Oyer and Terminer of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, *Argument of Franklin B. Gowen of Counsel for the Commonwealth* (Pottsville: Miners' Journal Book and Job Rooms, 1876), 22.

<sup>29</sup>Pinkerton, 322.

<sup>30</sup>Bimba, 76.

<sup>31</sup>Lewis, 36.

<sup>32</sup>Kenny, *Making Sense*, 213.

<sup>33</sup>Kenny, "Molly Maguires in Popular Culture," 30.

<sup>34</sup>Deweese, 355.

<sup>35</sup>Charles A. McCarthy, *The Great Molly Maguire Hoax* (Wyoming PA.: Cro Woods 1969), 34.