

Making Sense of the Molly Maguires

Book examines persecution of Pennsylvania miners

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Making Sense of the Molly Maguires, by Kevin Kenny, Oxford University Press, 1998, 336 pages

Historian Kevin Kenny's *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* is a serious analysis of a chapter in the turbulent rise and expansion of American industrial capitalism following the Civil War. It focuses on the bitter confrontation between coal miners and the owners of the Reading Railroad Company, who were consolidating their control over the anthracite (hard) coalfields in eastern Pennsylvania during the 1870s.

A strike called by the Workingmen's Benevolent Association in 1875 was violently smashed by the coal and railroad barons, with the aid of Pinkerton detectives and the backing of government authorities and the press. A backlash against management followed that left six dead: a mine superintendent, a foreman, a justice of the peace, a policeman and two miners. Ultimately 20 Irish immigrants, dubbed the Molly Maguires, would be railroaded in court, convicted and hanged between 1877 and 1879 for the killings.

Author Kenny, an assistant professor of history at the University of Texas in Austin, points out that contemporary persecutors of the miners, and later right-wing historians, sought to prove the existence of a terrorist conspiracy against American society and morals. It was not until the 1930s that more objective historians began to unravel this myth. Some arrived at the conclusion that there was no conspiracy of Irish miners. They concluded that an organization named the Molly Maguires never existed, having been fabricated by the ruling class as a pretext to destroy the fledgling miners union.

The last major writing on the subject, Wayne Broehl's *The Molly Maguires* (1964), was researched in the 1950s and, as Kenny points out, bears "the stamp of that decade." It uncritically relied upon sources, such as the notorious provocateur Allan Pinkerton, who sided with the oppressors of the miners.

Kenny's research provides a wealth of detail proving that the trials of the miners were frame-ups and that innocent men were hanged. At the same time, he paints more subtle shadings in this episode of the class struggle. Kenny believes that, indeed, a small section of miners did turn to individual acts of violence. His book seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the political and cultural context within which this process took place and why in some cases the miners' struggle against oppression took this form.

Kenny traces the origins of the term Molly Maguires back to specific counties of rural Ireland in the period of 1760 to 1850. The name was one of many that Irish peasants used to refer to the secret societies they formed to combat feudal exploitation.

Under feudalism the Irish rural poor worked the large estates while retaining small patches of land for their own use. The advent of the enclosure movement, though which the landlords converted the land from

small-scale tillage to large-scale pasture and cattle farming, ignited a struggle between peasant and lord over access to the land. The resistance to enclosure and the other encroachments against the poor peasants led to the emergence of secret societies. These groups would sometimes kill the landlords' cattle, ruin pasture land by digging it up, tear down fences on enclosed land, reinstate evicted tenants by force and murder landlords, their agents and government officials.

Kenny uses the term *retributive justice* "to describe a form of collective violence designed to redress violations against a particular understanding of what was socially right and wrong." These reprisals were often preceded by warnings or "coffin notices," so called because they were adorned with images of a coffin, which advised the transgressor to either change his ways or face retribution.

With the memory of the movement against enclosure fresh in their minds, these rural layers carried their traditions of struggle to new lands. Those who eventually settled in the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania would, under specific conditions, adapt these methods forged against feudalism to the conditions of class struggle unfolding in the coalfields.

Kenny cites two waves of activity that gave rise to the charges of Molly Maguireism. The first took place during the American Civil War of 1861-65. The second wave erupted at the end of the "Long Strike" of 1875, in the middle of a depression.

During the Civil War many Republican coal operators and their investors were interested in waging class war against miners as well as against the Southern slavocracy. The draft was often used to rid the mines of labor organizers and the more militant workers. Police and Union troops, under the pretext of enforcing the draft, were used as a strikebreaking force.

To combat scabs, some miners put up "coffin notices," such as the following:

This is to give you the Gap men a cliar understanding that if you dont quit work after this NOTICE you may prper for your DETH.

You are the damdest turncoats in the State-- there is no ples fit for you bute Hell and will soone be there.

Molly.

Sind by the real boys this time -- so you better loocke oute.

During this struggle in 1862-63 a mine owner and foreman were killed. In the showcase trials of 1877-78 these deaths would be attributed to the Molly Maguires

In contrast to those who arrived in America from the Irish countryside, Welsh immigrants who had been miners at home brought traditions of trade unionism with them to Pennsylvania. The coal operators naturally sought to divide the work force by retaining the division between the skilled Welsh miners, who mined the coal, and the unskilled Irish laborers, who hauled the coal out of the mines and received one-third the

pay of the former.

By 1868, with the end of the Civil War and the passing of the most immediate post-war convulsions, the miners established the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA). For the first time Welsh and Irish miners achieved a considerable degree of unity. At that time there were no actions taken that could be labeled Molly Maguireism.

The founding of the WBA represented an advance for the miners, but an advance limited by the outlook of the organization's leaders, who believed in the identity of the interests of workers and capitalists. John Siney, the WBA founder, argued "that there is no normal difference of interest between employer and employed."

The WBA was successful only as long as the market for coal continued expanding. But the politics of the WBA blinded the miners to what was to come with the onset of a nationwide depression in the mid-1870s and the drive to monopolize the coal industry.

The union's presence helped keep coal prices high and wages at a relatively high level, a situation not entirely disagreeable to small individual coal operators. But this arrangement came under attack when the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, which hauled coal out of the Pennsylvania region, raised its rates and drove the individual operators out of business by 1873.

Franklin B. Gowen, president of the Reading Railroad, set out to undermine the union. Gowen had previously used Pinkerton's National Detective Agency against his railroad employees. Now Pinkerton agents were dispatched to infiltrate the mining regions to prepare for war on the WBA.

Gowen also established the Coal & Iron Police. The government literally sold police powers in rural areas to corporations. By petitioning the government and paying a fee, Gowen had the state police force under his direct control.

In 1874, with a depression under way and fully one-third of the workers in Pennsylvania unemployed, Gowen acted. In the autumn he began stockpiling coal. Then wage cuts were announced. The tactics provoked the "Long Strike," which began in January 1875 and lasted until June.

The strike proved a failure. In May coal operators reopened the mines and offered protection to those wishing to return to work. Unable to negotiate a return to work, the WBA counseled workers to go back under any conditions they could obtain. But radical workers in the coal region of Shenandoah and Mahanoy City in Schuylkill County rejected the WBA's advice. Throughout June workers organized demonstrations and parades, as large as a thousand strong. Coal & Iron Police armed with repeating rifles were mobilized. Miners managed to shut down nine collieries. In one confrontation between miners and a sheriff's posse, a deputy discharged his gun into the crowd of strikers who responded with a hail of rocks.

The capitalist press howled, "Let the troops act on the offensive. Let the leaders of these riots be hunted down and arrested. [If] the ruffians ... will learn tolerance only by being shot down, it is better to shoot them down than to let them shoot others."

The WBA, through its newspaper the *Pottsville Workingman*, fought the slanders of the capitalist press. But it also admitted that some miners "have committed acts of violence against those who have broken through the rules which the workingmen have deemed necessary to the protection of their interests."

Kenny calls attention to the above statement. "Here in a nutshell, was the ethic of Molly Maguireism: direct retributive action against those who transgressed a specific vision of what was just and moral."

But the WBA differentiated itself from the violence of these individual miners and went on to say it would "denounce the acts of these individuals, and even offers to furnish ... the necessary police to prevent the perpetration of acts violative of the rights of property."

The miners found themselves further isolated by the role played by the

Catholic Church. Those alleged to be Molly Maguires were excommunicated. Friar Daniel O'Connor preached, "Beware of the Molly Maguires.... They are scum and a disgrace to us as Irishmen and American citizens."

Following the collapse of the strike the union disintegrated. Wages in mining fell to 54 percent of the 1869 level. With miners under the oppressive heel of the state and railroad police and vigilante committees, three months of violence erupted in which six people were killed, including mine personnel and government agents. These deaths were attributed to a conspiratorial secret society--the Molly Maguires.

An undercover agent planted by the Pinkertons in the miners ranks, James McParlan, now came forward to finger the alleged instigators. The same McParlan would emerge again 30 years later as the chief architect of the attempted frame-up of Big Bill Haywood, leader of the Western Federation of Miners and the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World.

McParlan served as star witness for the prosecution of the Molly Maguires. Fifty-one Irishmen were implicated in the deaths of sixteen people between the years 1862 and 1875. Twenty of them were ultimately found guilty in a series of trials held between 1876 and 1877 and sent to the gallows. In many cases McParlan's testimony was the main basis of conviction. In other cases, some of the defendants were convinced to turn state's evidence to help convict their alleged collaborators.

Kenny exposes the blatant travesty of justice during the trials. Irish Catholics were excluded from the juries. Many jurors were German immigrants who could not have followed the trial properly. "I don't understand much English," said one. Another juror asked to be questioned "in Dutch as I am light on English ... I would not understand the witnesses." Most of the prosecutors, among them Franklin Gowen, were on the payroll of various railroad and mining companies. One historian wrote: "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."

For two and a half years McParlan carried on his infiltration by getting a job as a laborer and joining the Shenandoah division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a fraternal organization of Irish men. In this capacity he gathered information on those who would ultimately be labeled Molly Maguires. According to his own testimony he took part in the planning of assassinations and knew well in advance alleged plans for retributive actions, but did not warn the victims.

McParlan also supplied vigilante committees with the names of alleged Molly Maguires. In one nighttime attack by vigilantes using information supplied by McParlan, an Irish woman was beaten and another shot dead.

Kenny advances the thesis that while there were retributive actions, they did not amount to the grand conspiracy painted by the press and robber barons. While some miners might have used the name "Molly Maguire," it is clear that it was not a subversive organization transported to American soil from Ireland as the authorities claimed.

The author does discuss the role of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a fraternal society to which many of those involved in "retribution" belonged and through which they established certain links. Kenny identifies another institution that--along with the Catholic Church and the trade union--played a central role in the lives of Irish mine workers, the tavern. All of the men alleged to have played leading roles in the killings were tavern or hotel keepers. And most of them had previously worked in the mines before opening taverns. One of those executed as a Molly who matched this description, John Kehoe, was an elected official and played a central role in delivering the Irish vote to the Democratic Party. A long campaign by his family earned him a posthumous pardon in 1980.

Through a technique of surname analysis of the family names of the 51 people implicated in the Molly Maguire episode, Kenny reached the conclusion that a majority of the names were unique or common to northwestern and north-central Ireland, and one county in particular, Donegal, the extreme northwest county in Ireland. This analysis tends to further support his conclusion that there was a link between the experiences of the poor peasants in Ireland and the miners in Pennsylvania.

The defeat of the strike and a determined drive by the capitalist class to smash the miners led to a last-ditch resistance among desperate miners who carried with them Irish peasant traditions. Kenny cites the contemporary publication of a letter in the *Mahanoy City Herald* by an alleged Molly which supports his contentions:

"i am against shooting as much as ye are, But the union is Broke up and we Have got nothing to defend ourselves with But our Revolvers and if we doubt use them we shal have to work for 50 cints a Day. i have told ye the Mind of the children of Mistress Molly Maguire, all we want is a fare Days wages for a fare Days work, and thats what we cant get now By a Long shot."

In academic circles today there is a concerted campaign to deny the significance, or even the existence, of the class struggle in American society. Race, culture, ethnicity or religion are raised in an effort to obscure it.

While Kenny deals with a myriad of cultural detail in presenting his subject, to his credit he does not seek to elevate culture and nationalism above the class struggle. He writes, "The old linear narrative of nationalist consciousness and struggle has been called into question in Ireland, and a similar move in Irish-American historiography is long overdue.... Definitions of Irish-American ethnicity [in the nineteenth century anthracite region of Pennsylvania], moreover, were caught up in a larger social conflict whose outlines are best described in terms of social class."

One difficulty with the author's approach is a tendency throughout the book to contrast the outlooks of the WBA and the Molly Maguires to the exclusion of any other. His presentation might lead the reader to believe that during this period only two perspectives existed for the miners and the working class--either trade union reformism or individual terrorism.

Kenny appears to favor the former. He writes, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association, by contrast [to the Molly Maguires], had a coherent organizational structure, a collective social vision, and a well-developed theory of labor relations."

The WBA was an embryonic attempt by the working class to organize itself. But its class collaborationist perspective left the WBA unprepared for wrenching economic changes and the violent repression to come.

The reformist trade union leaders, however, were not without their opponents.

William Sylvis, a correspondent of Karl Marx and a leader of the National Labor Union, was a leading opponent of the policy of class collaboration. In one scathing attack on this nostrum, he declared, "If workingmen and capitalists are equal co-partners, composing one vast firm by which the industry of the world is carried on and controlled, why do they not share equally in the profits? Why does capital take to itself the whole loaf, while labor is left to gather up the crumbs? Why does capital roll in luxury and wealth, while labor is left to eke out a miserable existence in poverty and want? Are these the evidences of an identity of interests, of mutual relations, of equal partnership? No sir. On the contrary they are evidences of an antagonism." [1]

At that time Marxism represented a small but not insignificant force in the American working class. In 1872 it was estimated that the International Workingman's Association, in which Marx played a leading role, had 30 sections in the United States with some 5,000 members. In the uprising of railroad workers during the Great Strike of 1877 members of the socialist International led the fight in key cities such as St. Louis for

the political and industrial organization of the working class.

The historian J. Walter Coleman wrote, "The adherents of the Marxian doctrines of reform, as set forth in Marx's *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, were also found in eastern Pennsylvania in the years following the middle of the nineteenth century. The identity of the men imbued with socialist principles is uncertain, and records of their actual work are obscure or non-existent, but they are mentioned unmistakably and condemned as a menace to industrial peace by mining and railroad officials." It was no less than Franklin B. Gowen who, speaking before a joint committee of the Pennsylvania legislature, sounded off about "a class of agitators ... men brought here for no other purpose than to create confusion, to undermine confidence, and to stir up dissension between the employer and the employed ... advocates of the Commune and emissaries of the International." [2]

Kenny's omission of any reference to socialists may be a concession to the present academic climate. However, the reviewers believe that *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* is a significant work on the history of the class struggle in America that deserves to be read.

1. Todes, Charlotte, *William H. Sylvis and the National Labor Union*, International Publishers, 1942: New York, p. 40.

2. Coleman, J. Walter, *The Molly Maguire Riots: Industrial Conflict in The Pennsylvania Coal Region*, Garret & Massie, 1936: Richmond, pp. 21-2.



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