Labor History: The Molly Maguires

By Ed Leavy

The original Molly Maguires were an organization who arose in Ireland in the mid-1800s in response to the Irish Potato Famine. They would go to warehouses and large farms and demand under threat that the owners give them the stored potatoes to feed the hungry poor. As the Irish emigrated to America in the decades following the Civil War, and especially the Pennsylvania mining districts, they brought the tactics and name with them. The Molly Maguires serve as a type of Rorschach Test on labor rebellion. Some people view the Mollies as the only possible response to the violence and power of the corporate mine owners. Others see the Mollies as little more than a terrorist organization that used violence, destruction, and murder to get their way. Many see elements of truth in both perspectives.

Working conditions in the Pennsylvania mines were almost unimaginably wretched – the jobs were incredibly dangerous, the hours brutally long, and the pay barely enough to pay for rent and groceries sold by the mine owners. The mine owners fought off any attempts to organize, but wildcat strikes were common. The Mollies made sure the strikes were followed. Attempts to cross picket lines were met with violence or death. The newly-invented dynamite was regularly used on mines and mine equipment. Yet Mollies were rarely apprehended. The Irish miners were supportive. As importantly, they brought in Mollies from other counties to perform the acts of violence and then return home. At a time when the only way to identify people was from eye witnesses, this practice proved effective. The mine owners, of course, fought back and their "security forces" would make an example of anyone suspected of pro-Molly sympathies. The violence continued to escalate; it is not hyperbole to say Pennsylvania mine country was a virtual war zone.

Allen Pinkerton made his reputation sneaking Abraham Lincoln into Washington DC before the Inauguration amid death threats, and he provided much of Lincoln's security during the war. In the days before established municipal police forces, private detective agencies flourished and Pinkerton's was the most successful. By the 1870s, much of Pinkerton's work was union-busting, protecting corporate property, and union espionage. With its ethnic exclusivity and secretive nature, the Mollies seemed impossible to infiltrate. Pinkerton soon came across 29-year-old Jamie McParlan, an Irish immigrant who knew of the Mollies in Ireland. After months of training, McParlan headed off to Pennsylvania coal country as James McKenna with the purpose of infiltrating the Mollies.

The narrative of his time in the Pennsylvania mines is much like a mafia movie today. McParlan headed to the bars to make friends among the miners, and soon met Muff Lawler, who kept the Molly membership list in the region. His friendship with Lawler was invaluable. He soon took the secret oath and worked his way up in the loosely-structured organization. For two years, McParlan/McKenna lived and worked as a Molly. The work took its toll on him: the stress (had he been discovered he would have been killed), the constant late-night drinking with different Molly groups in an effort to get information, and the cold and damp mines left him sick and balding. He threatened to resign the Pinkertons, but was talked out of it by his managers.

Finally, the threat became too great – rumors of a traitor among the Mollies became prevalent, and he fell under suspicion – so in 1876 McParlan had to leave the coalfields for good. His reports led to a series of spectacular trials. Despite his reluctance to testify – not only was it dangerous, but it would end his career as an undercover operative – McParlan was the star witness in all the trials; the $15 a week Pinkerton paid McParlan's brothers for two years may have aided his decision to testify. The $15 was not the only issue of questionable ethics in the trial: Franklin Gown, president of the local railroad company that depended on the coal, was the chief prosecutor; and the jury pool noticeably excluded Irish Catholics who might

sympathize with the Mollies. The trials resulted in twenty executions of Molly members for crimes ranging from murder to treason. McParlan became a celebrity and was called "The Great Detective"; he even appears in a Sherlock Holmes story. But for decades, Irish Americans in the Mideast considered him a traitor, and he ended up moving west. With the Mollies out of the way, the mine owners maximized profits and working conditions became even worse until the UMW began organizing them decades later. Perceptions of Jamie McParlan are as mixed as those of the organization he helped destroy.

Information for this article come from Big Trouble by J. Anthony Lukas – thanks Peg Sonntag! – and internet sources.