

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Anthracite and the Irish: Extricating the Irish Immigrant Mining Community from the Molly Maguire Myth, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, 1850-1879

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The Molly Maguires were a reputed secret society of Irish immigrant mine workers who allegedly terrorized the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania from the Civil War until twenty men convicted as Molly Maguires were hanged in the late 1870s. The sensational nature of the Molly trials and executions has spawned a myth concerning the Molly Maguires which has clouded historical understanding of the episode. One of the unfortunate results of the Molly Maguire myth is that the legacy of the nineteenth-century anthracite Irish mining community has been inextricably and wrongly tied to the legacy of the alleged criminal activities of the Molly Maguires.

The thesis seeks to draw a portrait of the Irish mining community of one anthracite county, Schuylkill, with as much depth as possible. The thesis first details Irish demographics and culture within Schuylkill County and proceeds to follow the Irish community through the years of the first regional mine workers' union to the destruction of

the union as a consequence of the bitter "Long Strike" of 1875.

The thesis demonstrates that negative expectations of the Irish conditioned negative perceptions by Schuylkill County's native population. The mass executions of the alleged Molly Maguires were only possible because of the deep anti-Irish sentiment that existed in Schuylkill among the non Irish, from Anglo-Protestant mine bosses to the large Welsh immigrant mining community.

**ANTHRACITE AND THE IRISH: EXTRICATING THE IRISH IMMIGRANT
MINING COMMUNITY FROM THE MOLLY MAGUIRE MYTH,
SCHUYLKILL COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA,
1850-1879**

**by
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To Erin, for her inspiration and love

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Introduction

Daybreak on the morning of June 21, 1877, appeared "dull and heavy" in the anthracite coal mining town of Pottsville, Pennsylvania, and by eight o'clock a drizzling rain began to fall. The rain did not deter a large crowd from assembling around the town's castle-like jail house. What brought this crowd, which the Baltimore Sun reported as consisting almost all "of the poorer class," was the scheduled hanging of six men convicted of first degree murder.¹ Some thirty miles away, in the town of Mauch Chunk, four other similarly convicted men awaited the same fate. Those to be hanged on that dreary Thursday morning, since dubbed Pennsylvania's "Day of the Rope," were all either Irish born or sons of Irish immigrants. They were also all members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), a national Irish fraternal organization that became synonymous in the hard coal region with an alleged criminal society known as the Molly Maguires. The executions proceeded as scheduled, and these ten represented the first of what would finally add up to twenty Molly Maguires hanged for murder in the anthracite region over the next eighteen months.

The events that climaxed with the executions of the convicted Molly Maguires attracted national, even international, attention to Schuylkill County, where most of the group's alleged crimes occurred. The nation's popular press depicted the Molly Maguires as a secret society of Irish-American mine workers that used violent means, ranging from threats and vandalism to outright murder, to address grievances against mine bosses and other non-Irish residents of the anthracite region. The Mollies allegedly terrorized the area from the Civil War until their prosecution in 1876. The prosecution's ability to portray the accused as sociopathic members of a sinister terrorist organization gave the trials a sensational quality. That most of the men convicted as Mollies were brought down by the testimony of James McParlan, a Pinkerton detective who had infiltrated the inner ranks of the AOH and lived among the Irish for over two years, made the court proceedings all the more intriguing to the public.

In the one hundred and twenty years since the Molly Maguire episode, several schools of thought have applied widely varying interpretations to the Molly Maguire legend that reflect as much the ideological perspective of the writer as the actual record of the activities of the alleged Molly Maguires. For those siding with the prosecution, the Mollies represented a threatening assault on the emerging industrial social order by alien agitators and malcontents

intent on disrupting the promise of the new age. The Molly Maguires were linked to the miners' union, and the criminal nature of the Mollies was viewed by many Americans as part and parcel of the unassimilable character of the Irish Catholic immigrant and the extremist nature of organized labor. For those siding with the defense the Mollies appeared as victims of a legal system completely controlled by an omnipotent big corporation, and the convicted were elevated as martyrs of the incipient American labor movement.

In the case of Schuylkill County that big corporation was the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, commonly known as the Reading. In the early years of the 1870s the Reading bought up most of the collieries in the county, creating an effective monopoly on the extraction, processing, and transportation to market of the county's anthracite coal. The architect of this monopoly, Reading President Franklin B. Gowen, also formed an alliance with the other major coal producing transportation companies of the region to forge one of the nation's first trusts. This combination succeeded in destroying the miners' union, as a consequence of the "Long Strike" of 1875. Gowen is remembered, however, for his part in the Molly Maguire incidents. He not only hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to infiltrate the suspected Mollies, he also had Pinkertons infiltrate the union leadership. Gowen, a former Schuylkill County

District Attorney during the Civil War, extended his role in the prosecution of the Molly Maguires by acting as a special prosecutor and taking a star role in several of the trials.

In many ways Schuylkill County represents the crucible of early industrial America. One of the first large scale mining areas in the United States, Schuylkill provided much of the anthracite fuel necessary to make the city of Philadelphia an industrial giant. Horrendous and perilous working conditions in the mines exacerbated the growing antagonisms between capital and labor that were becoming ever more manifest throughout the industrializing North. In the decade before the Molly trials this conflict was more open and fierce in the anthracite coal regions of eastern Pennsylvania than anywhere in the nation.² The maneuvers of Gowen's Reading made Schuylkill County a virtual fiefdom of the company, anticipating the predominance of the big corporation on the national level. The destruction of the miners' union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA), mirrored the sorry state of organized labor in the years of economic depression following the Panic of 1873.³ Finally, the ability of the Molly prosecutors to link the union to the putative Irish villains reflected both the deep antipathy of Anglo-Protestants to the Irish and the class lines which were often determined by ethnicity.

Although much has been written about the Mollies, the episode is still poorly understood. Even Kerby Miller,

perhaps the preeminent scholar in America today on Irish immigration, wrote that the Mollies "temporarily ruled Pennsylvania's anthracite fields through intimidation and violence."⁴ To the contrary, as the accused were executed, it became stunningly apparent that the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, among other transportation companies, ruled the anthracite region. The attempt by scholars and descendants of the accused to romanticize the Mollies as heroes of the labor movement has also clouded historical understanding. Certainly none of the accused received a fair trial, and several men were hanged on the basis of mere hearsay evidence. The pattern of the murders allegedly committed by the Mollies, however, suggests that the victims were killed merely as personal vendettas, rather than to counter some broader grievances against management. Those who tie the Mollies with the union as class-conscious defenders of miners' causes fall prey to Gowen's largely successful, yet wholly unsubstantiated, attempt to link Molly Maguire terrorism to union activity in the public's mind.

While considerable attention has been devoted to the Molly incidents and trials, little attention has been paid to the Irish immigrant mining community and culture from which the condemned men came. This oversight stems partly from the scant literary legacy left by the community. Most of what we know of these people comes to us through the

words of the often hostile Anglo-Protestant publishers, reporters, lawyers, and mine bosses of the anthracite region and of the nation. Despite the severe limitations imposed by the unfortunate paucity of literary sources from Schuylkill's Irish I believe that a portrait of this community's struggles, dreams, failures, and successes can be honestly, if not completely, drawn.

In the tradition of labor historians such as Herbert Gutman and Stephen Thernstrom, this thesis endeavors to represent Schuylkill County's Irish community's aspirations on its own terms, which did not necessarily reflect the same set of cultural values held by the native middle class.⁵ More specific in informing this study is the work of several scholars. Kerby Miller's huge volume on Irish emigration, Exiles and Emigrants: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America, reveals not only how tragic the "forced" emigration from the Emerald Isle was for those involved, but how certain Irish cultural traits made the tragedy even more painful. Anthony F. C. Wallace, in St Clair: A Nineteenth-Century Coal Town's Experience with a Disaster-Prone Industry, chronicles the rise and fall of the Schuylkill coal industry, with particular sympathy for the miners, many Irish, who suffered from absentee owners, employer apathy toward mine safety, and overproduction.

It is perhaps ironic that this thesis is guided in large measure by the work of historians concerned with the

Slavic immigrants, who followed the Irish into the coal fields a generation after the Molly episode. Ironical because many anthracite Irish of the turn of the twentieth century held negative perceptions of the Eastern European immigrant, similar to those that Anglo-Protestants had of the incoming Irish less than fifty years before. Victor Greene, in his important study The Slavic Community on Strike, convincingly portrays the Eastern European immigrants of the anthracite region as instrumental to the success of the United Mine Workers, debunking the myth, propagated in no small measure by Irish labor leaders, that the presence of Eastern European workers retarded the labor movement.

It is my hope that this thesis presents the Irish community of Schuylkill County in a like manner. Just as scholars of the anthracite Slavs have been able to successfully challenge the stereotype of a docile and ignorant Slavic worker, this thesis attempts to discredit the legacy that the badge of Molly Maguireism has left on Irish-American heritage. That legacy has added greatly to the popular image of the nineteenth-century Irish immigrant as a whiskey swilling, ignorant, lawless and violent individual. To define the character of Schuylkill's Irish-Americans in terms of the Molly Maguire episode limits our ability to understand them as complex and active historical players.

Historian Michael Barendse, in writing of the Slavic

community in the anthracite region, begins by stipulating that "social reality is a cultural construct. What a society expects to be true, in other words, is what its members tend to perceive as being true." Barendse uses this hypothesis to show how negative expectations held by American society determined negative interpretations of the Eastern European immigrant's behavior. This thesis applies Barendse's hypothesis to the Irish immigrant who preceded the Slav into the anthracite region. One aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how culturally produced negative expectations of the Irish created perceptions that ratified those expectations. It was easy for those outside of the Irish community to believe in wholesale Molly Maguire terror and it was easy for the Reading under Gowen to have the state prosecute and condemn twenty men, some for crimes allegedly committed more than a decade prior to arrest, based on negative perceptions of the Irish.

Another aim of this thesis is to explore the strengths and weaknesses of ethnic identification in the particularly dangerous and divisive industrial arena of anthracite coal mining. "In the [eighteen] seventies and eighties," says historian John Higham, "the coal mining country was rapidly becoming the industrial hell of the northeastern United States." Inter-ethnic conflict plays a major part in this analysis. Schuylkill's Irish not only had to deal with the often hostile Anglo-Protestants who made up the managerial

class, but also with the antipathy of the large Welsh immigrant mining community. The Irish mine worker's ethnic identity had a double edge: it provided him with a strong community base, but that community's insularity also sustained the "otherness" of the Irish. Certainly, nativist attitudes and discrimination fueled this Irish insularity and made it simple for non-Irish in the anthracite region to believe in pervasive Molly Maguire terror. But the Irish anthracite community was itself not without inner turmoil, and a discussion of intra-ethnic conflict is critical in developing a portrait of Schuylkill's Irish community.

To help him cope with the rigors of his harsh industrial setting the Irish mine worker looked toward three institutions for aid. These were the Roman Catholic Church, the Workingman's Benevolent Association, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. In quick succession the Irish miner was abandoned by each of these organizations: the union could not survive the Long Strike; the Church banned the AOH as a secret society in the lower anthracite region in 1874, and the AOH itself expelled the anthracite region chapters in the wake of the Molly trials. This thesis examines the importance that each of these institutions played in the life of Schuylkill's Irish-Americans, the conflict among them, and their ultimate inability to sustain the Irish mining community through the dark days of the mid-1870s.

This thesis utilizes and briefly evaluates the

considerable secondary literature concerning the Molly Maguire incidents. More important, this thesis incorporates an eclectic range of primary sources. Newspapers from outside the anthracite region, such as the New York Times and the Baltimore Sun, among others, are used in order to provide the reader an impression of national reaction to the Molly episodes. The Irish press, most notably New York's Irish World, not surprisingly, spoke out on behalf of the accused and gives a sense of the anguish that the Molly hangings visited upon the Irish community throughout the nation. As far as the local press is concerned, the Pottsville Miner's Journal furnishes the most detailed coverage of area news. Its publisher and editor for most of the period pertinent to this thesis, Benjamin Bannan, was a renowned spokesman for the Republican Party, an advocate of mine operator interests, and avowedly anti-Irish. Some court testimony is incorporated into this thesis, but more often the daily reports of the Pinkerton operatives living among the Irish, especially James McParlan, are used to help illustrate the class warfare that raged in Schuylkill County in the mid-1870s. Folklorist George Korson's anthology of Irish ballads from the anthracite area constitutes one of the few local Irish literary sources, and these lyrics cannot be ignored in an exploration of Irish cultural traits.

There are enough good accounts of the events which led

to the hangings of Schuylkill's alleged Mollies so that this thesis need but cursorily discuss them.⁸ This thesis is not concerned with establishing the guilt or innocence of the Irish-Americans hanged as Molly Maguires. Instead, this thesis concentrates on attempting to define Irish society and culture in Schuylkill County amid the labor-capital strife of the 1870s, which climaxed in the Long Strike of 1875.

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. Chapter One provides the reader with an introduction to the anthracite industry in Schuylkill County and a demographic profile of Schuylkill's Irish community. Chapter Two attempts to illustrate and define Irish immigrant culture in the anthracite region. Chapter Three details the largely negative perceptions held by the county's native and non-Irish immigrant populations toward the Irish. Chapter Four discusses the struggle of Schuylkill County's mine workers to build and maintain a strong union, in which the Irish had an integral role. Chapter Five concerns the destruction of the union and the dominance of the Reading Railroad in Schuylkill County as consequences of the Long Strike of 1875. Finally, Chapter Six gives a brief description of the Molly Maguire murders, trials, and executions. Chapter Six also deals with the creation, propagation, and evolution of the Molly Maguire Myth in the years since the episode.

In the 1990s the debate over immigration into the

United States has risen to levels unseen since stringent immigration restrictions were put into effect after World War I. California reelected Pete Wilson governor largely on the basis of his anti-immigrant policies. In the 1995 best-selling book decrying the Federal government's immigration policy, Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster, conservative author Peter Brimelow echoes the sentiments of anti-Irish nativists of the last century when he asks: "Is it really wise to allow the immigration of people who find it so difficult and painful to assimilate into the American majority?"⁹ The recent immigrants whose entrance into the United States Brimelow decries come mostly from Asia, Latin America, and Africa, not from Ireland. But surely it is important to examine the complex course of the first great wave of "alien" Irish immigration of the mid-Nineteenth Century in order to more fully comprehend the implications of the present wave of immigration. My hope is that this thesis in some small way contributes to that understanding.

NOTES

1. Baltimore Sun, 22 June 1877.
2. John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 47.
3. John H. Commons, et al., History of Labour in the United States, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1918), vol. 2, 195.
4. Kerby A. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 327.
5. See especially Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," in Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); and, Stephen Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).
6. Michael A. Barendse, Social Expectations and Perception: The Case of the Slavic Anthracite Workers (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), preface.
7. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 47.
8. Wayne G. Broehl's The Molly Maguires (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), remains the most thorough and balanced account of the Molly Maguire episode.
9. Peter Brimelow, Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster (New York: Random House, 1995), 7.

Chapter One

The Irish in Schuylkill County

The Irish came to Schuylkill County in the 1850s and settled in the mining districts. Refugees from the Emerald Isle found a dreary haven mining the black rock that lay beneath Schuylkill's soil. Most came because they lacked the knowledge of a specialized trade or the capital necessary to achieve economic independence in the cities and towns of the American littoral. The Irish left their beloved island because the Great Famine turned a previously dire economic situation into an impossible one for the Irish peasant. The factories and mines of industrial Britain and the industrializing United States offered the unskilled Irish peasant perhaps his only chance to avert starvation in Ireland.

This chapter will introduce the origins of Schuylkill County's anthracite coal industry, discuss the economic and social context of Irish immigration, and give the reader a detailed demographic profile of Schuylkill's Irish community.

Schuylkill County and Anthracite Coal

In the geological process of coalification, anthracite, or hard coal, represents the final stage. Anthracite contains a high carbon content, ranging from 88 to 94 percent by weight, and relatively little of the volatile hydrocarbons found in the softer grades of coal: bituminous, sub-bituminous and lignite. Anthracite is heavy, one cubic foot weighing over ninety pounds, and so hard that it was initially known as "stone coal." When ignited it burns very hot, with an almost colorless and smokeless flame. It retains its structure while burning and leaves only a small quantity of ash. These characteristics helped make anthracite the fuel of choice for eastern Americans, especially in home heating, in the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth.¹

Most of North America's anthracite is to be found in several fields in northeastern Pennsylvania, covering an area not quite 500 square miles. Virtually all of Pennsylvania's anthracite lies in the counties of Lackawanna, Luzerne, Carbon, Schuylkill and Northumberland. The two most southern anthracite fields are often described together as the Schuylkill field. The Mahanoy field cuts through northern Schuylkill County and into southern Northumberland County, from Mahanoy City west through Shamokin. The Southern field runs westward from the town of

Jim Thorpe (formerly known as Mauch Chunk, and hereafter to be called by its nineteenth-century name), bisecting Schuylkill County and running just into Dauphin County.

The physical characteristics of Schuylkill's coal fields made an inherently dangerous workplace even more so. The intense pressures from movements of the earth's crust which created the high grade anthracite coal also made its extraction more dangerous. Anthracite coal beds are often steeply pitched and fragmented, and usually reach beneath the area's water table, making anthracite's extraction far more difficult than that of bituminous coal. This is particularly the case in the Schuylkill field. Initially coal mining there was relatively simple, since outcroppings of pitched coal beds were numerous. But when production escalated in the middle of the nineteenth century, Schuylkill coal became ever more of a challenge to extract, requiring greater capital expenditures, and greater risks for miners.²

The Early Anthracite Industry

In August of 1814, two owners of a nail and wire mill near Philadelphia, Josiah White and Erskine Hazard, bought a small shipment of coal that had been shipped from the anthracite region down the Lehigh and Delaware rivers and to the docks of the City of Brotherly Love. This purchase

marked the beginning of anthracite's commercial value. Previously, anthracite was considered unsuitable as a fuel for heating or industry because it was so difficult to light. White and Hazard purchased the anthracite in hopes of finding a way to make it burn and use it as a replacement for expensive charcoal. After several fruitless attempts at lighting the hard coal in the mill's furnace one of the mill's workmen shut the furnace's door in disgust and went home. A short time later White was summoned to the furnace by a workman who had gone back to retrieve his coat and noticed that the coal was white hot. White and Hazard discovered, as serendipitously as so many technological innovations have been made, that for burning the coal in an iron furnace the draft had to pass through the coal rather than over it.³

White and Hazard, cognizant of the commercial potential of anthracite, led the construction of a slack-water canal along the Lehigh River into the coal region. In 1820, the year that regular shipments of coal commenced, 365 tons were received in Philadelphia. Four years later, White and Hazard's firm, the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, shipped 9,000 tons. By the end of the decade the opening of three major canals linking the anthracite region to tidewater, coupled with increasing demand, raised the shipment to 173,000 tons yearly.⁴

Business historian Alfred Chandler has credited the

development of Pennsylvania's anthracite fields with providing the impetus for further industrial development in the United States, which had until then been restricted mostly to water-powered industries such as textiles. Cheap anthracite allowed for widespread use of steam power and the creation of a large-scale iron industry. The amount of hard coal production rose tremendously in the 1830s and 1840s, more than quadrupling from the 1830 mark to over 1,008,000 tons by 1840, and almost quadrupling again to 3,724,800 tons by 1849. As production increased and transportation to market by canal, and later rail, became more efficient the price of anthracite declined steadily on the Philadelphia market, from \$7.50 per ton in 1829 to \$3.46 per ton in 1852, making the fuel all the more attractive to the consumer.⁵

The opening of the Schuylkill Canal, from Port Carbon, near Pottsville, to Philadelphia, in 1825, was the event which marked the real beginning of the anthracite industry in Schuylkill County. By the end of the decade the county was producing half of the nation's anthracite coal. Since much coal was easily reachable from the surface in the early years of the industry, the Schuylkill field attracted many fortune hunters and entrepreneurs seeking to make an easy profit with relatively little capital expenditure. Whereas transportation companies in the other districts controlled production from the beginning, the Schuylkill Navigation Company, proprietor of the canal, was not permitted in its

charter to own or develop coal land. Thus the Schuylkill district was characterized by its relatively large number of small, independent operators, until the Reading began its move to monopolize Schuylkill coal in the early 1870s.⁶

Although there may have been a large number of independent operators in Schuylkill, most of them leased their collieries from large estates controlled by wealthy individuals and families from the urban centers of Philadelphia and New York. For example, during the Schuylkill coal land boom in the late 1820s and early 1830s Philadelphia banker Stephen Girard purchased 28,460 acres in northwestern Schuylkill County.⁷ The land was not developed until 1862, thirty-one years after Girard's death. By this time the estate was under the control of the city of Philadelphia, and proceeds went to an institute for orphaned boys and other charitable causes.⁸ Henry Carey, scion of a prominent Philadelphia publisher, led a group of owners of Schuylkill coal lands, none of whom resided in the county. Absentee ownership was the rule in the district, compounding the conflict between capital and labor which intensified as the exploitation of the coal fields rapidly increased.

The Irish

The Irish had migrated to North America from the commencement of white settlement and had been arriving in

the United States in ever larger numbers since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The make-up of the early nineteenth-century Irish immigrant population differed substantially from the majority of people who left Ireland following the Great Famine in 1845. Pre-Famine immigrants tended to be Protestant and not destitute. Many were younger sons of prosperous farmers who, because of the practice of primogeniture, found their fortunes limited in their native land. Although political exiles made their way to America's shores, most pre-Famine immigrants were drawn to the United States by the lure of increased economic opportunity. The Irish economy deteriorated steadily after the Napoleonic Wars, and chances for advancement in Ireland were slim.

The Potato Famine changed the pattern of immigration; now Irish emigrants, mostly Catholic and from the tenant farming class, fled to America in order to escape the threat of starvation at home. Not since the invasion of Oliver Cromwell's English army had Ireland known such hardship. Seemingly overnight, the previously unknown fungus, Phytophthora infestans, destroyed the potato harvest of 1845 and with it virtually the only food source of the Irish peasantry. The potato blight, and the, at best, feeble British response for relief, accounted for an estimated 1.1 to 1.5 million deaths by starvation.⁹

As devastating as the Great Famine was it must be

viewed in a larger context. The Famine began a process of the depopulation of Ireland which continued at a remarkable pace until after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921. Ireland's population stood at about 8.5 million just prior to the Famine. Within a decade it had declined to 6 million, and the declining trend remained fairly steady until the population stabilized at around 4.3 million in 1926. "Ordinarily," writes Irish emigration historian Kerby Miller,

demographic catastrophes such as the Great Famine only temporarily retard population growth; however, Ireland's mid-century crisis was not an anomaly, but rather a tragic, accelerating symptom of the island's integration into a maturing international market system as a dependent and subordinate supplier of raw materials, specialized manufactured goods, and cheap labor to the world's dominant industrial nations.¹⁰

The Irish Catholic tenant farmer suffered most from the dislocation that famine and a subordinate economy imposed on Ireland. Even in the best of times the Catholic peasant stood in virtual thralldom to his English landlord and the Irish Protestant gentry. The infamous legacy of the Penal Laws, imposed after William of Orange's decisive victory over the Catholic Stuarts at the Boyne in 1690, and still not fully abrogated by the time of the Famine, provided Catholics with no political rights and limited economic ones. With the Famine, flight from the land of their ancestors proved the only viable recourse for the Irish fortunate enough to have the means to obtain passage to England or America.

The Irish Catholic tenant farmer was at an extreme disadvantage in the emerging North Atlantic economic nexus. Considered a superfluous population, Irish Catholics found themselves with fewer and fewer choices in a homeland whose economy was dedicated to enriching absentee landlords rather than providing for the community as a whole. Emigration became a last and, according to Miller, a bitter choice of a people who had a strong and ancient bond to the land. Miller asserts that the Irish possessed certain cultural traits that compounded the tragedy of forced exile. He maintains that Irish peasant culture, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century, was essentially premodern. Especially in the western part of the island, many spoke Irish as an everyday language and maintained other links to an ancient Celtic civilization. Miller writes: "poor Catholics themselves gave evidence of a premodern mentality which viewed the universe as static and tradition bound, within which they were merely passive recipients of whatever bounties or ills God or fate saw fit to ordain."¹¹

The Irish worldview was similar to other "traditional" peasant societies in that it emphasized the collective over the individual; custom over innovation; trust in the workings of providence over a desire to take charge of one's destiny. In short, the Irish peasant's ethos equipped him well for a life based in the small agrarian community, with its dependence on the caprice of nature and reliance on

familial and village cooperation for survival. But these same traits would do little to advance an individual in the world of industrial capitalism into which the Famine-era Irish were thrust.¹²

Miller's bleak portrayal of the Irish immigrant as an unwilling and unprepared exile seems to be undercut by the remarkable degree of assimilation and economic prosperity that the Irish have enjoyed in this country. Irish-American historian Dennis Clark counters Miller's paradigm by showing the Irish immigrant as possessing a singular "initiative, zest for life, and social drive. . . . it seems evident that whatever their misfortunes, the Irish managed to respond to America with a heartening and creative vitality that befits their remarkable tradition." ¹³

If one puts individual achievement aside and ignores the progress of the Irish in this century, the tragic aspects of the Irish immigrant story as emphasized by Miller carry more weight. For most of the nineteenth century the Irish remained in the ghettos of large cities, within the working-class sections of factory towns, and in the mining towns and patches of the anthracite region. Social and economic mobility, the benchmarks of progress to the Anglo-American middle class, seemed less important, or unattainable, to the Irish. They were more interested in preserving their own communities and maintaining their institutions, particularly their Church. The Irish workers'

goals were modest by middle-class standards, primarily consisting of securing for their families the stability that comes with the ownership of a home, and receiving a decent wage for a decent day's work. Even urban politics, the sphere in which nineteenth-century Irish-Americans made their most visible mark, proved a tribal affair in which a politician's worth was measured more in his value to the Irish community rather than in his individual accomplishment.

For anyone who has been fortunate to have travelled in Ireland, especially on the rugged and beautiful western coast, Miller's insights into the exile mentality of the Irish emigrant appear poignant. Those immigrants who made their way to the anthracite fields could scarcely have encountered a vista of greater contrast to that of verdant Ireland. Photographs of the late nineteenth century, particularly the work of Pottsville photographer George Bretz, reveal a landscape ravaged by the business of coal extraction. What was once, and is again today, a largely wooded area appears in Bretz's photos as denuded of flora as the Nevada desert.¹⁴

Few of the million and a half Irish refugees from the Famine who arrived in the United States in the decade after 1845 met a warm welcome. The Irish represented the first mass "alien" wave of immigration to the United States and elicited the overt hatred of Anglo-Protestants fearing the

onslaught of depraved Irish papists. The nativist political party, the American, or "Know-Nothing," was alarmingly strong in the mid-1850s, reflecting the fear and loathing that the Irish sparked in a substantial segment of the native population. For the Irish the hostile attitude of native Americans created a somber touchstone for adaptation to their new land. As Irish-American historian Lawrence McCaffrey notes:

the same close associations between Irish and Catholic identities that inspired Anglo-saxon Protestant prejudice in Britain and Ireland as well as Anglo-American Protestant prejudice in the United States also gave the frightened immigrants a means of bridging Old and New Worlds and easing the problems of adjustment to a strange environment.¹⁵

For the Irish who made their way to the anthracite region, the type of Old World prejudice they were accustomed to came in large doses. But one would be incorrect in assuming that the Irish viewed Anglo-American prejudice in the same way that they viewed Old World Anglo-Protestant prejudice. Despite their strong ties to their erstwhile home the Irish embraced American political institutions, especially the Democratic Party, passionately and immediately. Of all the major immigrant groups arriving in the United States the Irish were the least likely to return to their country of origin. The celebration of American Independence (which was, after all, the celebration of the overthrow of British tyranny) was passionately observed by the Irish.

Irish-American patriotism can best be summed up by the motto of one of the leading Irish-American newspapers, New York's Irish World: "Catholic in Religion; American in Nationality; Irish in Race." "To the flag of the United States only do we owe allegiance," said the Irish World's mission statement, "to the flag of no other power on earth do we look to for protection. This country is our home, and forever to be the home of our children. Let us always feel this."¹⁶

Demographics of Schuylkill's Irish

Table 1

Population Growth of Schuylkill County¹⁷

	Population	% Increase
1820	11,339	
1830	20,744	83
1840	29,053	40
1850	60,713	109
1860	89,510	47
1870	116,428	30

The table above reveals the rapid population growth of Schuylkill County as its economy was transformed from an agrarian one dominated by Pennsylvania-German independent farmers to an industrial one driven by the production of

anthracite. The county's farming districts and mining districts were sharply segregated throughout the period. The degree of segregation was such that no township or borough contained both well developed farming and mining enterprises.¹⁸ Virtually all the county's Irish settled in the mining districts. Certain mining districts, particularly Mahanoy and Cass townships, had a higher concentration of Irish mine workers and their families. For example, Cass township possessed thirty-eight percent of the county's Irish population in 1860.¹⁹

The U.S. Census shows that in 1870 Schuylkill County had a foreign-born population of 30,856, constituting 27 percent of the total population. The foreign-born population of the state of Pennsylvania as a whole stood at only 15 percent, according to the same census, indicating the relative prevalence of Schuylkill's foreign-born. More significantly, the number of county residents having one or both parents of foreign birth was 68,870 in 1870, or nearly 60 percent of the total population. Clearly, Schuylkill's population was predominantly of immigrant background and the largest of the immigrant groups were the Irish. The 1870 census shows that 13,465 people were of Irish nativity in the county, or approximately 12 percent of its total population, double the percentage of Irish-born in the state as a whole.²⁰

Since at least 1850, the Irish had represented a

sizable proportion of Schuylkill County's population. By 1870 people of Irish birth or descent counted toward almost a third of the county's aggregate population (see Table 2). The county's Irish formed an important minority, large enough not to be ignored but not large enough to set the political agenda of the county by themselves.

Table 2

Major Ethnic Groups as Percentage of Total Population of Schuylkill County²¹

	1850	1860	1870
Germans	45	35	32
English and Welsh	35	35	32
Irish	15	25	30
Others	5	5	5

Most Irishmen arrived in Schuylkill County with little to offer their employer save their brawn. They usually began their careers in the mines as laborers, assisting the skilled miner, who was typically English or Welsh, at the coal face. Over time the Irish laborer often did obtain full miner status, but opportunities to rise to even the lowest levels of management were rare. For most miners and mine laborers mobility was merely lateral, and the career option was simply to "move on" to the bituminous mines of western Pennsylvania, to metal mining in the western states, or to another occupation. From what is known of the

physical mobility of the nineteenth-century working class it is likely that Schuylkill's Irish often chose to move on.²²

There appears to have been considerable physical mobility within the county itself among the Irish. In the town of St. Clair, a few miles north of Pottsville, for instance, the percentage of people of Irish birth declined from 22 percent in 1850 to 12 percent in 1870. Anthony Wallace speculates, as the Pottsville Miners' Journal had repeatedly suggested, that the Irish from older mining communities, such as Pottsville and St. Clair, were "colonizing" the newer mining areas in the northern part of the county.²³

A sign of a maturing Irish population within the town of St. Clair is shown in the substantial rise in the number of Irish skilled miners. In 1850 the census indicated that of 191 Irishmen in the mines, 167 were laborers while only 24 were contract miners. The 1870 census listed 78 Irish miners and only 58 laborers, demonstrating substantial mobility within one occupation. Another indication of a maturing, more settled, Irish population within St. Clair was the increasing number of Irish owners of real estate. In 1850, St. Clair had nine Irish property owners, or two percent of the Irish adult population; by 1870 that number had risen to 131, or nineteen percent, and exceeded the ownership rate of all other ethnic groups in the town save Germans.²⁴

Formal education was a luxury that few of Schuylkill's Irish could afford. The Census of 1870 shows that only 1,314 persons of foreign nativity attended school, compared with 23,030 native born. Even if one considers that a significant number of natives counted were offspring of foreign born, the ratio of natives attending school to those of foreign birth is surprisingly large.²⁵ More specifically, in St. Clair, 19 percent of all children having an Irish-born father had attended school in the year of the 1850 census, while children from other ethnic groups attended at rates of 30 to 40 percent. In 1870, 40 percent of children having an Irish-born father attended school, but the improvement was almost all accounted for by the attendance of girls. Boys' school attendance, according to the 1870 census, remained at the 1850 level of 19 percent.²⁶

The 1870 census also reported that 10,450 people of foreign birth over the age of ten could not write as compared to 5,841 people of native birth. The Catholic Church organized night classes for school age boys in the anthracite region during the 1870s, using public school buildings. "But after working all day," notes a contemporary observer, "the boy can not bring so much animation to the night school as if he were not fatigued."²⁷

Schuylkill County's Irish immigrant community found

itself at the bottom of almost every social and economic index from the 1850s through the 1870s. There were some bright signs, such as the increase of the home ownership rate in St. Clair in the twenty year interval mentioned above, but these represented marginal gains. However, the increase in size of the county's Irish community during the period, ensured that it would have some say in county political affairs. Also, the importance of the Irish as a significant segment of the anthracite work force, ensured that their voice would be heard in the labor battles of the 1860s and 1870s.

NOTES

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23. Wallace, St. Clair, 372.
24. Ibid., Table 9, Table 10, 374.
25. Ninth Census (1870), Population, Table X, 427.
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27. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, November 1877, 921.

Chapter Two

Irish Immigrant Culture in Schuylkill County

Irish immigrants arrived in the anthracite region with deep ties to their ancient Celtic culture. For many Irish, recently removed from peasant life in the Old World, the process of adaptation to life in the industrial setting of anthracite Pennsylvania was a bitter experience. The transplanted Irish forged their own communities and exhibited a clannishness thought peculiar in their new land. This clannishness allowed the Irish to continue many of their old traditions and served as a way of ameliorating the often hostile conditions of working-class life in industrial America. This chapter discusses how the Irish adapted to their new environment while still maintaining a discrete culture. Irish immigrant culture featured the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church; traditions considered superstitious by native Pennsylvanians; and a male social life centered around the tavern, the Democratic Party, and fraternities such as the AOH.

Another distinctive cultural trait of the Irish immigrants was their use of the Irish language. It is estimated that as many as a quarter of all those who left

Ireland, especially from western areas, during and after the Famine spoke Irish.¹ While it is difficult to determine how prevalent the use of Irish was in Schuylkill County, a contemporary commentator wrote of the anthracite region that "Gaelic is extensively spoken by the Irish here, there being women, I am told, newly come over, who do not speak English."²

Pre-Christian and unorthodox Christian beliefs abounded among the Irish of the region. Irish miners refused to continue working on the day that someone had been killed in their mine, considering it bad luck. The belief that the ghosts of those killed in mining accidents haunted the mines, causing strange noises and lights, was commonplace among all anthracite miners, but particularly the Irish.³ One miner related the tale of a man who had been killed in a mine by a cave-in. It was said, the miner reported, that if one went to a certain spot "the fairies might be there, and the lost man with them; then by throwing something his friends could get him back all right. Some went there in fun; some in earnest."⁴ If a miner were to meet a red-haired woman on his way to the colliery he would heed this sign of impending ill fortune and return home. Women in the mines were a serious taboo which was universally obeyed in the anthracite region. In some places women remained indoors until the men were safely down the shaft.⁵

Keeners, or paid women mourners, were common at the

wakes and funerals of the Irish. Folklorist George Korson writes of one keener present at the funeral of a disreputable miner near Pottsville who "was so fulsome in her eulogy as to cause the widow to turn to her daughter and remark, 'Mary, is there another caarpse in the room?'"⁶

Besides keening, the Irish wake consisted of entire communities keeping a nightlong vigil over the body of the newly deceased, with women lamenting over the body while the men reminisced, often over whiskey and beer, in an adjacent room. These practices were strongly discouraged by the Catholic clergy, who considered the customs pagan holdovers and lacking the proper somberness befitting orthodox Christian burial.⁷

Since the majority of the Irish entering Schuylkill County in the mid-nineteenth century came from regions in Ireland that were neither industrial nor urban, many arrived with an ethos that insured that their adaptation to the industrial milieu of anthracite production would be turbulent. The Irish peasant regarded most social institutions suspiciously. The state, which in Ireland was a vehicle of English oppression, conjured no positive memories for the immigrant Irish. The Irish also looked with disfavor upon the town, for its police and courts had treated them harshly in the Old World. In the same manner the discipline required of a worker in the mines, with management's authoritarian ability to set hours, regulate

drinking and smoking, arbitrarily reduce wages, and dock for poor quality piecework, was not something to which the Irish worker could easily adapt.⁸

Anthony Wallace writes that the Irish had no experience

with craft unions and benefit clubs, so familiar to the English, Welsh and Germans. More exclusively than the others, the Irish countryman organized his work, his financial obligations, and his social relationships around a network of cooperative extended families, and to these he turned when he was in trouble.⁹

This reliance on the extended family reflected the practice of labor reciprocity necessary in an agrarian society. One tenant farmer and his sons would gladly assist brothers, cousins, and in-laws in the harvest or other farm labor, secure in the knowledge that such labor would be repaid in kind. The strong kinship bonds fostered in a non-industrial economic setting helped provide a means for the Irish to adapt to the harsh world of anthracite coal production. The peculiar "clannishness" of the Irish provided for one of the few social safety nets available to Irish mining families. For instance, a contemporary reporter remarked that the anthracite Irish "extend their care to the widow of their unfortunate companion whom they frequently set up in a little saloon, where she vends candy, pea-nuts, and various drinks."¹⁰ A faith in the extended family in the midst of hostility from other ethnic groups and the rigors and perils of the industry worked to maintain a considerable degree of insularity among the Irish. As

late as 1886, in the northern anthracite county of Lackawanna, Irish married within their own ethnic group at least 94 percent of the time.¹¹

The anthracite region's rugged topography and the nature of the coal industry tended to further reinforce Irish insularity, in that mine worker families often lived in isolated mining "patches." Patches were hamlets, consisting of little more than a dozen to one hundred houses, a company owned store, and a church or two, surrounding the coal breaker of an individual colliery. People of the same ethnicity tended to settle together in the patches, and by 1850 there were identifiable "Irish" patches in Schuylkill County, forming effective Irish ghettos.¹² The typical house, usually owned by the company, was a duplex generally made from hemlock boards with no plastering, no ceiling and no wallpaper. The simple furnishings provided by the colliery consisted of a bedstead and a table and chairs. Rents were often artificially high and deducted directly from a miner's pay.¹³

A curious aspect of mine patch life was that although labor was based on compensation in wages, money itself was a rare commodity. Miner John Maguire recalled:

Workmen about the mines could scarcely get any money at that time. They could get store orders instead. About every company that owned a mine ran a store. Sometimes he would get all his pay in a store order on that store for the balance. He would then go to the butcher and pay him. The butcher would take the store order and give him what was left over paying his bills in his orders, or issue, called "shin plasters." Then the

miner would go to a tavern, for instance, and pay his score there, or buy a drink, and for change the tavern keeper would give him so many tickets, each good for a drink; and these tokens of indebtedness passed around in that way, but hardly any money was used.¹⁴

This cashless compensation system definitely benefitted the mine operators, insuring that workers and their families would continue to buy from the company store. It was not unheard of for a miner to receive a "bobtail" check, where money owed to the company store for groceries and mining supplies equalled the amount of the miner's gross earnings.¹⁵ A cash-poor work force also made it more difficult for people to move from the anthracite region, thereby tightening the hold of operators over their workers.

Family life in the mine patch was circumscribed by the demands of the industry and the poverty which was the lot of the typical Irish mine laborer. It was difficult for the family to manage even when work was steady but, due largely to overproduction and fluctuating market demand, the mines closed frequently.¹⁶ To make ends meet families took in boarders, and boys went to work at very young ages in the mine or breaker. Girls may have been sometimes able to remain in school longer than their brothers but often were "put out to domestic service at twelve or fourteen."¹⁷

Irish women might not have had to endure the eternal darkness and constant danger of the mines, but their lives were perhaps more difficult than those of their men. Catholic tradition mandated that a married woman bear all

the children that her body could produce, making many women old before their time. In addition to raising children women handled all the chores of the household, including preparing meals for family and boarders, tending vegetable gardens, scrounging coal from the culm banks, and heating water for the men to wash the coal dust off their bodies on their return from the mines.¹⁸ Women were also usually responsible for managing the household economy. As a contemporary observer noted: "Miners' wives generally hold the purse. As soon as he gets his pay and his fill of beer, the miner hands his wages to his wife, who acts as treasurer with much discretion."¹⁹

The most terrifying sound to a miner's wife was that of the colliery whistle at an odd hour of the day, signalling that an accident had taken place in the mine. Fatal or disabling mine accidents were a commonplace, if not everyday, occurrence in the region. Every anthracite town and patch had its share of widows, and despite the aid of extended family and neighbors the widows' ability to provide for themselves and their children was indeed precarious.²⁰

The arrival of new immigrants into the anthracite region was always a cause for celebration. It served as a means of easing the immigrants' adaptation to their new environment and as an initiation into the community. The fuss that was made over new arrivals also demonstrates the community's interest in the psychological well-being of its

members, established or not. The words of an anthracite ballad express the gala atmosphere which welcomed newcomers:

Last Thursday night with heart so light just as
 the clock stuck nine,
 The neighbors all assembled for to have a jolly
 time
 In Paddy Maylock's residence on Frog Street,
 Gravel Hill,
 The guests were heartily welcome to eat and drink
 their fill;
 The cause for this rejoicing was paying respects
 you know
 To the greenhorns that had just landed from County
 Mayo.²¹

John Maguire, who settled with his family near St. Clair in the 1860s, recalled in 1914 his family's arrival into the anthracite region and the welcome given by the mining community:

The houses at Gold Mine Gap were built and furnished by the mine owners, two houses in a block, each with one room on the ground floor and two rooms upstairs. Each was equipped with a coal stove, being a step stove, also a bedstead made of square timber, by the colliery carpenter, a deal table, also a few benches. They paid \$4.00 a month for the houses and got their coal "thrown in." When a number of emigrants had been secured by the agent of the mine owners in New York or Philadelphia, a passenger car would be attached to a coal train to bring them along to the region. Sometimes a new family would arrive and take possession of a bare, empty house. In the evening, after the men came from work, the older residents would call upon the new comers. When some of the coal patches had been abandoned, the neighbors would make a trip to the houses not then being used as dwellings and take from them the stoves and ready-made furniture and carry them to the one just occupied by the new arrivals. Tom Rutledge, one of the miners would go there with his fiddle and they would have a dance in the newly occupied house the same night. This was their method of welcoming the stranger in their midst.²²

Standing adjacent to a mine and coal breaker, the patch definitely lacked the bucolic aesthetics of a typical

American village. The huge, dark breaker and the mounds of mine waste, or culm, loomed over the hamlet. Coal dust made everything dingy; the air was foul from coal dust and the water was often polluted from mine acid. Despite the dour setting the people of the mine patch were, on the whole, gregarious. Impromptu gatherings were commonplace on summer evenings. George Korson describes these gatherings: "A sheet of iron borrowed from the colliery would be laid on the grass as a sounding board for jigs, reels, hornpipes, and breakdowns as the fiddler scraped out his tunes."²³

Organized recreation, apart from holiday parades and church socials, often included illicit activities, such as cock-fights. Pinkerton spy James McParlan, whose daily dispatches to his superiors were transcribed and forwarded to Reading Railroad President Franklin B. Gowen, related the following:

operative reports attending a cock-fight, in company with Frank McAndrew, a large crowd was present from all parts of the country. There were seven matches to be made, and appearances indicated that the sport would last all day. The fights came off in the Borough, and neither the Chief Burgess, or Police Authorities interfered.²⁴

Another Pinkerton detective, P.M. Cummings, whose task it was to infiltrate the leadership of the miners' union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, reported finding union President John Siney at a cock-fight in St. Clair. Siney averred that "he did not take any active hand in cock-fighting-- although he liked to see a good fight."²⁵

Less violent sports were also popular, and travelling entertainers provided diversions specifically geared for the anthracite Irish. McParlan's reports mention his attending at least one foot race which drew people from all over the county.²⁶ Various troupes of musicians and dancers, collectively known as "Dublin Dans," toured the anthracite region in the late nineteenth century. The revues featured Irish music and began their appearance in the town or patch with a morning parade to advertise the evening's show. "What with jaunting carts hitched to asses," George Korson writes, "and gentlemen rigged out in colored breeches and buckled shoes, and bagpipes blowing familiar Irish melodies, they brought a touch of old Ireland to the drab mining country."²⁷

Not all of the anthracite Irish were newcomers to the new industrial order. A number of Schuylkill's Irish had worked in mines and factories in England or the northeast United States before coming to the mines. The story of John Siney, the driving force behind the WBA, the first genuine mine workers' union in the region, is a good example of an Irishman steeped in the industrial milieu, and labor-capital conflict, well before arriving in Schuylkill County.

Siney was born into a potato-growing tenant family in Queens County, Ireland, in 1831. When John was five the Sineys were given eight days to remove themselves from the plot which had been in the family for a century and a half,

after a crop failure had made it impossible to pay rent to their English landlord. The family moved to England, where young John got his first job carrying bobbins in a cotton mill in Lancashire. After eight years in the cotton mills, Siney served an apprenticeship and became a full-fledged brickmaker. The egalitarian ideals of the Chartist movement attracted Siney from an early age, but more significantly, he became involved in trade unionism. In his early twenties Siney helped organize the Brickmakers' Association of Wigan, Lancashire; he was elected its president seven times.²⁸

The Union blockade of the Southern coast effectively cut the supply of raw cotton to the Lancashire mills in the early 1860s, thereby depressing all industries in the area. Siney was one of many who saw opportunity in America, arriving in New York in 1863. He made his way shortly thereafter to St. Clair, with the support of friends from England who had previously settled in the area.²⁹

Another group of Irish far removed from peasant life, though few in number, was Schuylkill's Irish middle class. As in other parts of the United States, politics became the vehicle through which members of the Irish middle class gained visibility. The Irish propensity to vote for the Democratic Party en bloc allowed for the elevation to party leadership and high office of several Irish Catholics. Bernard Reilly, born in County Cavan, Ireland, founded a thriving contracting business in Pottsville, served in the

state legislature, and narrowly lost a congressional election. Although native born, Irish Catholic attorney John Ryon served Schuylkill County as a district attorney, state legislator and congressman. He later took part in the Molly Maguire trials as counsel for the defense. By the early 1870s Irish ascendancy in the Democratic Party was such that at the county convention of 1872 "...names like Furey, Igo, Murphy, Kehoe, Eagan, McCarthy and McGuirk dominated the proceedings."³⁰

Although the Irish usually appeared to outsiders as an ethnic group that behaved monolithically, a strain of regional sectarianism carried over from Ireland. This manifested itself in the political arena, as the story of one anthracite Irish politician illustrates:

The Irish miners up our way are united now. But in the old days we were split into two factions, the Kilkennys and the Far Downs, and always battling for the upper hand we were.

One't two tickets were put up for election and the ballots were marked Kilkenny and Far Down. When the ballot boxes reached Pottsville, sure, didn't the Court throw them out saying as there was only two parties in this country, Republican and Democratic, and we could have our choice of one or the other. The party labels were changed to carry out the Court order. But nobody was fooled. The voters knew which were the Kilkenny candidates and which the Far Downs.³¹

The Pinkerton spy, James McParlan, also recorded Irish infighting between members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and a nebulous group of Kilkenny men called the "Sheet Iron Gang." McParlan was told that:

there would soon be some stir. That the sheet-iron gang was pretty much all through this county-- and

Cumberland-- that they were composed of men who had been dismissed from the sleepers and young Irish Americans and Kilkenny men. That the Kilkenny men were never admitted in the M.M.'s-- they are called "Soup-drinkers" and the M.M.s do not associate with them.³²

The rivalry with Kilkenny men possibly had its origins in Ireland. Kilkenny possessed the only coal mining district in Ireland, and experienced Kilkenny miners were getting better jobs in Schuylkill collieries than their compatriots from other parts of Ireland. The use of the term "soup-drinkers" to describe the Kilkenny men is indicative of both the extent to which ethnicity determined, or was perceived to determine, occupation in the mines. A soup-drinker, or "souper," was an Irish term for a Catholic who had turned Protestant, from the practice of Protestant evangelical groups testing their supposed converts by offering them meat or soup on Fridays. To call the Kilkenny men soup-drinkers was to associate them with the largely Protestant skilled miners and mine bosses. They were then not to be trusted and apparently not welcome in the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the organization which became synonymous with the Molly Maguires.³³

In North America the Roman Catholic Church, more than any other force, was the glue that bound the Irish community, ameliorating and, over time, dissolving the petty parochial divisiveness that had abounded in Ireland and was carried across the Atlantic.³⁴ Alongside the family, the Church stood as the most important Irish institution, around

which Irish-American identity revolved. Schuylkill's Irish Catholic community was one of the oldest in the United States. Its first parish, St. Patrick's, in Pottsville, used a primitive log building as its church in the late 1820s. Ten years later a stone structure was built on the same site. In the 1840s a school building was erected and priests from St. Patrick's founded St. Vincent de Paul's Church in Minersville and St. Stephen's at Port Carbon.³⁵

In St. Clair, the first Catholic Church was not Irish, but German. St. Bonifacius was organized in 1852 to serve the area's German Catholics and was presided over by a priest who could speak only broken English. Local Irish were expected to travel to Pottsville for Church services, but on occasion they did use the German Church. Although Irish Catholics by far outnumbered German Catholics in the area, it was not until 1864 that St. Mary's was built to serve St. Clair's Irish.³⁶ In 1870 fourteen Catholic Churches served Schuylkill County, double the number of twenty years previous, an increase, it can be assumed, due to the increase in the Irish population.³⁷

For as vital as Catholicism was to the identity of Irish-Americans all was not harmonious within the Church, particularly as the Molly Maguire episode unfolded in the anthracite region. The actions of a dominant segment of the Church's hierarchy in Pennsylvania reflected what has become identified as a "devotional revolution" within the Church in

Ireland. Led by the Archbishop, and later Cardinal, of Dublin, Paul Cullen, the post-Famine Irish Church moved to reinforce and make sacrosanct middle-class values and lifestyles. The rising number of clergymen, combined with the rapid depopulation of the countryside, allowed for more direct Church supervision of peasant daily life. Cullen moved to thoroughly professionalize the clergy, by measures such as mandating the Roman collar and surplus and enforcing tighter hierarchical discipline. Most important, Cullen led an energetic campaign to force the laity to practice their faith in a strictly orthodox manner.³⁸ "Trained in rigidly conservative seminaries," notes Kerby Miller, "most Irish priests reflected both their church's concern for order, authority, and spiritual conformity and their middle-class parents' compatible obsessions with social stability and their children's chastity." In an attempt to forge a Victorian Irish Catholic culture the Church went to war against the traditional wake, the belief in fairies, sexually integrated education, "and all practices which threatened either clerical or bourgeois hegemony."³⁹

Schuykill County was a part of the diocese of Philadelphia and under the direction of Archbishop James Frederic Wood, from 1860 through the period of the Molly Maguire trials. Wood was born in Philadelphia to English parents and raised as a Unitarian. He was sent to grammar school in England for several years, then settled in

Cincinnati to work in a bank. At the age of twenty-two, Wood suddenly converted to Catholicism and decided to join the priesthood. He went to Seminary at the Irish College in Rome, where Paul Cullen was rector at the time. After ordination in Rome, Wood served as pastor of a Cincinnati church before moving to Philadelphia to assume the title of bishop and later to lead the diocese as archbishop.⁴⁰

From early in his tenure as archbishop, Wood made it clear to the diocese's clergy and congregations that unorthodox behavior would not be tolerated. His most visible battle was with the secret Irish fraternal society, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which became associated not only with the name Molly Maguires but also with names such as the "Buckshots." Wood admonished his flock to have nothing to do with all such organizations in a circular sent to pastors of the diocese to be read to their congregations at mass in January 1864:

the Catholic Church, through her revered head, the Holy Pontiff, has again and again condemned and censured all secret societies, properly so called, as dangerous to civil society, and injurious to the interests of religion. . . .

To say nothing of the "Masons," "Odd Fellows," "Sons of Temperance," &c., about whose condemnation no doubt can exist, these societies are known by various other appellations: such, for example, as the "National Brotherhood," lately condemned by the Bishops of Ireland; the "Fenian Brotherhood," whose efforts to aggregate members to their association in this country are unscrupulous and unceasing, and, in addition to these, the "Molly Maguires," "Buckshots," and others, whose spirit is equally objectionable, and whose names seem to be selected rather to conceal, than to indicate the object of their association.

We admonish also, our Reverend Clergy,

affectionately to instruct and warn their flocks, calling to their minds the spirit of docility and obedience, which should animate them, and the holy alacrity with which they should labor to conform themselves in all things to the commands and desires of the Church.⁴¹

Historian Kevin Kenny, in writing on the Molly Maguire incidents, has paid close attention to the conflict between the AOH and the Catholic Church. Kenny contends that most of the alleged Mollies were from the wilder, less anglicized and less religiously orthodox western parts of Ireland. Wood's strong stand against the AOH, and hence the Mollies, was part of a systematic campaign to conform the Church to American middle-class values.⁴² At the parish level the pastor had the difficult job of trying to keep his flock toeing the orthodox line, while not alienating those who relied on the AOH for fraternity. As will be shown later, there was an ambivalence on the part of some Schuylkill priests toward taking part in the persecution of the alleged Mollies, many of whom they had known as parishioners for years. Although church membership was crucial to the anthracite Irish, the Church and its clergy were not above reproach, especially by members of the AOH. The reports of James McParlan's activities in the region contain at least one denunciation of Church policy in the town of Shenandoah: "The operative went to Church with Lawler-- Father O'Rielly read a circular from Bishop Wood of Phila. denouncing the M.M.'s and 'Buck Shots' as damnable. After church Lawler informed the operative that they got that lecture every

Sunday but he didn't 'care a d--n.' "43

The Ancient Order of Hibernians was the most active Irish benevolent society. Pottsville was host to one of the first chapters of a prototype of the organization in 1836, a testament to the strength of the early Irish community in Schuylkill County.⁴⁴ The AOH confessed to only existing to promote brotherhood among Irishmen throughout the world and dedicating itself to promoting Irish independence. Yet the prosecutors of the Molly Maguires were able to successfully paint the AOH as an international crime syndicate that had terrorized the anthracite region with impunity since before the Civil War.

The AOH was not an organization established to mimic Protestant fraternal groups such as the Masons or Odd Fellows. It had roots in the secret Irish agrarian sects designed to sabotage and wreak vengeance on English landlords and their Irish attendants. These sects, loosely conceived and organized, were commonplace in rural Ireland from the late eighteenth century until the 1840s. Although these sects diverged in their methods and aims their members were collectively known as Ribbonmen.

In 1825 the Catholic Church, under Pope Leo XII, clarified and reaffirmed its prohibition of the secret society. Specifically, the Church objected to its members joining an oath-bound organization which required unconditional obedience to temporal authority, thereby

compromising a Catholic's allegiance to the Church.⁴⁵ Consequently, Ribbonmen created formal benevolent institutions which the Church would not condemn. Although details on the founding of the AOH are few, it is known that the society was formed in America and took its present name in the 1850s. The Hibernians first called national attention to themselves when an AOH contingent in New York City was involved in a riot after a stage driver headed his team of horses into their ranks during an Independence Day parade in 1857. Despite the negative press given the society at the time, the popularity of the AOH grew until it virtually controlled New York's important St. Patrick's Day parade by 1860.⁴⁶

According to the constitution of the AOH, adopted in 1871, the avowed purpose of the organization reads like a disclaimer of any but the most altruistic activities. The AOH's mission was "to promote Friendship, Unity, and True Christian Charity among its members, by raising or supporting a stock or fund of money for maintaining the aged, sick, blind and infirm members, and for no other purposes whatsoever."⁴⁷ In New York parades, banners with slogans such as "We relieve our sick and bury our dead" were routinely carried by AOH divisions.⁴⁸ But, despite the formal disclaimer, the AOH's concerns went beyond mere intra-ethnic benevolence; the society was also very concerned with liberating its Irish brethren from English

dominance. The AOH had close ties to the Fenian Brotherhood, a militant nationalist group which trained militiamen in America for the purpose of armed invasion and liberation of Ireland. In 1858, the AOH collected \$13,000 for the Fenians.

As the Fenian movement ebbed in the mid-1870s, the AOH aligned itself with other Irish nationalist groups, such as the Clan na Gael. Members of the Clan na Gael played an important role in AOH leadership from the 1870s until Ireland gained independence in 1921, and the organization maintained a considerable presence in the anthracite region.⁴⁹ While wildly exaggerating the number of adherents, Clan na Gael official Dr. William Carroll nevertheless pointed to the importance of the anthracite Irish to the society when he wrote, in 1876, to Fenian leader John Devoy that "there are at least 200,000 of our men in these Penna. coal regions, who ought to wield a power in the [executive body] superior to that of New York."⁵⁰

It was in taverns and saloons that the membership of fraternal organizations such as the AOH gathered. The reports of James McParlan are replete with meetings in saloons and of drunkenness. It was in drinking establishments that McParlan made the contacts which gained him entry into the AOH. A number of reputed Molly Maguires were tavern owners, the most notable being the alleged "King of the Mollies," John Kehoe, who ran the Hibernian House in

Girardville. Tavern ownership, requiring relatively little capital or specialized skill, became the easiest way for the Irish to enter the petit-bourgeois. Successful tavern owners became models of leadership and affluence in communities where only a priest had stood out as a leadership figure.⁵¹

The tavern also was the scene of the most negative and enduring aspect of the nineteenth-century native American stereotype of "Paddy," that of his virulent abuse of alcohol. Indeed, alcoholism was a genuine problem among the anthracite Irish; perhaps more so than in other ethnic groups, although there is no substantive way to determine if that was the case. One writer has noted that heavy drinking among the Irish took on a spiritual value. It symbolized Irish group identity and implied that the more a man drank the more Irish that man became:

Hard drinking ceased to be modified by the stigma of drunkenness, as it had in Ireland. In Ireland the drunk was ambivalently regarded as the good man with a failing-- but he was still a sinner. In America in the give-and-take of ward politics and in saloon and street life, the drunk was no longer a sinner/saint; he had been transformed into a complete saint, the professional Irish inebriate.⁵²

But the saloon was more than a place for men to get drunk. The tavern represented the only respite outside the home for miners to relax, after a long day at the mines, and to socialize with their fellow miners. The saloon also allowed a man a degree of freedom, away from the critical eye of wife, mother, mine boss, or parish priest.

Not all the Irish condoned alcohol abuse. The division in the Irish community over the use of alcohol was expressed in the celebration of the most Irish of holidays, St. Patrick's Day. On that day all work stopped and the Irish formed parades which gathered celebrants as they proceeded from one mining patch to another before ending in one of the larger towns. The Irish World's report of parades in the mining towns of Tamaqua and Mahanoy City, in 1875, revealed separate celebrations: one, held by the members of the various parishes' Total Abstinence Brotherhood Societies, and the other held by the AOH. These separate celebrations were possibly a manifestation of tensions within the Irish community pitting a Church rapidly assuming the values of middle-class America on one hand, against a wilder, more boisterous miner element represented by secular organizations, namely the AOH, on the other.⁵³

The Catholic temperance movement was vigorous in the 1870s and fairly strong in the anthracite region, spurred in large measure by Irish women worried by their husbands' drinking.⁵⁴ The Irish World reported a parade held by the Catholic Total Abstinence Societies of Schuylkill County, in Mahanoy City, which began with mass, followed by an address from a local pastor on "the evils of intemperance, citing many facts sufficient to induce the most hardened to become a full 'total abstainer.'" The report noted that the "parade was by far the largest that ever took place in this

county, and it is needless to say, passed off without the least disturbance."⁵⁵

Allied with the Catholic temperance movement was a fraternal organization called the Emerald Benevolent Society (EBA). Of the 56 lodges of the EBA in Pennsylvania, 16 were located in the anthracite region.⁵⁶ The organization stood as a respectable, doctrinally strict, and sober alternative to the AOH. Through its local organ, the Emerald Vindicator, published in Pottsville, the EBA espoused middle-class values and advocated a respectable self-help approach to social advancement. The Vindicator, however, made such an attempt to demonstrate fealty to a middle-class ethos, ignoring issues pertinent to the Irish working-class, that the paper never gained widespread popularity among the anthracite Irish.⁵⁷

The Irish of the region turned to other sources, most notably the nationalist and working-class Irish World. Although the Catholic oriented Boston Pilot also circulated through the region, it was the Irish World which spoke more directly to the Irish anthracite workers. The Irish World catered to a national readership and provided some local coverage of events in the anthracite region. The newspaper also linked the cause of Irish nationalism to the improvement of the laborer's lot in the United States. Historian Eric Foner places Irish World editor Patrick Ford solidly in the American radical labor tradition of the

nineteenth century, a tradition whose guiding force was the ethic that the producer was being robbed of the fruits of his labor by a parasitic capitalist class.⁵⁸

Thus far this thesis has attempted to draw a portrait of Schuylkill's Irish community with as much color and definition as possible. But it is impossible to understand these people without placing them in the broader social context of the anthracite region. Historian James Rodechko has commented that the anthracite Irish, although "intensely conscious of common origins and problems, . . . were unable to develop the kind of institutions that had been so effective elsewhere."⁵⁹ Intra-ethnic unity and strife, and the failure of Irish institutions, were in large measure conditioned by the industrial arena of anthracite production and by the reactions of native and other immigrant groups to the Irish. The following chapters will attempt to place the Irish in the context of anthracite society and examine the forces at play which led to the demise of the WBA and the wholesale Molly convictions.

NOTES

1. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles, Table 10, 580; Kevin Kenny, "The Molly Maguires and the Catholic Church," Labor History 37 (Summer 1995): 348.
2. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 916.
3. George Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 143.
4. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 917.
5. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 145-46.
6. Ibid., 150.
7. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 917.
8. Wallace, St. Clair, 182.
9. Ibid., 182
10. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 923.
11. Rowland Berthoff, "The Social Order of the Anthracite Region, 1825-1902," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 89, no.3 (July 1965): 270.
12. Wallace, St. Clair, 141.
13. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 83.
14. Joseph F. Patterson, Reminiscences of John Maguire After Fifty Years of Mining, " Publications of the Historical Society of Schuylkill County 4 (1914): 312.
15. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 85.
16. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 47-48.
17. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 921.
18. Miller and Sharpless, The Kingdom of Coal, 144.
19. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 920.
20. Miller and Sharpless, The Kingdom of Coal, 146-47.
21. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 64-65.

22. Patterson, "Reminiscences of John Maguire After Fifty Years of Mining," 308.
23. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 3.
24. Pinkerton National Detective Agency to Franklin B. Gowen, report of activities of operative James McParlan, 23 January 1875, Hagley Museum and Library, Reading Railroad Molly Maguire Papers, Accession 1520, Box 979.
25. Pinkerton National Detective Agency to Franklin B. Gowen, report of activities of operative P. M. Cummings, 28 February 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Society Collection (Molly Maguire Papers).
26. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of McParlan, 25 March 1875, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
27. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 78.
28. Edward Pinkowski, John Siney, The Miners' Martyr (Philadelphia: Sunshine Press, 1963), 4-7.
29. Ibid.
30. Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Maguires, 109-10, 119.
31. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 79.
32. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of McParlan, 24 March 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
33. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 165.
34. McCaffrey, The Irish Diaspora in America, 173.
35. Joseph Henry Zerby, History of Pottsville and Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania (Pottsville: J.H. Zerby Newspapers, 1935), 895-96.
36. Wallace, St. Clair, 162-63.
37. Ninth Census (1870), Population, Table XVII, 553.
38. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles, 420.
39. Ibid., 421.
40. Kevin Kenny, "The Molly Maguires and the Catholic Church," footnote 10, 351.

41. Bishop James Frederick Wood to Diocese of Philadelphia, pastoral letter, 19 January 1874, Hagley Museum and Library, Reading Railroad Molly Maguire Papers, Accession 1520, Box 979.
42. See Kenny, "The Molly Maguires and the Catholic Church," *passim*.
43. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of McParlan, 8 February 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
44. John T. Ridge, Erin's Sons in America: The Ancient Order of Hibernians (New York: AOH Publications, 1986), 10
45. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 32.
46. Ridge, Erin's Sons in America, 18, 20.
47. "Report of the Case of the Commonwealth vs. John Kehoe, et al." (Pottsville: Miners' Journal Book and Jobs Rooms, 1876), 167.
48. Ridge, Erin's Sons in America, 29.
49. *Ibid.*, 30, 34.
50. William O'Brien and Desmond Ryan, Devoy's Post Bag, vol. 1 (Dublin: C.J. Fallon, Ltd., 1948) 134. From Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 323.
51. Dennis Clark, The Irish Relations: Trials of an Immigrant Tradition (East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1982), 63.
52. Richard Stivers, A Hair of the Dog: Irish Drinking and American Stereotypes (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), quoted from Andrew M. Greely, The Irish Americans: The Rise to Money and Power (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 175.
53. Irish World, 10 April 1875.
54. Clark, The Irish Relations, 66.
55. Irish World, 9 October 1875.
56. Kenny, "The Molly Maguires and the Catholic Church," 364.
57. James Rodechko, "Irish-American Society in the Pennsylvania Anthracite Region," in The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania, ed. John Bodnar (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1973), 32-33.

58. Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish-America," in Immigrant Radicals: The View from the Left, ed. George Pozzetta (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 144-47.

59. Rodechko, "Irish-American Society in the Anthracite Region," 33.

Chapter Three Nativist Reactions to the Irish

The Irish who came to Schuylkill County in the mid-nineteenth century faced not only the need to adapt to work in the perilous mines and to life in the squalid mining towns and patches, they also faced a powerful anti-Irish Catholic sentiment among the native population and other immigrant ethnic groups. The arrival of the Irish in large numbers upon American shores in the wake of the Great Famine inflamed a latent xenophobia which had been a part of the American legacy since the earliest white settlement. This chapter will examine anti-Irish prejudice as it existed in Schuylkill County from the 1850s until the Molly Maguire executions.

The Irish formed a substantial part of the working class of Schuylkill County, and they worked mostly as the least skilled and lowest paid segment of mine workers. When conflict between labor and capital escalated during the 1860s and 1870s, advocates of capital sought to exploit anti-Irish sentiments by portraying the miners' union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, as serving the clannish Irish's interests exclusively. This effort to keep the

working-class divided along ethnic lines did meet with a considerable degree of success, especially dividing the Catholic Irish from the staunchly Baptist or Methodist Welsh.

Anti-Irish riots in major American cities were not uncommon during the 1850s, but the largest and most well-known organized expression of anti-Irish sentiment came in the form of the American, or "Know-Nothing" Party. At their peak, in the 1855 elections, the Know-Nothings put six governors into office. In the midst of sectional strife threatening national dissolution the Know-Nothings made a plea for all "true" Americans-- meaning Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent-- to set aside sectional animosity, realize the threat to American institutions posed by the Catholic immigrant, and rally around the banner of national homogeneity.¹

The Know-Nothings were, of course, unsuccessful in their attempt to use native prejudice and fear of Catholic foreigners as leverage to maintain national unity. As the United States drifted inexorably toward civil war the party collapsed and anti-Irish feelings abated nationwide-- but not in the anthracite region, and especially not in Schuylkill County. There, antipathy toward the Irish raged on through the 1860s and 1870s. This antipathy, in large measure, made the Molly Maguire executions possible.

The twenty Irish-American men hanged in the anthracite

region for complicity in the murders allegedly committed by the Molly Maguires could not have been executed if there had not been a well developed base of anti-Irish feeling. These men were hanged for a total of nine murders, some of which were committed more than a decade before the accused were arrested. The rhetoric used to describe the Mollies and their deeds bears little resemblance to the scale of the crimes of which they were formally accused. Even assuming that all the executed men were indeed guilty of their alleged crimes, the words typically used by non-Irish to condemn the Molly Maguires were not warranted by the Mollies' own activities. Take, for example, this concluding passage from Pottsville Lawyer Francis P. Dewees' 1876 book The Molly Maguires:

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.²

Many in the anthracite region found it easy to believe in the existence of a secret fraternity of sociopathic Irish Catholics. The model used by Michael Berendse to explain negative native perceptions of the Slavic and other Eastern European immigrants to the anthracite region, also best explains the extreme response to the alleged deeds of the Molly Maguires.³ Culturally-generated negative expectations of the Irish produced perceptions that

fulfilled those expectations. The intense reaction to the Molly Maguires by non-Irish is properly understood within the context of deep and long-established anti-Irish sentiment. In short, many Anglo-Protestants and other citizens of Schuylkill County believed that there was an element in the Irish character that made the Irish prone to collective criminality. Irish behavior, from public drunkenness to adherence to strange Catholic dogma to labor agitation, tended to affirm and reinforce these negative expectations. When the prosecution of the Mollies began in late 1875, it was not difficult for the prosecutors to persuade the county, and even the nation, to believe in ubiquitous Molly terror.

A leading and long-term voice against Schuylkill's Irish was Benjamin Bannan, publisher and editor of Pottsville's Miners' Journal, the county's most influential newspaper. In 1829, at the age of twenty-two, Bannan bought the Miners' Journal. He retained full control of the paper for the next thirty-seven years. Indeed, until his death in 1875, Bannan remained the Miners' Journal's animating force, articulating his pro-Whig, later pro-Republican, but always anti-Democratic views on a daily basis.⁴

In the early 1850s, in part in reaction to a new Democratic dominance of county politics made possible by the influx of the Irish, Bannan embarked on an anti-Irish Catholic crusade. He did more than simply blame the decline

of the Whig Party on the apparently invariable Irish affinity for the Democratic Party. The Miners' Journal editor assumed the rhetoric of a hard-core nativist, insisting that the Irish contributed to every social ill then existing in American society. Bannan editorialized frequently on the extent of Irish depravity, citing as evidence that the majority of inhabitants in the county's mental institution were Irish.⁵ He also pushed hard for temperance, and dedicated himself to restoring "good Puritan notions of the country."⁶

Bannan's anti-Catholicism involved disdain only for Irish Catholics; he paid no attention to Catholics from Germany.⁷ "Anti-Catholicism has become truly nativistic, however," writes historian John Higham, "and has reached maximum intensity, only when the Church's adherents seemed dangerously foreign agents in the national life."⁸ In Bannan's mind Irish Catholics presented just such a threat. His crusade against the Irish was based initially on fears that their power at the polls would give the Democratic party an insurmountable edge in county politics. But, with the onset of the labor conflicts of the 1860s, the basis for Bannan's antipathy changed to fear that the Irish would disrupt relations between capital and labor, threatening to overturn the exploitative mine labor system that Bannan held dear.

Bannan's rhetoric sought to convince his readership of

a Catholic conspiracy to spread the Romanist doctrine in the public schools and to desecrate the sabbath by allowing the vending of liquor on Sundays. The Miners' Journal even linked the Catholic conspiracy to the free trade issue by asserting that "the controlling power of the Catholic Church does not want protection to American industry."⁹

Bannan's condemnation of the Irish and the Catholic Church took a variety of paths: sometimes oblique, but often quite blunt. In an item that was ostensibly intended as a paean to Irish wit, the reader is more inclined to get the impression that Irish "wit" is nothing more than a duplicitous cover for Irish stupidity, as this exchange between an Irish cab driver and his passenger illustrates:

"I say, Pat, what are those figures up there?"
 "Ah shure, yer honor, thim's the twelve apostles."
 "Twelve apostles indeed! There are only four."
 "Well, now, ye wouldn't have them all out at once, would ye? That's the post office, and the rist is inside, yer honor, sortin' letters."¹⁰

Miners' Journal items on the rituals of the Catholic Church often were condescending in tone, such as one entitled "How They Make Popes," which reported, less than reverentially, the mystery and political gamesmanship which went into the election of a pope.¹¹ Another item attempted to undercut Irish faith by pointing out that St. Patrick was not Irish himself and that his teachings were more in line with the modern Episcopal Church than with the corrupted Catholic Church. The article implied that Ireland's patron saint's reading of the Bible to his followers contradicted

Catholic teaching. The item concluded by quoting the work of a contemporary theologian, who stated that "the nonsense of St. Patrick's belonging to Rome has been sufficiently refuted."¹²

The idea that the Irish were importing European radicalism into the anthracite region was a persistent theme in the pages of the Miners' Journal. The paper clearly laid blame for the recurrent labor strife of the 1870s at the feet of the Irish. "Foreigners are welcome to come here and improve their condition and the prospects of their children," wrote an editor during the Long Strike of 1875, "but they make a mistake when they bring with them their Old World traditions of the hostility of capital to labor."¹³

Bannan was probably the first person to use the name "Molly Maguire" in the anthracite region. In an editorial published in the Miners' Journal in October 1857, he referred to a number of indictments for fraud handed down by a Philadelphia grand jury to inspectors of the 1856 presidential election:

Every one of these inspectors were Irishmen, belonging no doubt to the order of 'Molly Maguires,' a secret Roman Catholic association which the Democracy is using for political purposes. The Philadelphia Transcript says this Association commenced in Boston and now extends all over the country, controlling all the nominations of the Democratic Party in our cities and in some parts of the country.¹⁴

Without going so far as to imply that Bannan created the Molly Maguire myth, it is significant that Bannan chose to call those Irish indicted in Philadelphia by the name.

In Ireland the Molly Maguires were a sect of the agrarian quasi-guerrilla groups known collectively as Ribbonmen. Their major activity was exacting retributive justice, usually from the agents and collaborators of the English landlords. The Mollies were first mentioned in Ireland in the mid-1840s and said to be active around the Ulster counties of Cavan, Tyrone, and Donegal, and as far south as Clare. The Mollies of Ireland appear almost as nebulous a group as do the Molly Maguires of the anthracite region. Like all the Ribbon groups it was an extremely amorphous fraternity, its members operating on a strictly parochial level, with no central leadership or agenda.¹⁵

The origin of the term Molly Maguire is uncertain. It is an ironic moniker since women almost never took part in the activities of the various Ribbon groups. There are several versions of the name's origin, the most famous of which deals with a poor old widow who, along with her grandchildren, was summarily evicted from her home. A secret society then formed to avenge her eviction, naming themselves in her honor. Another story tells of a fierce woman named Molly Maguire who led gangs of young men disguised in women's clothing on night raids. Regardless of the origins of the name, the Molly Maguires acquired a reputation, albeit unverifiable, of being particularly **desperate** and bloodthirsty. They were considered in Ireland, says Molly historian Wayne Broehl, "a criminal

lunatic fringe that used the 'better' reasons for murder and outrage as a cloak to perpetrate crimes of a more personally oriented origin."¹⁶

The belief that a sinister Irish terrorist organization was attempting to sabotage the anthracite industry gained credibility during the Civil War. As wartime demand inflated coal prices, operators attempted to keep miners' wages to a minimum. The Irish were branded as Southern sympathizers, or "copperheads," throughout the North. In the anthracite region operators used this reputation to bring in federal troops ostensibly for the purpose of enforcing conscription, but actually to quell labor disturbances over wages and the right to unionize. In the name of protecting the draft, and therefore the Union, the federal government in the anthracite region made a commitment, backed by force of arms, to protect the rights of capital over labor.¹⁷

In the two years directly preceding and following the end of the war, the high price of coal created a boomtown atmosphere throughout the region. Workers were making more than ever before: wages reached as high as \$150 a month, and many men deserted the army or dodged the draft in order to mine coal.¹⁸ During this time fifty-two murders, the victims ranging from mine superintendents to Irish mine laborers, were reported in Schuylkill County, most of which went unsolved. A number of suspects were released because

no one would testify against them, and they were able to easily find corroborators for their alibis.¹⁹ The seeds that Bannan had planted in the late 1850s regarding the nefarious operations of an Irish secret society bore fruit as the Molly Maguires were implicated in all these unsolved murders.

With the organization of the WBA in 1868, the Miners' Journal found a new enemy. Initially Bannan was not specifically hostile to the new miners' union, but after it was clear that the union would use the strike as a weapon against the county's operators the Miners' Journal became obsessed with trying to discredit the union by denouncing its leadership as a band of corrupt Irishmen.

The paper also linked the "Irish" union to the Molly Maguires. In a scathing rebuttal of a report on the WBA by a New York Herald correspondent, the Miners' Journal stated:

He says that the Molly Maguires do not belong to the W.B.A. This is not true; they all belong, because they could not get any work whatever if they did not. There are but two classes in this Region-- members of the W.B.A., or what they term blacklegs [strikebreakers]. The correspondent says: "The 'Buckshots' and 'Molly Maguires' are the self-constituted detectives and judges for the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, although not members of the order." This is true, so far as the acts of these persons are concerned, and it is also this class that the quiet and orderly men dread so much, and always obey when ordered to stop work; but when the writer says they are not members of the organization, he states what is absolutely false.²⁰

Few people were as vociferous in their attacks on the Irish as Bannan and the Miners' Journal. However, even those who voiced sympathy for the Irish were made uneasy by

the Irish "importation" of foreign evil onto American soil. Author Francis P. Dewees attempted to praise and sympathize with Schuylkill's Irish as a whole even while he vilified the Mollies. His book makes an effort to differentiate between the evil works of the nefarious Mollies and the rest of the Irish:

The Molly Maguire is an Irishman, or the son of an Irishman, professing the Roman Catholic faith. That he is a blot and disgrace to the land of his fathers, as well as to the land of his adoption, is felt more strongly by the great body of the Irish people than by any class of the community.²¹

Yet the stinging rhetoric with which Dewees describes the Molly Maguire "terror" echoes the anti-Irish and nativist sentiments of Bannan. Dewees presents the Mollies as a pernicious virus the like of which could only be of foreign derivation: "They are a class of criminals whose origin is traced to another land, and who are imbued with ideas and prejudices for which there is no shadow of foundation in this country."²²

Attacks against the Irish came not just from middle-class lawyers like Dewees or newspaper editors like Bannan, but also from miners of German, English, Welsh and native stock. The Miners' Journal published numerous letters from disgruntled miners who chafed under the control of a union that the paper depicted as serving only the interests of the Irish mine worker. The following, signed simply "An English American or Englishman," is particularly vindictive in its indictment of Irish union leaders during the Long Strike of

1875. Alleging gross misuse of members' dues, the miner from Mahanoy City stated:

The officials . . . cannot say they gave the price of one loaf of bread to feed the hungry, foolish dupes, who are forced to be governed by the McGinnes' and McCarthy's, the 'Macs and the O's,' and the devil knows what. One of the present officials arrived here from the Ould Dart two or three years ago as poor as a church mouse, and by some unknown, but well laid plans, got hold of an office which I believe was through his connection or sympathy with Molly Maguireism. . . . It was laughable at a meeting of this District last Saturday to see a German delegate sneak out of the hall, after giving his opinion toward an honorable compromise, for fear the Irish would go for him. I am weary of this one sided Irish humbug and have made up my mind to peddle my own course for the future.²³

The Catholic Irish and the Protestant Welsh shared the same work space in the mines and often lived on the same streets in the mine patches and towns of Schuylkill County, but there was much distrust between the two ethnic groups. Many Welsh immigrants arrived in the Pennsylvania coal fields with experience in mining from their homeland. In the anthracite region the Welshman was more apt to be the skilled miner with one or two Irish laborers working for him at the coal face.²⁴ Tensions along ethnic and occupational status lines sometimes manifested themselves in open violence. An item in the Miners' Journal reported these tensions in Mahanoy City along with a description of a gang of Welshmen called the Modocs:

At the present time there exists here between two classes or clans a feeling of hostility which does not augur well for the future peace of the borough, and which causes a rumor of meditated assassinations to be credited. There exists here a band of men called "Modocs," who I am persuaded are organized for no good

or lawful purpose. It is well known that they haunt the streets at night armed and ready for almost any deed of hostility towards a class of our citizens. They bear a special grudge against the Sons of Erin. . . .²⁵

Animosity toward the Irish was so rampant in Schuylkill County that the suggestion of a widespread, murderous conspiracy to supplant the Union, topple industrial capitalism and even overturn the Protestant Reformation, was credible to a substantial segment of the County's population. Thanks in part to the efforts of men such as Bannan the groundwork for an acceptance of the idea of Molly terror was well laid.

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century Schuylkill County was indeed a hostile place for the Irish. Assailed by the middle-class press, by mine operators, and by members of their own class, the Irish had every reason to be "clannish." But the Irish community would find its most powerful adversary in Reading Railroad President Franklin B. Gowen. Gowen would use the almost unlimited resources of the powerful Reading to destroy the WBA and broaden the county's ethnic divisiveness with his pursuit of the supposed Molly Maguires. No one, not even Benjamin Bannan, would exploit that divisiveness to his own gain as would Gowen. His name looms large in the pages that follow.

NOTES

1. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 7.
2. Francis P. Dewees, The Molly Maguires: The Origin, Growth, and Character of the Organization (New York: Burt Franklin, 1877, reprint, New York: Lennox Hill Publishing, 1974), 355.
3. See Barendse, Social Expectations and Perception: The Case of the Slavic Anthracite Workers.
4. Wallace, St. Clair, 67.
5. Miners' Journal, 30 September 1854, from Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Maguires, 66.
6. Miners' Journal, 1 October 1853, from Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Maguires, 65.
7. Palladino, Another Civil War, 76.
8. Higham, Strangers in the Land, 5.
9. Miners' Journal, 15 August 1853, from Gudelunas and Shade, Before the Molly Maguires, 63.
10. Miners' Journal, 15 April 1871.
11. Miners' Journal, 14 January 1871.
12. Miners' Journal, 8 April 1871.
13. Miners' Journal, 23 April 1875.
14. Miners' Journal, 3 October 1857.
15. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 27-30.
16. Ibid., 30.
17. For a discussion of the anti-draft movement and Federal intervention in the anthracite region during the Civil War see Pallidino, Another Civil War, passim.
18. Yearley, Enterprise and Anthracite, 171.
19. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 94-5.
20. Miners' Journal, 11 March 1871.
21. Dewees, The Molly Maguires, 346.

22. Ibid., 346.

23. Miners' Journal, 15 October 1875.

24. "The Miners of Scranton," Harper's, 917.

25. Miners' Journal, 21 June 1875.

Chapter Four Schuylkill County's Labor Situation, 1868-1874

From the Civil War until the end of the Long Strike of 1875 Schuylkill County was the site of one of the most contentious struggles between labor and capital in the United States. In 1868 a new element was introduced into this struggle with the creation of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, the union that would quickly come to represent most of Schuylkill County's mine workers. From its inception until it was crushed as a consequence of the operators' victory in the Long Strike the WBA served as a vehicle, however imperfect, to unite all anthracite mine workers, regardless of occupation or ethnicity. This was not an easy task, especially with the strong anti-Irish sentiment that permeated the Welsh, English, and German miners of the county. This chapter will discuss the rise of the WBA, its success in ameliorating ethnic divisions within Schuylkill's working class, and the union's inherent weaknesses. In order to understand how a degree of ethnic cooperation was sustained within the working class in Schuylkill County during the years of the WBA, this chapter will provide a brief description of anthracite production

and the dangers that awaited all anthracite workers.

Most of Schuylkill's Irish-American men were employed in some aspect of anthracite coal production. Their experience in the county's mines and coal breakers colored every aspect of their own and their families' lives. Mining provided the worker an inherently more dangerous work environment than virtually any other industrial setting, and Schuylkill County's severely pitched coal beds made its mines particularly dangerous places to earn a living. Operator nonchalance toward essential safety conditions, such as proper mine ventilation, contributed to a frighteningly high accident rate in the county's mines. In addition, intense competition resulting in overproduction produced unstable market prices for coal which led to wildly fluctuating wages and long lay-offs for coal workers.

Union organization seemed a logical means of effectively addressing mine-worker problems. The first region-wide union, the WBA, was born from the eight-hour workday movement in 1868 and died a victim of the Long Strike seven summers later. In the interim the WBA strove to provide the anthracite mine worker with more equitable wages, safer conditions, and regular work. The union leadership tried to effect a partnership between labor and capital that would benefit the entire industry. However, capital, and especially the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad under Franklin Gowen, proved uninterested in

effecting such a partnership and used virtually every means at its disposal to sabotage the WBA.

The Irish played a key role both in the leadership and the rank-and-file of the union. Irish insularity and a tendency to act with the interests of the collective good foremost in mind made them receptive to union organization. The Irish also brought from Ireland memories of a rigidly stratified society, where it was clear that the English landlords constituted the top and that they, the Irish Catholic peasantry, formed the lowest social stratum. The Irish quickly embraced American republican ideals of white male social equality, but they were not naive to the reality of the social stratification which the new industrial order entailed in America. In Ireland their landlords were Anglo-Protestants and in America the mine operators and absentee owners were also Anglo-Protestants. For many Irish the ancient battle against English oppression had simply moved across the Atlantic, with the bucolic arena of the peasant-landlord struggle in Ireland replaced by the coal-blackened industrial landscape of anthracite Pennsylvania.

But adapting to the harsh new industrial environment of Schuylkill County meant far more to the Irish than a simple change of scenery. Unlike agrarian labor, work in the mines required that an Irish mine worker interact with and rely on strangers, who were often of different ethnicity, to literally survive. To an important, if not decisive, extent

the anthracite mines formed a crucible where ethnic distinctions melted. Regardless of occupational status or ethnicity all anthracite mine workers shared the perils of work in the mine and coal breaker. This common work experience tended to alleviate ethnic tensions and fostered an inchoate class-consciousness.

Despite the claims of the Miners' Journal, the WBA was not just an "Irish" union. Within the union problems arose less from ethnic differences among mine workers than from poor coordination or dissension between the different districts of the anthracite region. The union succeeded in attracting members of all ethnic groups despite the resentment created due to the role that ethnicity played in determining occupation in the mines.

It is impossible to appreciate the conflict between the mine operators and mine operatives, and the degree of cooperation necessary among mine workers, without at least some knowledge of the way in which anthracite was extracted and prepared for the consumer.¹ Anthracite coal was mined and processed for market all at one site. From the mine's entryway a shaft, or gangway, led to the "breasts," or galleries where individual miners extracted coal. Skilled miners drilled a hole in the coal seam and inserted a charge of gunpowder, taking cover as the coal was blasted from the seam. The miner and one or two laborers then broke up the larger chunks with picks and loaded the coal into rail cars.

The cars were hauled to the surface and elevated to the top of the coal breaker.

The breaker was a huge, windowless structure, usually standing seventy-five feet high, that housed a series of rollers and screens through which the anthracite was crushed and sorted. Coal made its way through the breaker by gravity, ending in rail cars, ready for shipment directly to the consumer. Slate pickers, who were mostly young boys and old or disabled miners, sat upon or beside chutes in the breaker and picked slate and other waste from the coal by hand as the rocks passed beneath them.

Within the mine there was a clear occupational hierarchy. A boy would normally move from picking slate to tending the doors required to maintain an adequate circulation of clean air through the mine. The next level was that of driver of the mules which were used to haul coal from the breasts. As a boy grew into adulthood he became a mine laborer and graduated, hopefully, to the status of contract miner. Bosses stood at the top of the operational hierarchy of a mine, but since most contract miners were paid per ton of coal produced, rather than daily wages, there was little direct supervision of miners by bosses.

In looking back over his long career in Schuylkill County's anthracite mines, John Maguire concluded that the risks taken by a miner were more hazardous than those taken by a soldier. The man in the army faces danger only when he

goes to the front, which is only occasionally. The miner, asserted Maguire, faced mortal danger every working day.² The dangers of the mine were numerous, including the threat of poisonous gas, exacerbated by the operators' neglect in providing proper ventilation. Another common example of the operators' disregard of miner safety was the practice of ordering the extraction of coal from around tunnel supports, called "robbing the pillar," which made cave-ins more frequent. Significant threats to miner safety not directly attributable to the operators' negligence included mine flooding and the ubiquitous coal dust. Since most mine shafts were well below the water table they required constant pumping and made for damp working conditions and occasional flooding. Coal dust presented a long term threat to a mine worker's health from constant inhalation, and a short term risk in that it was so easily ignited.

Death or serious injury in the mines and breakers of the Schuylkill district was alarmingly commonplace. The Miners' Journal estimated that in 1870 one mine worker was killed in Schuylkill County for every 35,000 tons of coal mined. This fatality rate was over twice as high as that of neighboring Northumberland County and considerably higher than even the most dangerous mining districts of Great Britain.³ The deadliest year in Schuylkill's mines in the period was 1870, when 112 workers were killed, but the average death rate in the county's mining industry from 1869

through 1874 was 85 men per year. The average number of serious injuries in the county's mines during the same period was 242 per year.⁴ John Maguire reasoned well that the miner "may expect, in the natural course of events, to meet his death in the performance of his duties."⁵ The Miners' Journal estimated that there were 21,000 mine workers in the county in 1870. The mine worker thus had a one in 188 chance of being killed at his job in that year alone. The Irish were certainly not exempt from death in the mines, for in the list of those killed in the industry in 1874 at least 30 men had distinctively Irish names. Boys were not exempt either, as 15 young men under age 18 were also on the list of those killed in the mines during 1874.⁶

Considering the danger that all mine workers faced in Schuylkill's collieries even the strongest ethnic animosity was often eased in the interest of mutual survival. The following story, which appeared in the Miners' Journal, not only gives a moving account of the self-sacrifice of an individual breaker boy but also shows how trivial ethnic prejudices were amid workplace dangers:

One of the begrimed little toilers, an Irish lad named Henry Welsh, was standing on a step above one of the screens and desiring to pass to the opposite side set his foot on the screen which was revolving slowly, intending to step off as it reached a convenient distance. But unfortunately his foot caught in the screen, and when he endeavored to step off he was held fast. Knowing his fate, he cried to his comrades. His cries brought to his assistance a Welsh lad about 13 years of age named John Owens. The little hero was never thinking of his own life rushed forward to pluck his companion from the jaws of death. He did not

realize the danger in the excitement of the moment, did not hesitate to realize it, but when he saw the other lad's terror pictured in his face he ran to help and in an unthinking moment set his foot on the fatal screen and sought to pull his companion from his perilous position. It was in vain, he was held too fast, and before Owens could release himself it was too late. The massive machine went round, taking both boys with it, and crushing both their lives out against the woodwork beneath its cruel weight.⁷

The Miners' Journal, always the unapologetic voice of mine owners and operators, blamed the mine worker and the WBA for the high incidence of serious accidents in the industry. Acknowledging the dangers inherent in any type of mining, the Miners' Journal absolved the operators of compromising mine safety for the sake of quick profits, and instead placed the onus for the county's appallingly high accident rate on the miner himself. "There is also a class of workmen who are naturally careless," the paper noted, asserting that there was an entire category of accidents "caused by the thoughtlessness, impudence, and foolhardiness of the workmen."⁸

According to the Miners' Journal, the union's contribution to creating a dangerous workplace was simply that it called strikes. In an editorial decrying the high death rate in the mines, the Miners' Journal answered its own rhetorical question: "Then to what is this tremendous slaughter to be attributed? We will answer that at least half of it, if not more, can be charged directly to the leaders of the WBA." The reason for this "tremendous slaughter" was that a union-ordered strike had idled the

mine workers for months and "so anxious were the men to go to work, that after the mines did start, they were reckless in trying to recover a portion of what they lost."

The deadliest mining disaster in the anthracite region during the period occurred at Avondale, in Luzerne County. On September 6, 1869, a fire killed the entire underground shift of 108 men at the Steuben Shaft colliery. It is unknown how the fire started, but those caught in the shaft had no chance because the mine's only exit was blocked by fire. The coal breaker, built directly on top of the mine's only entrance, was quickly engulfed in the flames spreading from below, making escape impossible and delaying rescue attempts. Tragically, the mine did not have a separate ventilation shaft, thought by miners the minimum requirement for safety.¹⁰

The Avondale disaster was the most extreme case of the consequences of the anthracite mine operators' disregard for the mine workers' safety. Despite the wisdom of the Miners' Journal, workers had their own ideas of who was chiefly responsible for the high accident rate in the mines. The words of this ballad commemorating the men killed at Avondale succinctly voiced the miners' opinion:

I shall never forget the sight as through the
shaft they came
And weeping friends stood waiting by, their cold
remains to claim,
While their souls may have ascended up to God who
gave them breath
To plead against the Company whose greed has
caused their death.¹¹

The official newspaper of the WBA, the Anthracite Monitor, published in Tamaqua for several years in the early 1870s, printed reports of the men killed and seriously wounded in the mines not as a statistic, but under the heading "What it Costs to Mine Coal." Far too many mine workers paid the ultimate cost in the collieries of Schuylkill County. Attempts to forge a permanent union began in large measure as a response to the dangers shared by men of English, German, Welsh, and Irish blood.

Early in the development of Schuylkill's coal fields, mine workers began to organize in order to procure better working conditions and wages. In the summer of 1842, the workers of the Primrose Hill colliery served their bosses with a militant resolution demanding no less than one dollar per day for miners and five dollars a week for laborers. The operatives also demanded regular cash payments every two weeks and that all men laid-off be given back wages owed them immediately.¹² In 1848 a miner named John Bates organized a union named after himself that gained popularity in the region but collapsed after a year amid charges that Bates had pilfered the union's funds.¹³

The high wages that mine workers received during the last years of the Civil War attracted thousands of people to the anthracite fields. In few other places in America could a man without a specialized skill receive as good a wage as in the anthracite collieries at that time. Many Irish were

among those who came to Schuylkill County, willing to brave the risks of mine work for these high wages. But after the war the demand for coal decreased and a shrinking coal market brought lower wages. By 1867 wages had fallen below the level of 1857 and, not surprisingly, mine worker resentment grew.¹⁴ Observers such as the Miners' Journal were quick to establish a link between the increasing number of Irish immigrants entering the coal fields and an increase in labor unrest.

Although strikes were common during the Civil War, a region-wide union did not appear until John Siney and fifteen others organized the WBA in St Clair in 1868. Of the founders of the WBA, twelve were immigrants from England, one from Wales and three from Ireland. Most of these men, like Siney, had experience in the trade union movement in industrial England.¹⁵ Siney, a natural leader, had the charisma and vision necessary to lead Schuylkill's miners in a unified attempt to win for themselves better wages and working conditions. John Siney was revered by the region's miners, particularly the Irish, in a way that foreshadowed the messianic reverence that United Mine Workers President John Mitchell received from Slavic miners during the great strikes of 1900 and 1902. Siney's popularity greatly aided the WBA's ability to organize throughout the anthracite region.

Terence Powderly, an Irish Catholic and the future

Scranton mayor and leader of the Knights of Labor, recalled first hearing John Siney speak to a crowd shortly after the Avondale fire. To the young Powderly, Siney's appearance was an epiphany: "...when I listened to John Siney I could see Christ in his face and hear a new Sermon on the Mount." Powderly stated that Siney's words that day convinced him to dedicate his own life to bettering the lot of the workingman.¹⁶ Although Siney's speech may not have had as great an impact on others in the audience, Powderly's enthusiasm reflected Siney's popularity, especially in the early years of the WBA:

Siney . . . was the first man I ever heard make a speech on the labor question. I was just a boy then, but as I looked at John Siney standing on the desolate hill at Avondale, with his back toward a moss grown rock the grim silent witness to that awful tragedy of ignorance, thoughtlessness, and greed, and listened to his low, earnest voice, I saw the travail of ages struggling for expression on his stern, pale face. . . . John Siney gave expression to a great thought at Avondale when he said: "You can do nothing to win these dead back to life, but you can help me to win fair treatment and justice for living men who risk life and health in their daily toil."¹⁷

In the summer of 1868, the federal government established an eight-hour work day for its employees, and the state of Pennsylvania passed a law setting eight hours as the legally recognized work day. The law was not enforceable, but its passage inspired anthracite mine workers to strike to demand an eight-hour day at the same wages they received for working their usual ten hours. The workers of a mine near Girardville began the strike and the

movement spread quickly. Borrowing a tactic used in England, anthracite mine workers marched behind a fife and drum from one colliery to another until dozens of mines were shut down and hundreds of workers marched in line.¹⁸

Although most of the mine workers in the Schuylkill district joined the eight-hour strike, they were not able to persuade the miners from northern Luzerne County to participate. This inability to unite the northern and southern coal workers of the anthracite region was a recurring problem throughout the life of the WBA and one that mine operators helped create and fully exploited. Nonetheless, the eight-hour strike of 1868 proved to be a victory of sorts for the union. A compromise measure was reached with the operators whereby workers in the Schuylkill district were given a 10 percent pay raise in exchange for dropping the eight-hour demand.

The guiding principles of Siney and the WBA leadership were far from radical. Besides seeking to improve working conditions the union attempted to use the strike as a means of limiting the supply of coal on the market, thereby keeping the price of coal high. This would benefit all who depended on the coal industry for their livelihood. Indeed, the eight-hour strike had the effect of raising the price of coal enough to cover the raise given the mine workers in the strike's settlement.¹⁹

The eight-hour strike also established the WBA as the

leading voice of anthracite mine workers of the entire region, as soon afterward union districts formed in the northern coal counties. The WBA established a General Council to coordinate general strikes and set union policy among the various county locals. However, the General Council lacked the power to overturn decisions made by the county districts. Without strong executive authority the Council could not overcome the parochialism that made consensus among the districts of the region rare.²⁰

Despite this organizational flaw, in its infancy the WBA met with considerable success. For the leadership of the WBA this success represented an opportunity for labor to gain an equal footing with capital, and to use the strike as a means of adjusting the market to create higher wages for mine workers. "In a word," wrote an editor for the Anthracite Monitor, "justice requires that labor should not be the employe but the partner of capital."²¹

The Anthracite Monitor appealed to its readers' deepest sense of patriotism when it defended the union's use of the strike as in line with the actions of the nation's founding fathers:

No American Citizen will dare assert that the American Revolution was not justified by the causes which led to it, but how many are there who condemn strikes, even when they are resorted to in defense of rights equally as sacred as, and similar to, those which the colonies so bravely defended and maintained.²²

Obversely, the Miners' Journal considered the aims of the WBA naive and idealistic, and rebuffed its dreams of

equality with capital by stating: "And Jesus says, . . . 'Ye have the poor always with you.' The rich and the poor are to dwell together as long as the world stands. This state of things is ordained of God and cannot be changed by the W.B.A." The Miners' Journal editor concluded his tirade against the union with the admonition to "let the men of each colliery determine their own matters."²³

The WBA scored a more substantial victory in May of 1869 when the first general strike in the anthracite region went into effect, lasting a month. After coal markets were depleted and the price of coal increased the union ordered workers back to the mines. The WBA negotiated a "basis," or standard pay which guaranteed a minimum base pay and rose according to the rise in the market price of coal. Management agreed not to discharge any union member "without just cause," and the union backed off its insistence that companies fire "blacklegs," or strikebreakers.²⁴

In the same year John Siney was instrumental in getting the first state mine safety law passed. The law made provisions for proper mine ventilation and established the office of Mine Inspector. It also placed the responsibility for mine safety squarely on management. The law's glaring weakness was that it pertained only to Schuylkill County, whose older mines and steeply pitched coal veins were, in the judgment of the Pennsylvania state legislature, the only ones in need of government regulation.²⁵

The partnership between labor and capital that the leadership of the WBA envisioned was never realized. Some independent coal operators were not opposed to the idea of labor's use of the strike to stem overproduction and keep the price of coal high. However, transportation companies, such as the Reading Railroad, could not abide labor's attempt to manipulate the coal market. The Reading Railroad, under its young, energetic President Franklin B. Gowen, was in the process of buying the Schuylkill Canal and hence monopolizing all coal transportation from the Schuylkill district to Philadelphia. Since the Reading profited from transportation tolls, which did not reflect the fluctuating market price of coal but remained constant, it was in the best interests of the railroad to keep coal production high and prices low.

When he became president of the Reading in 1869, Gowen immediately set the company on a course to dominate Schuylkill County's anthracite industry. Gowen was the son of a wealthy Irish-born Philadelphia merchant who was not Catholic, but Episcopalian. The young Gowen served as Schuylkill County's district attorney during the Civil War years 1862 to 1864. During this time many alleged Molly outrages, including murders, occurred, but Gowen sought no indictments for the crimes. Gowen, a Democrat, may have been hesitant to upset the backbone of the county's Democratic support, the Irish community. Also, most of

those suspected of alleged Molly crimes had solid alibis backed by their Irish neighbors and relatives.²⁶ Gowen would, however, show no lack of decisiveness in furthering the power of his company.

In response to a demand from a coalition of Schuylkill operators that mine workers accept a lowering of the wage minimum agreed upon in 1869, the WBA ordered a strike in the Schuylkill district. The strike began in January of 1870 with the Schuylkill men confident that it would become another general strike. By summer Schuylkill's mine workers were still on strike and the prospects for settlement with the united operators were dim. Gowen offered to negotiate a settlement. The resulting compromise significantly lowered the wage minimum but offered greater increases if the price of coal remained high. Unfortunately for the union the price of coal dropped precipitously after the settlement and the "Gowen Compromise" turned out to be a wage cut larger than that originally proposed by the Schuylkill operators.²⁷

One of the major reason's that Schuylkill workers were willing to accept Gowen's arbitration was that an attempt to create a general strike to support their efforts failed when the mine workers of the Scranton area refused to participate. The WBA's General Council then expelled the workers of the three largest coal producing companies operating around Scranton.²⁸ This action, however, cost

the WBA the ability to completely suspend anthracite production. Thus the strike of 1870 resulted in a double blow to the union-- a lowering of wages and the loss of regional solidarity.

Wounded, but far from dead, the WBA of Schuylkill County reluctantly went out on strike again in January 1871. This time Schuylkill workers struck to support their northern compatriots, despite the fact that the northern workers had failed to aid the Schuylkill men in the previous year. The General Council reinstated the workers of the Scranton after they appealed to the Council for help in combatting a 30 percent wage reduction.²⁹ Strike-weary Schuylkill workers, not yet suffering from the terms of the Gowen Compromise, protested the readmittance of the northern mine workers, but still joined the strike.

At the same time Gowen organized meetings of all the major anthracite carrying and producing companies in New York City, forming the region's first corporate combination. The operator's combination attempted to circumvent the WBA leadership by making wage offers directly to union members. Workers who accepted the combination's terms were threatened with violence by striking workers, although few violent incidents occurred. Finally, both labor and management accepted arbitration and the strike was settled in May 1871.³⁰ This was fortunate for the WBA in that the union was showing signs of cracking due to divisions between the

anthracite districts and the inability of many mine workers to continue without wages.

Labor relations proved relatively stable in the three years after the 1871 strike. In light of consistently low coal prices and the onset of a national depression in 1873, anthracite mine workers were relatively fortunate to be working under a minimum wage basis, however reduced. But profound changes were taking place in Schuylkill County. Through its subsidiary, the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, the Reading had purchased over 100,000 acres of Schuylkill coal lands and was on its way to gaining a virtual monopoly of the county's anthracite production by 1875.³¹

The mine worker had found his first great advocate in the WBA, but by the end of 1874 it was clear to all that the WBA was in a fight for its life against the awesome resources of a powerful combination of large corporations. The union fell victim to its own mistaken belief that harmony could exist between capital and labor in the coal fields. The years following the panic of 1873 were dark ones for organized labor throughout the United States. They would prove especially grim for the mine workers of Schuylkill County. Perhaps the most ignominious injury that the adherents of the WBA would have to endure in the last years of the 1870s would be the connection in the minds of millions of Americans between the truly benevolent aims of

the union and the sinister specter of Molly Maguireism.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed description of anthracite mining in the period see Chapter 1 of Wallace, St. Clair, 7-53.
2. Patterson, "Reminiscences of John Maguire After Fifty Years of Mining," 332.
3. Miners' Journal, 21 January 1871.
4. Ibid., 19 February 1875.
5. Patterson, "Reminiscences of John Maguire After Fifty Years of Mining," 332.
6. Miners' Journal, 19 February 1875.
7. Ibid., 12 March 1875.
8. Ibid., 28 January 1871.
9. Ibid., 21 January 1871.
10. Wallace, St. Clair, 296-302.
11. From the ballad "Avondale Disaster," Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 191-2.
12. Primrose Hill Miners' Resolution, 11 July 1842, Labor Archives, Pennsylvania State University.
13. Yearley, Enterprise and Anthracite, 178.
14. Ibid., 171.
15. Edward Pinkowski, John Siney: The Miners' Martyr (Philadelphia: Sunshine Press, 1963), 15.
16. Terence V. Powderly, The Path I Trod, eds. Harry J. Carman, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 35.
17. Ibid., 24.
18. Pinkowski, John Siney, 18.
19. Marvin W. Schlegel, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association: First Union of Anthracite Miners," Pennsylvania History 10 (July 1943): 244-45.
20. Harold Aurand, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association," Labor History 7 (Winter 1966): 24.

21. Anthracite Monitor (Tamaqua, Pa.), 14 October 1871.
22. Ibid.
23. Miners' Journal, 15 April 1871.
24. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 71-72.
25. Wallace, St. Clair, 293-96.
26. Marvin W. Schlegel, Ruler of the Reading: The Life of Franklin B. Gowen, 1836-1889 (Harrisburg, Pa.: Archives Publishing Co., 1947), 9-10.
27. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 76.
28. Aurand, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association," 26.
29. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 78.
30. Ibid., 84.
31. Priscilla Long, Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal Industry (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 107.

Chapter Five

Schuylkill County's Irish and the Long Strike of 1875

The Panic of 1873 marked the commencement of a national economic depression which lasted six years. Although the Miners' Journal initially viewed the panic as a mere "rest in industrial development," workers around the United States faced long-term unemployment and reduction of wages in the panic's aftermath.¹ In the face of this mounting crisis for the working class, trade unionism not only failed to respond adequately but was almost destroyed. In virtually every industry, unions disintegrated at a rapid pace. By 1877 trade union membership was merely a fraction of what it had been before the depression.² This chapter will discuss how, in Schuylkill County, the Long Strike of 1875 reflected unionism's national decline and how the collapse of the mine worker's union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, affected the county's working-class Irish community.

In the anthracite region the conflict between workers struggling to maintain their union and capital determined to destroy unionism was so intense as to be properly called class warfare. This class warfare was most manifest in the conflict's climax, the Long Strike, in which the WBA was

crushed and the Reading Railroad emerged as a seemingly indomitable and omnipotent force in Schuylkill County. Under the dynamic leadership of Reading President Franklin Gowen, the anthracite coal corporate combination was willing to endure a prolonged suspension of coal production, and therefore a substantial profit loss, in order to destroy the WBA. Coal operators were guided by the beliefs that the union was a needless impediment to the development of the industry and that it was best to deal with workers as individuals rather than collectively. The mine worker realized that his only hope in keeping his wages at a level at which he and his family could survive was through the vehicle of collective bargaining. Mine workers of Schuylkill County were willing to risk starvation in order to preserve that vehicle.

For the county's Irish community the union's demise at the end of the Long Strike held dire consequences. Both during and in the years following the strike the Reading was successful in building a case, in the minds of most of the non-Irish public, that inseparably linked the union and the sinister Molly Maguires. The company's ability to make the general public believe in a pervasive Molly Maguire terror that controlled the working men of the county could only have occurred because there was a deep base of suspicion and outright contempt for the Irish. During the strike the Reading and pro-management newspapers, in particular the

Miners' Journal, used ethnic antipathies as a wedge to divide the anthracite mine workers. In this they were less successful, as the county's working class remained remarkably united throughout the Long Strike. But ultimately, the death of the WBA left the Irish without an institution which could effectively combat large corporations like the Reading. In short, the wholesale hangings of the alleged Molly Maguires that began in 1877 were made possible because of the Reading's total victory in 1875.

The Reading's scheme to dominate anthracite production in Schuylkill County took two major directions. First, the company bought up the majority of the county's coal lands in the early 1870s. The Reading faced considerable resistance to this from forces within Schuylkill County's middle class. Many of the independent operators who initially opposed the Reading's move to control the county's coal production were simply bought off and became loyal employees of the railroad as mine engineers and superintendents. The Miners' Journal had protested the Reading's dominance of the coal carrying trade as early as 1857, but when the company moved to control all facets of production the newspaper asserted that the Reading would make the county's coal industry stable and more efficient. Even when the issue of the Reading's possible violation of state law in acting as a monopoly business received attention in the state legislature,

President Gowen succeeded in obfuscating the monopoly issue and in winning praise for the company's practices.³

The second direction in the Reading's plan to dominate Schuylkill's anthracite production was to control mine labor by destroying the WBA. The need to crush the union crystallized for Gowen when the Reading and other companies were forced to rescind a wage reduction in January 1874. Gowen's plan to reduce wages had provoked both the northern and southern sections of the region to strike together in protest, and coal operators, desirous of maintaining a steady supply of coal, were not in the position to enforce the reduction.⁴

Gowen resolved to never again be stymied by the WBA, and the Reading made preparations to outlast the mine workers by overstocking its inventory throughout 1874.⁵ The Reading also strengthened the company's private police force, the Coal and Iron Police, to protect company property during the strike and to provide safe passage to and from the mines for the scabbing workers or "blacklegs" as they were called in the region. But the surest sign that the company was willing to leave no stone unturned in its quest to gain unquestioned hegemony over Schuylkill's laborers was in Gowen's decision, made the previous autumn, to employ the services of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency.

In October 1873, Allan Pinkerton, president of the detective agency, travelled to Philadelphia to confer with

Gowen. According to Pinkerton's account of the meeting, Gowen declared his belief in the existence of a malicious secret Irish society that had been terrorizing the region and, indirectly, the entire country for years. Implicit in Gowen's plea to Pinkerton for aid in ridding the anthracite region of the Molly Maguire scourge is Gowen's conflation of the mine workers' union and the Molly Maguires:

Wherever in the United States iron is wrought, from Maine to Georgia, from ocean to ocean-- wherever hard coal is used for fuel, there the Molly Maguire leaves his slimy trail and wields with deadly effect his two powerful levers: secrecy-- combination. . . . We want the laboring-men, of whatever creeds or nationalities, protected in their right to work to secure sustenance for their wives and little ones, unawed by outside influences.⁶

Despite Gowen's ostensible concern over the safety of the working people of the region, criminal activity in Schuylkill County, and in particular the murder rate, had declined significantly during the period of the WBA's greatest strength. While the union's advent cannot be categorically listed as the reason for less crime in the region, the state's mining inspector for Schuylkill County reported that the area had become "remarkably settled" under the influence of the WBA.⁷

Yet the Reading's president was seemingly convinced otherwise. Shortly after Gowen's meeting with Allan Pinkerton a young Irishman named James McParlan entered the county, under the alias of James McKenna, in order to infiltrate the Ancient Order of Hibernians. McParlan became

the most famous detective employed by the Reading but he was certainly not the only operative to go undercover for the railroad. During the Long Strike the company employed at least eleven Pinkerton detectives in the coal fields.⁸

Pinkerton spies infiltrated the WBA and the Miners' National Association (MNA) to investigate John Siney, even though Siney in his new role as president of the MNA was not involved with the strike in an official capacity. Gowen also used Pinkerton men to spy on the state legislators who were investigating the Reading as an illegal monopoly during the summer of 1875.⁹ Gowen did not, however, rely merely on the Pinkertons and the Coal and Iron Police for all of his information. He went so far as to hire an itinerant newspaperman named H.B. Hanmore to supplement his intelligence on union and AOH activities.

The WBA's leadership realized as early as the spring of 1874 that the region's mine operators, under Gowen's guidance, wanted to destroy the union. According to a Pinkerton detective, Siney's successor as WBA president, John Welsh, announced at the first meeting after his election, "that some of the large operators had declared this to be the last basis [minimum wage rate] they would form and would break the 'unions' before next fall."¹⁰ The WBA, as opposed to the Reading, was not in the position to withstand a protracted strike. The secretary of the Wadesville branch of the union was reported by a Pinkerton

to have said that his district was the only one in the union that had money in its strike fund and that many other union branches were heavily in debt.¹¹

The Long Strike did not begin in the gala fashion of previous anthracite strikes. Before, men had marched behind fife and drum by the hundreds from colliery to colliery, closing each in their wake and adding the closed mine's workers to the throng. The great strike that would ultimately bring down the WBA began quietly as a company lockout when the Reading Railroad, through its coal-producing subsidiary, the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, suspended operations in Schuylkill County in late November 1874.

Despite the WBA's lack of readiness for a lengthy strike the region's mine workers were willing to endure a great degree of hardship to combat the wage decrease that the Reading and other operators proposed in January 1875. The November suspension was not in itself a serious cause for alarm for Schuylkill's mine workers, since winter work stoppages were a common practice in the industry. But when operators reopened the collieries in January 1875, workers were faced with a significant wage reduction. Operators offered what amounted to a ten percent wage reduction for mine laborers and a twenty percent wage reduction to contract miners, with the wage basis for contract miners to be determined solely by the price of coal at market,

allowing for no set minimum wage.¹² The suspension imposed on the workers the previous autumn switched from a lock-out to a strike when the WBA rejected the operators' proposed wage reductions. The words of a mine workers' ballad, entitled "The Long Strike," illustrate the militant stance that the mine workers were willing to take in order to avoid sustaining a wage decrease on top of the reductions of the early 1870s:

In eighteen hundred and seventy-five, our masters
did conspire
To keep men, women, and children without either
food or fire.
They tho't to starve us to submit with hunger and
with cold,
But the miners did not fear them, but stood out
brave and bold.¹³

While attending a cockfight in Shenandoah in January of 1875, James McParlan had several conversations with union men on the wage question and reported that they were "all in good spirits" concerning their prospects in the strike. The mine workers whom McParlan spoke to asserted that they would "be sure to gain their point by the first of March," but they were prepared to hold out until August if necessary. Curiously, in the same report McParlan identified the union men as Molly Maguires, coming "from all sections, and of all Nationalities."¹⁴ This is not the only instance where union members were categorically labelled Molly Maguires, or even where Molly Maguires were identified by the Pinkertons as being other than Irish Catholics.¹⁵

The WBA leadership was less enthusiastic than the union

rank and file about going out on strike against the united operators. The new WBA leadership under Welsh appeared less dynamic than that under John Siney. While Welsh was a determined and loyal union president the union suffered from the lack of a spokesman with Siney's charisma. H.B. Hanmore reported to Gowen that Irish Catholic WBA President John Welsh was "vastly inferior to Siney as an organizer or executive, and he feels this." In an interview with Welsh, Hanmore observed that while the WBA president stoutly maintained the intention of the union to hold out until summer if necessary, Welsh did not seem as confident of the union's ability to hold out as long as he claimed. Hanmore concluded in early March that, based on his observations, "the final and complete overthrow of the W.B.A. is merely a question of time." As evidence of Welsh's pessimism over the strike's outcome, Hanmore reported that he witnessed a discussion between Siney and Welsh in which Siney asked the WBA's president how things were going with the strike and Welsh exclaimed: "We're getting along poorly, and God knows what the end will be!"¹⁶

John Siney and the Miners' National Association were adamantly opposed to the strike. Indeed, the national organization was opposed to any strikes, except as a last possible resort. Siney declared that it was folly for the anthracite mine workers to go on strike against the united operators in early 1875. He urged the miners instead to

"work on under disadvantageous circumstances and bide their own time."¹⁷ Despite Siney's position as head of the national union, Schuylkill mine workers were reluctant to "exchange cards," or affiliate, with the MNA because they feared losing their autonomy. This autonomy was especially critical in Schuylkill County, where being part of a strike-shy national union would severely handicap the county's mine workers in dealing with an aggressive corporation such as the Reading.

Although the strike began as a company lock-out in the Schuylkill district, in November 1874, mining continued in northern Luzerne County. In Luzerne, mine workers attempted to shut down the working mines. At a colliery near Scranton strikers gathered to await the exit of the "blacklegs" at the end of their shift. As the frightened blacklegs-- men who had just entered the region or mine workers desperate to keep their families fed-- made their way out of the mine they faced an angry crowd which included a number of women and children. The leader of the blackleg party fired several shots into the crowd, but according to the Philadelphia Inquirer no one was injured.¹⁸

Few such violent incidents occurred in Schuylkill County until March of 1875, when the tenor of the strikers became militant. Francis P. Dewees, Pottsville lawyer and author of the 1877 book The Molly Maguires, listed the types of "outrages" performed by the strikers:

Men were beaten and robbed by unknown parties, the repairsmen on the railroad were stopped from their work, train-hands were threatened, railroad-tracks obstructed and barricaded, engines and cars thrown off the track, cars unloaded, property stolen and destroyed, houses burned; mobs riotously assembled, took possession of engines and trains, displayed fire-arms, and drove men from their work.¹⁹

The strikers' militancy expressed itself in the deepest antipathy toward the Reading Railroad and Franklin Gowen. The Reading president was never popular among Schuylkill's mine workers, but their estimation of him dropped even further as they became aware of his tactics to crush the WBA. Mine workers knew that they were being spied on by the company and there was a general belief that the Reading was capable of anything in order to discredit the strikers and bring down the WBA. A union leader even asserted that the Reading burned its own breaker at the Norwegian Colliery.²⁰ In an interview printed in the Daily Miners' Journal, a WBA member directly accused the Reading of manipulating public opinion by destroying its own property and blaming the union or the Molly Maguires:

There is a preconcerted design on the part of the company to induce the commission of outrages, and consequently the heads of the organization have their hands full in their well-rewarded efforts to suppress them. The company tries to acquire the public sympathy and it can do it in no better way than by inducing the popular belief that a reign of terror exists in this section of the State.²¹

To the striking mine workers Gowen became a palpable symbol of the avaricious and uncaring big corporation. Although there was not an actual attempt made on his life

there were many threats. Pinkerton operative P.M. Cummings reported that in his conversations with mine workers he found that there "were plenty of miners around this region who would shoot the president of the Pha. & R.R. Co. (Mr. Gowen) owing to his monopolizing the coal trade."²²

The violent ill will directed toward Gowen further increased in March when the Reading broadened its offensive against unionism by summarily dismissing all members of the Mechanics and Workingmen's Benevolent Association, the union which represented the railroad's mechanics and maintenance workers. The New York Times succinctly summed up the Reading's anti-union ethos when it reported that "these removals will be beneficial to the working of the road as the company have been long determined to crush out any labor combinations which would place the running of the road in jeopardy."²³

In a letter written to Gowen in late March the head of the Coal and Iron Police, General Henry Pleasants, urged the Reading president to take every precaution to protect himself. Pleasants warned Gowen of a "strong probability of an effort being made to destroy your life." Pleasants' letter also linked union disaffection toward Gowen with Molly Maguire terror:

There is a very great deal of bitterness felt and expressed against you by the men in this region, especially by the Irish, and more especially by the Irish lately discharged by the Railroad. The society of Ancient Order of Hibernians is believed to contain in this region the desperadoes known as "Molly

Maguires," and a priest has denounced them from the pulpit. These men know full well that if the master spirit who planned and is carrying out the great projects of the Reading Company is removed now, that it is impossible to replace him, that these projects will be paralyzed by his removal, and that the Company would probably abandon coal mining and lease the collieries in the region returning to the former reign of coal operators and their union to its former power.²⁴

The Miners' Journal kept up its traditional attack on the union, but as strike-related violence escalated the paper's invective against the WBA's leadership took a decidedly more brutal tone. From simply dismissing the union leadership as a corrupt and incompetent band of Irish dipsomaniacs-- the paper called Welsh the "blockhead grog shop president of the WBA"-- the Miners' Journal called for decisive action.²⁵ In language that foreshadowed the Molly executions the paper condemned the WBA's leaders, stating: "If they were all hung a dozen times, it would be no more than justice."²⁶

The national press was also party to blaming the Irish for the turmoil in the anthracite fields. A letter to the Irish World signed simply "A Miner" refuted the New York Tribune's assertion that the Irish were prolonging the strike by intimidating other ethnic groups:

The Tribune man should visit this place and see for himself before writing any such article as the one alluded to. Men of different nationalities are fighting this battle, and I assure you, Mr. Editor, that there never was so much unity and friendship existing among the men of the anthracite coal region as at present.²⁷

A letter from an "American Miner" printed in the Daily

Miners' Journal disputed both the Miners' Journal's assertion that workers would return to the mines if a vote were taken among the union membership in early April and the paper's contention that the union was controlled by the Irish:

Now, Mr. Editor, I am an American and a Union man. . . . We are as determined as General Grant was when he said "we will fight it out on this line if it takes all Summer." We will show Mr. Gowen that he can't do as he pleases, if he is President of the R.R. Company. . . . We miners have children, and we want wages so that we can raise them as children should be raised, and give them a little education, so that they won't be as ignorant as their fathers. . . . I am a poor writer, and not a very good scholar, but I am a true Union man.²⁸

From the mine worker's perspective, there was at least one advantage to having the Reading control most of the county's coal mines. The railroad, under Gowen's dictates, would have no part in running company stores.²⁹ To a significant degree, the success of the strike hinged on the relationship between mine workers and the county's independent storekeepers. The union went to great lengths in order to keep grocers and other merchants confident that a continued extension of credit to the families of strikers was not foolhardy. As the strike continued mine workers became very anxious about the continuance of store credit. A Pinkerton operative reported in early April that "the men in the vicinity of St. Nicholas seem as determined as ever to keep up the strike so long as the store keepers supply them with provisions."³⁰ The WBA attempted to ease merchant anxiety over a further extension of credit and

passed a resolution to expel any man from the union who would not pay his store bill after the strike ended.³¹

By mid-April, however, merchants were unable or unwilling to extend further credit to many mine worker families. Some families had been living on merchant credit for over three months. Lower-paid mine laborers, able to accumulate little savings before the strike, felt the loss of credit most. Requests for relief were far greater than the union could handle, and the WBA's funds were virtually exhausted by the beginning of April.³²

With union coffers hopelessly inadequate to support the striking mine workers and their families through the strike, Schuylkill's miners were forced to find other forms of assistance. A method of strike relief which had succeeded in the past was closed to them during the Long Strike. In previous strikes mine workers would send men to other regions to work to help support strikers at home, or those receiving pay doing "dead work" (mine maintenance not directly connected with coal production) would help provide for their neighbors. But the united front that the operators presented in 1875 made these forms of relief unpracticable. The WBA sent representatives from Schuylkill and Luzerne counties to New York City to seek relief. The New York Times reported that the Pennsylvanians had successfully secured the aid of "the Radical Club, a wealthy organization given to 'isms,'" and that they had also "met

with much success among the working men and are hopeful of obtaining a large sum of money."³³ Whatever aid the mine workers may have received from their New York supporters it was clearly not enough, as toward the end of the strike mine workers' families were reduced to roaming the Pennsylvania countryside begging and scavenging food.³⁴

In a union circular, issued April 10, President Welsh requested that the union membership consider a compromise with the operators.³⁵ The proposal was rejected by the membership, but it would not have mattered since the operators would accept nothing short of the WBA's demise. Although the city of Philadelphia was feeling the pinch from the lack of anthracite fuel, the public was not yet panicked over the scarcity of coal. The workers of the three largest coal corporations in the Scranton area had not gone on strike and thus the New York and New England markets were adequately supplied.³⁶

Aware that many of the mine workers were near the point of starvation, the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company decided to open several collieries in the vicinity of Shenandoah and Mahanoy City in the first days of June. To balance the influence of those union leaders who still advocated resistance, whom Dewees calls "the lawless few," the company promised protection in the form of the Coal and Iron Police for all those wishing to resume work.

Dewees and Pinkerton give accounts of the stand taken

by Pinkerton detective turned Coal and Iron Police Captain Robert Linden and his company at the West Shenandoah colliery on June 3. Linden's men faced off against a "mob" of several hundred mine workers with Winchester rifles shouldered and pointed into the crowd of strikers. Not surprisingly, Pinkerton's staunchly anti-union description makes no distinction between union members and Molly Maguires. To him all strikers were outlaws and posed a potentially lethal threat to the social order, whether as Molly Maguires or as "communists," the label that Pinkerton gives to the striking miners.³⁷

By early June it was clear that the WBA was defeated, but the militancy of the striking mine workers continued. The Miners' Journal's reportage of the events of June 3, the same day as Linden's "heroic" stand, details the strike's last violent spasms: "Yesterday morning Pottsville was thrown into an uproar by telegraphic reports that a large body of armed men from the vicinity of Hazleton had marched to Mahanoy City and ordered the men who had just gone to work to quit." A crowd of five hundred strikers halted work at several mines near Mahanoy City and marched into town and demanded, and were granted, the release from jail of a man arrested at an earlier demonstration. In Shenandoah the county sheriff and a posse of twenty to thirty commanded a crowd of strikers to disperse. The "rioters," however, opened fire on the posse and two members of the posse and

eight striking mine workers were shot before the posse retreated and the crowd eventually broke up. Also near Shenandoah a pile of rocks was placed on a train track but discovered before a train arrived. A "mob" of one hundred striking mine workers burned the breaker at the William Schwenck & Co. colliery. Meanwhile a crowd of seven hundred men, women and children paraded peaceably through the streets of St. Clair, headed by a fife and drum and "cheering lustily for the union."³⁸ The following day the governor dispatched several militia units to the Mahanoy City area, which remained there several weeks until all the mines opened, and "very soon the coal regions presented their usual appearance of busy life."³⁹

By the middle of June most mine workers were returning to work. The WBA issued a circular which in effect acknowledged its defeat. The Miners' Journal printed the circular, an excerpt of which reveals the bitterness of the union toward the operators and the press:

Though grossly and persistently vilified by upstart scribblers for the city papers . . . you have until now successfully resisted the demand for its [operators' wage offer] acceptance. . . . And now Mr. Gowen and the operators of Schuylkill County have the satisfaction of knowing that as a county organization we can continue the fight no longer, that the keen prongs of hunger have driven the more unfortunate of our number into a reluctant acceptance of terms, which, under any other circumstances, they could never have been induced to accept.⁴⁰

By the end of the summer of 1875 the WBA ceased to exist as an effective representative of the anthracite

region's mine workers. In the months following the Long Strike the WBA's leadership, including John Welsh, were black-listed from the region's collieries.⁴¹ For seven years the WBA had represented the region's miners in a manner that would not be duplicated, despite the efforts of the Knights of Labor, until the United Mine Workers organized the anthracite fields after the turn of the century.

Schuylkill County's Irish had played a prominent role in the union in both its leadership and in its ranks. Now the Irish, and the county's entire working-class community, were without an institution designed to advocate on their behalf against the seemingly insurmountable power of the Reading Railroad. As the Molly Maguire arrests, trials, convictions, and executions unfolded over the next several years the people of Schuylkill County would feel the loss of the WBA and realize the breadth of the Reading's power. Writer Joseph Patterson phrased the somber mood of the working people of the county in the following warning:

Stay where you are, or, if you must go hence
Go East, Go North, Go South, no consequence,
Take any one direction, you'll be blest
Sooner with what you seek than coming West.
In short, if you wish to enjoy God's bounty,
Go anywhere except to Schuylkill County.⁴²

NOTES

1. Miners' Journal, 23 April 1875.
2. John R. Commons, et al., History of Labor in the United States, vol. 2, 177.
3. Yearley, Enterprise and Anthracite, 197-213.
4. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 86.
5. Ibid., 88.
6. Allan Pinkerton, The Molly Maguires and the Detectives (New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1877; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 15-17.
7. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to The United Mine Workers, 99.
8. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 188.
9. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of operatives A.F.L., C.M.P., and R.W.P., 15 July 1875, Hagley Museum.
10. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of operative P.M. Cummings, 6 May 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
11. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of Cummings, 6 April 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
12. New York Times, 24 March 1875, 1.
13. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 224.
14. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of McParlan, 23 January 1875, Hagley Museum.
15. See Pinkerton to Gowen, report on activities of Cummings, 6 March 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
16. H.B Hanmore to Franklin B. Gowen, 28 March 1875, Hagley Museum.
17. Miners' Journal, 1 January 1875.
18. Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 November 1874.
19. Dewees, The Molly Maguires, 115.

20. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of operative William Nicle, 13 February 1875, Hagley Museum.
21. Daily Miners' Journal, 3 April 1875. During the 1870s the Miners' Journal began publishing a daily while still printing a weekly edition.
22. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of Cummings, 12 March 1874, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
23. New York Times, 24 March 1875, 1.
24. Henry Pleasants to Gowen, 29 March 1875, Hagley Museum.
25. Miners' Journal, 23 April 1875.
26. Ibid., 21 May 1875.
27. Irish World, 3 July 1875.
28. Daily Miners' Journal, 2 April 1875.
29. Schlegel, Ruler of the Reading, 76.
30. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of Nicle, 2 April 1875, Hagley Museum.
31. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of McParlan, 4 February 1875, Hagley Museum.
32. Pinkerton to Gowen, report of activities of Nicle, 13 April 1875; 2 April 1875, Hagley Museum.
33. New York Times, 1 May 1875, 5.
34. Miners' Journal, 28 May 1875.
35. Ibid., 23 April 1875.
36. Schlegel, Ruler of the Reading, 67.
37. Dewees, The Molly Maguires, 121-22; Pinkerton, The Molly Maguires and the Detectives, 327-34.
38. Miners' Journal, 4 June 1875.
39. Dewees, The Molly Maguires, 123.
40. Miners' Journal, 18 June 1875.
41. Joseph Patterson, "After the W.B.A.," Publications of the Historical Society of Schuylkill County, 2 (June 1912): 174.

42. Ibid., 184.

COIN

Chapter Six

The Molly Maguire Episode and Its Effect on Schuylkill County's Irish Community

The hanging of the twenty members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who were forever to be branded Molly Maguires, represented a catastrophe for the anthracite Irish community that ranked second only in magnitude to the demise of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association. This chapter will discuss the murders for which the AOH members were convicted, the reaction of Schuylkill County's Irish community to the executions of the convicted, and the evolving legacy of the Molly episode. To the non-Irish that legacy began as one which painted the accused AOH members as evil, almost demonic, men whose deeds were attributed to the wild nature of the Irish. The Molly legacy has also incorrectly, but inextricably, linked the Molly Maguires to the labor movement by labelling the alleged society as a secret labor organization.

The summer of 1875 began in Schuylkill County with the death of the WBA and ended with a series of murders ascribed to the Molly Maguires. The county's hungry and demoralized mine workers reluctantly returned to the mines under the

terms offered by the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company in the early summer of 1875. The Miners' Journal crowed over the union's demise: "The W.B.A. is to be buried in very low ground, as it is thought it will be the best place, as it will never rise up again."¹

For Schuylkill County's working people, especially the Irish, the loss of the union meant that the Reading's considerable leverage as the county's major employer and landowner would have no institutional counterbalance of any kind. The manner in which the Reading aggressively dominated the process that led to the hanging of twenty Irishmen in the last years of the 1870s lends credence to the notion that Schuylkill County had become a virtual fiefdom of the company. The Reading Railroad took such a large part in the prosecution, conviction, and execution of the alleged Molly Maguires that it made the role of the legitimate prosecutors, the local government, marginal.

Reading President Gowen followed his success in crushing the WBA with the spectacular prosecution of the alleged Molly Maguires. In one of the first of the approximately dozen Molly trials Gowen, personally leading the prosecution's team, turned the attention of the proceedings away from the crimes of individuals and toward the prosecution of the AOH itself. The effects of decades of anti-Irish sentiment manifested themselves in the wholesale arrest of AOH members in the spring of 1876.

The Reading Railroad spent a small fortune investigating the union and the AOH.² Unfortunately for Gowen the Pinkerton spies and others he hired to collect evidence against the union found little of incriminating value. Gowen then looked to the investigation of the AOH as a way of combining the image of the nefarious Molly Maguires and the union in the public's mind. With the detailed testimony provided by the Pinkerton detective James McParlan, Gowen had all he needed to convince juries and, indeed, the nation of not only the existence but the pervasiveness of the Mollies. Judging from the comments made in 1906 by one-time United States Commissioner of Labor, Carroll D. Wright, Gowen spent the Reading's money well:

In the late sixties and early seventies the public mind was aroused to a pitch of excitement and apprehension never before experienced in this country, through a long-continued series of outrages committed by a secret organization in the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania known as the "Molly Maguires." An open strike, no matter how tragical or how disastrous, does not create that feeling of apprehension resulting from the secret actions of an organization like the Molly Maguires. Their depredations may be considered as forming the dark background of our own modern battles.

No great strike was inaugurated by this secret organization, but it caused a feverish condition of the public mind, so that when the great era of historic strikes really opened people feared for the continuance of industry and for the general prosperity and business of the country, and when the first great historic strike occurred in 1877 it is not to be wondered at that the public excitement was so great that the most drastic remedies were considered as the only ones with which to deal with labor uprisings and insurrections.³

Less than a month after Pennsylvania's "Day of the

Rope," June 21, 1877, when ten men convicted as Molly Maguires were hanged in Pottsville and Mauch Chunk, a railway strike began in Baltimore and quickly spread to most of the nation's industrializing centers. Pitched battles between workers and militia resulted in the deaths of scores of people and significant property damage. In early August striking railmen and mine workers in Scranton were gunned down by a special police force, largely paid by the Lackawanna Coal and Iron Company, killing six and wounding over fifty.⁴

Schuylkill workers, for over a decade the most militant in the anthracite region, were strangely quiet during the Great Strike of 1877. Although the executed Molly Maguires were not labor leaders, and few were actually even mine workers, the mass hangings in the summer of 1877 sent an unmistakable message to the county's Irish working class that justice was on the side of the Reading and defiance would be dealt with severely.

In the months immediately following the downfall of the mine workers' union a total of six murders were allegedly perpetrated by members of the AOH. James McParlan was the leading prosecution witness in most of the trials of those AOH members indicted for the murders. McParlan had arrived in Schuylkill County in October 1873 and remained there undercover until February 1876. While in the county McParlan used the alias James McKenna and successfully

ingratiated himself with many in the Irish community. Indeed, within several months of his entrance into the area McParlan was made a member of the AOH and even served as secretary of the Shenandoah chapter.

McParlan warned his superiors that community life in the mining districts would destabilize without the union's presence. The detective wrote in early September of 1875, after the series of murders had occurred: "Now you can see yourself how this is, and what I predicted at the time of the suspension-- 'that if the Union would fail there would be rough times.' The Irish knew this." The report continued that under the WBA "each man got his turn, but now the Irish are discharged or if not they are put to work at some place where they can make nothing."⁵ Little did McParlan realize just how prophetic his statement was or how much he would personally contribute to creating the "rough times" for Schuylkill's Irish community during the next two years.

The controversial murders of the summer of 1875 were preceded by the killing of a Mahanoy City town official in late October 1874. Both the Irish and the Welsh fire companies of Mahanoy City responded to a fire in the center of town, on the line dividing their respective districts. As often happened when the two companies met, a brawl broke out between them. During the melee the town's chief burgess, George Major, was fatally shot. The dying Major

identified the Irishman, and AOH member, Daniel Dougherty, as his murderer. After a sensational trial Dougherty was acquitted, thanks in no small part to the AOH providing for his defense, but many non-Irish citizens of Mahanoy City felt justice was not done.

In May 1875 an attempt was made on Dougherty's life which the Irish attributed to members of the Modocs, the local Welsh gang. According to McParlan, AOH County Delegate John Kehoe put the Pinkerton operative in charge of avenging the assault on Dougherty. McParlan succeeded in postponing the attack and even feigned illness on the night it was to be carried out but, supposedly in order to safeguard his identity, he did not alert the authorities about the assault. On the night of June 28, a group of men shot William "Bully Bill" Thomas several times. Although seriously wounded, Thomas, a Welshman who supposedly led the assault on Dougherty, was not killed.⁶

A week later Tamaqua constable Benjamin Yost was shot and killed by two men while on a ladder extinguishing the town's gas street lights. As revealed by the subsequent trials of those accused of killing Yost, his murder was part of a pact that the Tamaqua Bodymaster, or local AOH leader, James Kerrigan had made with Coaldale Bodymaster James Roarity. Kerrigan assured Roarity that if he arranged for the murder of Yost, with whom Kerrigan held a personal grudge, then Kerrigan would do away with Lansford mine boss

John P. Jones, with whom Roarity likewise carried a grudge. Jones was shot to death by two men as he entered the Lansford train station on September 2. The day before the Jones murder, in the Shenandoah vicinity, five men shot and killed a boss of the Heaton Colliery, Thomas Sanger, and a young miner who boarded with him, William Uren, as the two men were on their way to work. This crime was also purportedly committed by members of the AOH.⁷

The murders of Jones, Uren, and Sanger attracted national attention. The New York Times reported that the crimes showed "that the band of cut-throats known as the 'Mollie Maguires,' which infest [the anthracite region] has entered upon a systematic work of blood." The Times declared that an emergency situation existed in the region in which "the county officers are powerless against an enemy who strikes without warning and, worst of all is protected in retreat by the very persons, the inhabitants of the vicinity, who are depended on most to bring him to justice."⁸ The paper's implication that the anthracite region's inhabitants were sheltering the murderers was repeated in an editorial which appeared in the same issue as the above report:

These desperadoes, who consider themselves bound to avenge the fancied wrongs of the miners have already shot three men. . . . That this was done when hundreds of people engaged in the mines were moving about in the vicinity, and that the murderers could at once escape, is proof that the miners were in some sort accessory to the crime.⁹

Alleged Molly Maguire murders were also occurring in the western part of Schuylkill County in the summer of 1875. Gomer James, born of Welsh parents, had allegedly killed an Irishman named Edward Cosgrove in Shenandoah in 1873. Although acquitted of the killing, he was guilty in the eyes of Cosgrove's relatives. They supposedly took their desire to see justice done to the local AOH bodymaster. When the AOH finally decided to proceed against James the acting bodymaster in Shenandoah was none other than McParlan. While James tended bar at a fire-company picnic, on August 14, 1875, a AOH member named Thomas Hurley stepped up to the bar, shot James at point-blank range and calmly walked away.¹⁰

On the same day Girardville Justice of the Peace Thomas Gwyther was killed by Irishman William Love. Love was angered that Gwyther had issued a warrant for his arrest for public drunkenness. This murder was apparently not planned and Love acted alone. Though reputed to be another Molly killing there is no evidence that the AOH had any part in the murder. Love fled the area after the murder and was never apprehended.¹¹

Far removed from the turmoil in the anthracite fields the Pennsylvania legislative committee investigating the Reading Railroad's possible violation of an anti-monopoly law in Schuylkill County was convening in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The 1875 trip to the shore was underwritten by the

Reading itself. The New York Times printed the entire text of Franklin Gowen's testimony before the committee, all of three full pages. Rather than directly deny the charges of monopolizing Schuylkill's coal industry Gowen asserted that the Reading's dominance had brought long needed stability to the county. Gowen's impassioned defense of his company's methods in cornering the Schuylkill coal industry ended with a list of "outrages" perpetrated against the Reading and the Schuylkill County community at-large in the previous two years. Gowen did not directly attribute these outrages to either the WBA or the Molly Maguires, but his words suggested that these acts, which ranged from incendiarism to refusal of workers to allow scabs access to the mines, were not random acts but planned to sabotage the Reading. President Gowen implied that it was the perpetrators of these outrages that needed to be investigated and not the Reading. Gowen's facile manipulation of the legislative committee foreshadowed his performance as the star prosecutor in the Molly trials of the following year.¹²

Back in the anthracite region, Tamaqua Bodymaster James Kerrigan and two others were identified fleeing the scene of the Jones murder and arrested soon afterward. Kerrigan turned state's evidence and revealed to authorities the details and participants in the plots to kill Yost and Jones. In the late winter of 1876 Kerrigan's confession prompted a flurry of arrests of area AOH members by posses

organized by Pinkerton Detectives and the Coal and Iron Police.¹³

James McParlan remained undercover as the first Molly trials were taking place but disappeared from the county after the AOH leadership suspected his real identity. To the surprise of Schuylkill's Irish community, and especially the defendants, McParlan resurfaced as a witness in the trial of those allegedly involved in the Yost murder in the spring of 1876.

The same day that McParlan took the stand against his erstwhile comrades, May 6, 1876, eleven AOH leaders, including John Kehoe, were arrested throughout the anthracite region.¹⁴ Kehoe and most of the other AOH leaders arrested that day were accused of complicity in the attempt on the life of "Bully Bill" Thomas. Their trial became the most publicized of all the Molly trials because of the number of defendants involved and the status of the accused. The prosecution successfully convinced the jury that the plan to kill Thomas was an open secret among all AOH members. Once again McParlan was the prosecution's lead witness.

Except for the murder of Gwyther, McParlan was at least indirectly involved in, or had knowledge of, the planning and execution of each Molly crime. The defense, largely paid for by the AOH, did its best during the Molly trials to paint McParlan as an agent provocateur. Martin L'Velle, a

leading defense lawyer in several Molly trials, stated in his closing arguments in the trial of the alleged conspirators in the attempt to kill "Bully Bill" Thomas that

James McParlan made his advent into this county, and crime since then has been in the ascendant. I say the ascendant, because I propose to prove to you that no crime has been perpetrated in Schuylkill County, except that which he himself assisted to plot, to counsel, to perpetrate, and to conceal afterward as far as he himself was concerned.¹⁵

But the jury and the general public were more impressed with the prosecution's argument, especially segments such as Gowen's description of the workings of the AOH in the region:

The purpose [of the AOH] was to make the business of mining coal in this county a terror and a fear; to secure for the leading men in this society profitable positions, and the control of large operations at every colliery, and employ as many of their confederates, members of this organization, as possible. . . . No industrial pursuit could have been carried on except by those who employed the services of Jack Kehoe, or Christopher Donnelly, or Mike O'Brien, or some of these men, either by giving them a good job or paying them money-- and to what condition would this county have been driven, and what would have been the result? . . . With these conspirators in the possession of everything that was of value, they would have driven out all honest industry, shooting down, either in the darkness of the night or in the broad daylight, as they became bolder, any man who dared to oppose the dictates of their society or set himself up in the opposition to their decrees.¹⁶

The jury took twenty minutes to decide that Kehoe and the others were guilty. However, Kehoe soon faced a more serious charge-- that of the 1862 murder of Audenreid mine foreman Frank Langdon. The Langdon murder was not the only old crime for which AOH members were being charged. Several

other AOH members were indicted for the 1863 murder of mine owner George K. Smith, for the 1868 killing of paymaster Alexander Rea, and for the 1871 murder of mine superintendent Morgan Powell. Allan Pinkerton placed the number of AOH members arrested as Molly Maguires at about seventy, while dozens of others fled the region, and even the country, to elude arrest.¹⁷

The defense in the Molly trials was at an insurmountable disadvantage. The prosecution had the resources of the Reading at its disposal as well as the weight of public opinion on its side. The prosecution was also able to keep Irishmen off most juries.¹⁸ Even the judge presiding over several of the trials, Cyrus Pershing, had a connection to the prosecution.

Pershing was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Governor of Pennsylvania in the 1875 election and had received the full support of Franklin Gowen. John Kehoe was outspoken in his opposition to Pershing's candidacy and, uncharacteristically for an Irishman, supported Pershing's Republican rival rather than back Gowen's man. Much has been made of the animosity between Pershing and Kehoe, particularly since Pershing presided over Kehoe's trial for murder. But the notion that Pershing and Gowen sought personal revenge against Kehoe for his opposition in the gubernatorial election is overplayed, primarily because Pershing took Schuylkill County by over 1,300 votes.¹⁹

The defense was most handicapped by the prosecution's ability to undermine the credibility of all the defense's Irish witnesses. In the trial of those accused of attacking Thomas, attorney L'Velle decried the prosecution's attempt to label all the region's Irish as criminals:

When you hear the term Mollie Maguire used, what does it mean? Has there been an Irishman upon the stand for the last six months in this county who has not been called a Mollie Maguire? . . .

Every Irishman, so far as I have made any observation, has been classed in the same category, and it has been a sort of a moving curse which falls not only on John Kehoe and those men who are arraigned here, but upon every man who has been brought on the witness stand to testify anything in aid of these prisoners.²⁰

Of course, there were other crimes committed while McParlan was undercover in the county. Killings not associated with the AOH received far less press but were still alarmingly commonplace during this violent period. The New York Times attributed the violence to ethnic strife, reporting: "The numerous murders which have been committed . . . have had for their victims Welsh and English men, while the murderers have been Irish, and this has caused a fierce jealousy of race."²¹ Ethnic tensions set the entire county on edge, especially the Coal and Iron Police, who, in the week of the murders of Jones, Sanger, and Uren killed a German youth while watching a road near Shenandoah. "It was a fatal error," a Times correspondent wrote, "but due only to the high level of excitement in that region which makes every man suspicious."²²

The most notorious incident of reprisal against the Irish for the murders of the summer of 1875 was at Wiggan's Patch, near St. Nicholas, on December 10 of that year. Early that morning a band of armed men stormed an Irish boarding house and brutally murdered a pregnant woman and a man rumored to be involved in the Sanger and Uren shootings. No one was ever indicted for the killings, but it is probable that they were done by a vigilante group intent on avenging the deaths of Sanger and Uren.²³

Schuylkill's Irish not only had to contend with the numerous outside threats to their community, they also faced internal strife. The most notable example of this strife was the conflict between supporters of the AOH and the Catholic clergy. The murders which AOH members were alleged to have committed in the summer of 1875 put greater strain on the already tenuous relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the fraternal organization.

The long standing conflict between the Church and the AOH found a forum in an urban Catholic newspaper, the New York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register, when the paper printed an article by Father Daniel McDermott, pastor at New Philadelphia, in October 1874. In the article McDermott attacked all quasi-secret societies, especially the AOH, as requiring members to split loyalty between themselves and the Church. Curiously, the Schuylkill County priest also condemned the Emerald Benevolent Association, an

organization which in the anthracite region served as a sober, doctrinally sound, and clerically approved, alternative to the AOH. McDermott's polemic included a unique description of the origin of the AOH in the region:

Prior to 1870 there existed in the Pennsylvania Coal Region the Molly Maguires, a society rendered infamous by its treachery and deeds of blood. . . . So vile and abhorred did this society become, that the most unpardonable insult that could be offered a member was to call him a Molly Maguire. . . . When it became impossible any longer to bear the odium of being called a Molly Maguire, application was made to the State Legislature for a charter for the A.O.H. . . . After obtaining this charter the Mollies were metamorphosed into Hibernians, and the association assumed the style and title of the Ancient Order of Hibernians-- the Mollies did not cease to be bad men, but they became Hibernians and ceased to be Mollies, somewhat after the manner a wolf ceases to be a sheep after he dons the clothing of a sheep.²⁴

The following week the Freeman's Journal printed a statement signed by seven priests of the lower anthracite region which openly condemned the AOH. The "Declaration of Seven Pastors," like most of the anti-Molly rhetoric of the period, was long on denunciation of the AOH but short on specific abuses attributable to the fraternity. In the article accompanying the declaration the Freeman's Journal noted that some Catholic clergy apologized for the actions of the AOH or ignored the issue altogether. The priests who signed the anti-AOH declaration, the paper stated, were to be lauded for their bravery, for each

is in daily contact with these men [AOH members]. The flummery of grips, and pass-words, and counter-signs, has a great attraction for a great many men. Then, when the initiated is told, in awful and mysterious whispers, of the tremendous things that the Ancient

Order is going to do for old Ireland, his imagination-- most idly and falsely, but most intensely-- is fixed with regard for it.²⁵

Over a year later, in December 1875, in response to the arrests of the alleged Molly Maguires, Philadelphia Archbishop James Frederick Wood reissued his pastoral of 1864 almost verbatim. The sole change was that in the naming of the condemned secret societies the Molly Maguires were termed as being "otherwise known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians." The New York Times reported the pastoral's reissue as constituting an official excommunication of members of the AOH, which it was not. In the same article the Times quoted from the sermon of Father Daniel O'Connor, one of the pastors who had signed the anti-AOH declaration the previous year. O'Connor told his congregation:

Molly Maguires, Hibernians, Buckshots, or whatever else they may choose to call themselves, they are excommunicated. . . . Beware of the Molly Maguires. If you have a brother among them pray for his repentance, but have nothing to do with him and remember that he is cut off from the Church. . . . They are scum and a disgrace to us as Irishmen and American citizens.²⁶

Ironically, it was the same Father O'Connor who revealed to John Kehoe the identity of the man he knew as James McKenna. O'Connor supposedly learned that McParlan was a Pinkerton detective while on a visit to the diocesan center in Philadelphia and reported the news to Kehoe. The promise that was made to McParlan that he would not have to testify against his erstwhile compatriots became irrelevant once his identity was known, and Gowen and Pinkerton

convinced him to take the stand. However much Father O'Connor abhorred the AOH he could abide an informer even less. His move to protect the local Irish from the outside threat posed by the Pinkerton detective underlines the ambivalence felt by local priests weighing loyalty to their congregants with pressure from the diocese and anti-Irish segments of society to roust out Molly Maguire terrorists. Obviously priests such as O'Connor had a difficult time accepting even their own rhetoric concerning the Mollies. Most of the accused Mollies were, after all, parishioners of long-standing and, one can assume, a certain intimacy existed between congregant and confessor.²⁷

The anthracite region's AOH members received a blow even more devastating than the Church's condemnation when they were abruptly expelled from the national AOH. At the AOH's annual convention in New York in April 1877 the delegates decided, after much debate, "to cut off from all connections with our organization the Schuylkill, Carbon, Northumberland and Columbia County lodges."²⁸ Just prior to the convention the Bishop of Scranton, William O'Hara, who had been reluctant to join Archbishop Wood in denunciation of the AOH, threatened the Hibernians in his diocese with excommunication. In order to salvage its national image and its relationship with the Catholic Church, the national AOH sacrificed the anthracite lodges. The AOH's withdrawal of support, both spiritual and

financial, to the men convicted as Molly Maguires destroyed their last hopes of escaping the gallows.

By the end of 1876 the list of condemned men began to grow, and as appeals were exhausted the prospect of multiple executions became a certainty. The decision was made to execute ten in one day so that security provisions would not need to be constantly repeated. The New York Times reported that security at the Pottsville prison was extremely tight in the days before and after the scheduled hangings. Despite the fears of the authorities there were no disturbances during the time of the executions. The New York Times reported that "the feeling among the lower class of Irish is very bitter." Threats were made, however, to the informer James Kerrigan rather than the police or the Reading Railroad.²⁹ In the days after the first executions many expected violence, but none occurred. The New York Times reported: "There are apparently well authenticated reports of mysterious gatherings of Molly Maguires at different points in the vicinity. . . . The telegraph offices have been ordered to remain open all night so as to call for assistance at any hour."³⁰

The reaction of the region's Irish community to the mass executions was largely one of grief rather than anger. The funeral of Alexander Campbell, hanged for his alleged part in the murder of John Jones, was reported as the "largest funeral ever seen in the coal regions." The

Baltimore Sun stated that "there may have been two thousand lookers-on, but there was nothing whatever to indicate the slightest use of reinforcement of the two regular policemen of the town by the four strange police of the Reading Coal and Iron Company."³¹

The hangings of the men convicted as Molly Maguires left an indelible impression on Schuylkill's Irish community. The folklorist George Korson recorded a conversation he had with an elderly Irish miner's widow in the 1930s. Her recollection of the day evokes the somber atmosphere that tradition holds attended the death of Christ on Good Friday. When asked if she remembered the day sixty years before, the woman responded: "Indade I do, sir. . . . Will I ever forget it! A sad day it was in the hard coal fields, sir. When the hour of the hangings arrived for the poor Irish lads, the world suddenly became dark and we had to burn our lamps."³²

Most of the nation's newspapers were adamant that justice was served in the executions of the alleged Mollies. Some editors even felt that the law had dealt with the condemned AOH members too leniently. The New York Times opined that the way in which the men were executed would do little to discourage future murderers:

The prisoners were paraded, as usual, on the scaffold. They were allowed to show such indifference to punishment as they could muster, which was considerable; to make prayers for the forgiveness of every one; to protest their innocence in more or less braggadocio fashion, and generally to do everything to

make their killing partake of a cheap tragic show rather than a solemn scene of retributive justice.³³

The newspaper that spoke out most vociferously against the hangings was the Irish World. "It would be useless here to repeat again the astonishing fact that those men are condemned to this most horrible death on evidence that would not be entertained for a moment if they had been rich men with friends at their back," the paper stated just before the hangings.³⁴ The Irish World also vilified Gowen and Pershing and declared that Pinkerton's recently published book contained nothing to "show that there exists or that there ever did exist, a Molly Maguire society."³⁵

Despite the efforts of the Irish World, for decades the view that justice was done in the hanging of the sinister Mollies held sway. Historian James Ford Rhodes, writing in the American Historical Review in 1910, understood the Molly episode as a function of the Irish immigrant character: "Subject to tyranny at home, the Irishman, when he came to America, too often translated liberty into license and so ingrained was his habit of looking upon government as an enemy. . . . It was easy for him to become a Molly Maguire."³⁶ Allan Nevins, writing in 1927, was even more blunt in his assessment of the Molly Maguires:

the one [secret society] which attracted the most attention in the mid-seventies was a sinister body among the Pennsylvania coal workers called the Molly Maguires. It was a product, on the one side, of the harsh conditions under which the miners worked, and on the other, of the virtually lawless temper of the Irish miners.³⁷

In the classic History of Labor in the United States, published in 1918, the team of writers led by John Commons depict the Mollies as a group of labor agitators who took control of the WBA during the Long Strike. "When, in December, 1874, 'the long strike' for higher wages began, many of the leaders and the better men in the Miners' and Laborers' Benevolent Association [the WBA] were opposed to it; but the Molly Maguires were in control and the strike was called."³⁸ Apparently, Gowen and the editors of such papers as the Miners' Journal had been so successful in their attempt to unite the nefarious image of the Molly Maguires with unionism that historians for decades after the episode incorporated the merged image into their syntheses.

Although there was no substantial collaboration between the AOH and the WBA, the Molly Maguire myth as propounded by those in opposition to both the union and the Irish fraternity had an unexpected effect. For many in the Irish community and the working-class movement the hanged Mollies appeared as martyrs, symbols of resistance to the large corporation. Socialist leader Eugene Debs stated that the "men who perished upon the scaffold as felons were labor leaders, the first martyrs of the class struggle in the United States." Author Anthony Bimba's 1932 book The Molly Maguires concurs with the sentiments expressed by Debs, declaring that "the Mollies were the miners' leaders at the dawn of a new large-scale industry, in the first major class

battle in American labor history."³⁹

Walter Coleman's 1936 book The Molly Maguire Riots presented the Mollies as an underground union movement, after the collapse of the WBA. But upon careful examination the actions of those condemned do not appear as those of class-conscious partisans of the producing classes. The men convicted as Molly Maguires were not labor leaders and, even assuming their guilt, the pattern of their crimes suggests that they were seeking nothing more than personal retribution.

Wayne Broehl's The Molly Maguires, published in 1964, was the first book based on the then recently opened Reading Railroad papers, which featured transcripts of the many Pinkerton reports. Broehl's book is thorough and balanced and remains the most complete book on the Mollies. According to historian Priscilla Long, however, Broehl takes the reports of McParlan and other Pinkerton operatives at face value. Long points out, quite correctly, that those reports do not merit the status of true historical documents and should not be treated as such.⁴⁰

Harold Aurand, in the 1971 book From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, and Anthony Wallace, in 1986's St. Clair, both seek to understand the Molly episode in terms of the industrial environment of the anthracite region. They both have added significantly to our ability to make sense of the Molly Maguires.

The Molly Maguire episode spawned a myth comprising elements of the fantastic which has endured to the present. On the morning that he was hanged in Mauch Chunk for his part in the murder of John Jones, Alexander Campbell declared his innocence to the Carbon County sheriff. He then stretched out his arm to the top of his jail cell and made an imprint with his hand, reportedly saying: "There is the proof of my words. That mark of mine will never be wiped out. There it will remain forever to shame the county that is hangin' an innocent man." Today, in the old Carbon County jail cell 17 there is a faint outline of a human hand, which has remained despite numerous attempts to remove it.⁴¹

The last of the condemned Molly Maguires was hanged on October 9, 1879, but the Molly Maguire myth was just beginning. The various transformations and manifestations of that myth reveal as much about the period from which they sprang as they reveal about the guilt or innocence of the alleged Mollies. The concern here has not been to establish whether the condemned Irishmen were part of a murderous organization or were victimized by the Reading Railroad. The concern has been rather to demonstrate that what made the mass hangings possible was the readiness of the non-Irish community to believe unreservedly in the threat of Molly Maguireism. The basis for such a belief lay in a deep and abiding prejudice against the Irish. Franklin Gowen and

others were able to exploit this prejudice to their fullest advantage. The results were to prove tragic for Schuylkill County's Irish community.

NOTES

1. Daily Miners Journal, 18 June 1875.
2. According to Broehl the Reading paid the Pinkerton National Detective Agency approximately \$150,000 for investigating the WBA and the AOH in the mid-1870s. Broehl also writes that Gowen estimated that the railroad's holdout during the Long Strike cost the Reading four million dollars. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 351-52.
3. Carroll D. Wright, The Battles of Labor (Philadelphia: George Jacobs, 1906), 112-13.
4. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 111-12. For a detailed discussion of events in the anthracite region during the Great Strike of 1877 see Robert V. Bruce, 1877: Year of Violence (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1959), especially 294-301.
5. Report of McParlan, September 2, 1875, George Kaercher MSS, quoted from Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 234.
6. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 102-3.
7. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 232-32.
8. New York Times, 9 September 1875, 1.
9. Ibid., 4.
10. Wallace, St. Clair, 346-50.
11. J. Walter Coleman, The Molly Maguire Riots: Industrial Conflict in The Pennsylvania Coal Country (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1936), 101).
12. New York Times, 6 August 1875, supp., 2.
13. Aurand, From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers, 106-107.
14. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 296.
15. "Report of the Case of The Commonwealth vs. John Kehoe, et al.," (Pottsville: Miners' Journal Book and Jobs Rooms, 1876), 193.
16. "Commonwealth vs. Kehoe, et al.," 177.

17. Pinkerton, The Molly Maguires and the Detectives, 552.
18. Miller and Sharpless, The Kingdom of Coal, 166.
19. Harold W. Aurand and William Gudelunas, "The Mythical Qualities of Molly Maguire," Pennsylvania History 10 (January 1982): 99.
20. "Comm. vs. Kehoe, et al.," 205.
21. New York Times, 11 October 1875, 1.
22. New York Times, 4 September 1875, 1.
23. Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 258-66.
24. New York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register, 3 October 1874.
25. New York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register, 10 October 1874.
26. New York Times, 23 December 1875, 2.
27. Broehl, 290.
28. Irish World, 21 April 1877, quoted from Broehl, The Molly Maguires, 345.
29. New York Times, 22 June 1877, 2.
30. Ibid., 2.
31. Baltimore Sun, 25 June 1877.
32. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 255.
33. New York Times, 22 June 1877, 4.
34. Irish World, 16 June 1877.
35. Ibid., 23 June 1877.
36. James Ford Rhodes, "The Molly Maguires in the Anthracite Region of Pennsylvania," American Historical Review 15 (April 1910): 560-61.
37. Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Modern America, 1865-1878, vol. 8 in A History of American Life, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), 381.

38. Commons, et al., History of Labor in the United States, vol. 2, 184.

39. Eugene V. Debs, Speeches of Eugene V. Debs, vol. 9 in Voices of Revolt, 76, quoted from Anthony Bimba, The Molly Maguires (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 17.

40. Long, Where the Sun Never Shines, note no. 57, 350.

41. Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch, 252; Miller and Sharpless, The Kingdom of Coal, 136.

Epilogue

In the twelve decades since the Molly Maguire episode the fortunes of Irish-Americans and of the anthracite industry have taken divergent paths. Slowly, yet steadily and completely, Irish Catholics have transformed their image in America from that of pariahs to respectable members of the middle class. Indeed, the Irish have "assimilated" into American society to the point that it is almost absurd to speak of the Irish as a discrete ethnic group. The few remaining contemporary enclaves of the Irish working class, in northeastern cities such as Boston or Albany, appear anachronistic. The Irish are no longer strangers to the corporate boardroom or even, with John Kennedy's 1960 Presidential election, to the White House.

Fortune has not been as kind to the anthracite industry or to the region. From the years of peak production in World War I the industry declined rapidly in the 1920s, primarily because Americans were switching to petroleum and natural gas as fuels for transportation and home heating. The Great Depression arrived ten years early in the anthracite region and the area has still not fully recovered

economically. At its peak the anthracite industry produced over 100 million tons of coal a year and employed 180,000 men. In the mid-1980s the region produced barely 6 million tons of coal and the industry employed about 3,000 people.¹

The respective fates of the Molly Maguire legacy and the Reading Railroad parallel those of the Irish and the anthracite industry. In 1980 the governor of Pennsylvania officially pardoned the "King of the Mollies," John Kehoe, for the murder of Frank Langdon, an action prompted largely by the efforts of Kehoe's descendants (the tavern in Girardville that Kehoe operated, the Hibernian House, is still run by one of his progeny). At the entrance of the old jailhouse in Pottsville, where many of the men convicted as Molly Maguires were hanged, is a plaque that honors the executed as early martyrs of the American labor movement. The image of the Molly Maguires as labor heroes is now ascendant.

Franklin Gowen's Reading successfully dominated Schuylkill County's coal industry through its buying of the county's collieries, its silencing of labor agitation by crushing the WBA, and its pivotal role in the conviction of the alleged Molly Maguires. But Gowen put the railroad so heavily in debt with his land purchases that the company was forced into receivership in 1880. He was dismissed as president, but later regained control of the Reading. On Friday, December 13, 1889, in a Washington, D.C., hotel room

Gowen committed suicide with a gunshot to the head. "Gowen's career had flashed across the nineteenth-century sky with the brilliancy of a meteor," his biographer wrote.² And yet for all his brilliance, Gowen is little known today.

One of Gowen's lasting accomplishments was his skillful association of the Molly Maguires with organized labor. In retrospect the connection was not difficult to make. The alleged Mollies were, after all, from an Irish community that was comprised mostly of mine workers and their families. The Irish were also an integral segment of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association. Gowen merely exploited for his own purposes negative perceptions of the Irish, perceptions that allowed many non-Irish to believe in a pervasive Molly Maguire terror.

Within a decade of the Molly episode the demographic complexion of the anthracite region was rapidly changing. For as alien as the Irish had seemed to native Americans in the 1850s, the newcomers from Eastern Europe must have seemed all the more strange. Poles, Italians, Macedonians, Hungarians, and Greeks were just some of the ethnic groups that were immigrating to the region. By the turn of the century the golden cupolas of their churches stood alongside Irish Catholic churches in Schuylkill County towns such as Shenandoah and Mahanoy City.

In their response to the Eastern European immigrant

workers the Irish did not always conscientiously remember their own ill treatment in the region. In many instances it was a second-generation Irish contract miner who had Slavic or Greek laborers under him. Many of these miners had as low an opinion of their laborers as the Welsh or English miners had of Irish laborers. In 1889, an Irish mine worker sponsored a bill in the Pennsylvania state legislature to require miners to pass a certification test in English. The measure was designed to deny the promotion of Eastern Europeans in the mines.³

The Irish and the Eastern European mine workers did find common ground in the struggle to organize the anthracite fields under the banner of the United Mine Workers. Irish-American UMW President John Mitchell, who was immensely popular with the region's Eastern European immigrants, was not native to the region but many other Irish labor organizers were natives. The UMW alliance of Irish leadership and Eastern European rank and file worked to gain for anthracite workers what the WBA could not achieve-- a lasting and powerful institutional advocate for the region's workers.

Much about the Irish experience in Schuylkill County in the mid-nineteenth century appears so extreme as to defy our ability to derive from it general applications about the Irish experience in America. There was no other place in America that had as harsh a working environment, where anti-

Irish sentiment was so pervasive, and where the Irish were hanged in such numbers. The struggle between labor and capital in Schuylkill County and the spectacular Molly Maguire trials and executions were far from mundane. But lost in the excitement of the Molly episode is the story of the daily struggles of the Irish mine worker and his family: their efforts to survive the rigors of the industry, to raise families free of want, and to build a community around their kinsfolk and their church.

The nineteenth-century Irish community of Schuylkill County has long been inextricably linked to the Molly Maguire myth. Yet it is an unfortunate and incorrect association, for to describe the Irish immigrant mine worker and his family in terms of Molly Maguireism negates the complexity of their experience in the anthracite region.

NOTES

1. Miller and Sharpless, The Kingdom of Coal, xxii.
2. Schlegel, Ruler of the Reading, 288.
3. Victor R. Greene, The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 115.

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