

Terrorism as Heritage? Remembering the Molly Maguires

Philip Jenkins
Pennsylvania State University
2000

During the 1860s and 1870s, intense industrial violence occurred in the anthracite mining areas of Pennsylvania, culminating in the mass arrests and executions of the alleged leaders of the “Molly Maguires”, supposedly a secret terrorist society which used as cover the Ancient Order of Hibernians. The event generated worldwide attention, and is even commemorated in a Sherlock Holmes story, The Valley of Fear. It has also left bitter memories within the communities affected, in which the descendants of the Mollies’ victims will often have nothing to do with the families of alleged perpetrators, and the affair remains a source of religious and ethnic tension. Nevertheless, despite the very grim memories of the Molly Maguire affair, the whole story has in recent years been incorporated in the heritage industry of north-eastern Pennsylvania, which has attempted to use tourism to rescue a region devastated by industrial decline and closures.

Since the 1970s, the story has been retold as a heroic saga, and (ideally) an irresistible draw for tourists. The turning point was the 1970 film The Molly Maguires, which laid the foundation for the emerging tourist sites at Eckley Miners’ Village, and in the community of Jim Thorpe. The county jail in which several Mollies were executed in 1877 was reopened as “The Old Jail Museum,” which attracted more than 25,000 visitors in its first two years of operation. By the 1990s, the Molly Maguire case had become the subject of regular historical re-enactments, initially by local lawyers and antiquarians, but in 1998, the city of Tamaqua dramatically re-enacted the executions as part of the region’s new annual “Molly Maguire Weekend.” The whole incident is now a lively presence on the Internet, with several major Websites geared for re-enactors and others, who seem as passionately concerned with this story as others are with the Civil War.

My paper describes the use of the Mollies within the larger context of the diverse strategies employed by the local heritage industry, stressing the rhetoric and historical analysis offered in the advertising materials for the recent tourist extravaganzas. I particularly emphasize the moral dilemmas involved in romanticizing what is in effect a story of terrorism and counter-subversion.

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The process of historical commemoration necessarily involves a good deal of selective amnesia, in which many unpleasant features are edited out. Only such a process can explain why the East End of London supports such an active tourist industry based on the memory of Jack the Ripper, while the Pennsylvania city of Johnstown so happily celebrates the memory of its great nineteenth century flood, in which two thousand residents perished. Distasteful as it may be to consider, I wonder if in 2045, Oklahoma City will be re-enacting the terrifying bomb attack of 1995? If that seems improbable, or even disgusting, we might consider the example which I will be discussing today, namely how a story of terrorism, nocturnal assassination and brutal counter-insurgency has come to provide a key tourist attraction for an area of north-eastern Pennsylvania, which according to its promotional

literature even defines itself in terms of these grim events. In the anthracite country, the affair of the Molly Maguires had left enduring bitter memories and ethnic divisions, but from the 1970s onwards, the story was retold as a heroic saga, and (ideally) an irresistible draw for tourists. However incredible that would have appeared a century ago, cities like Jim Thorpe and many smaller communities in the old anthracite region of Pennsylvania have become the land of the Molly Maguires.

The Molly Maguires

Who were the Molly Maguires? After many years of scholarship, the question still arouses ferocious debate. What can be stated without controversy is that the story must be located in the explosive record of American industrial development in the nineteenth century. American industrial growth accelerated from about 1830, initially in the well-established sectors like textiles and iron. From the 1840s, the United States economy began the full exploitation of its vast mineral reserves. A new iron industry based on coke-smelting permitted the development of the magnificent anthracite coal reserves of Pennsylvania. New industrial towns were created to mine the coal, and wholly new cities emerged at Pennsylvania centers like Scranton, Carbondale and Wilkes-Barre, and a region which included the counties of Luzerne, Lackawanna, Schuylkill and Carbon became one of the most expansive and progressive industrial regions in the world. During the 1860s and 1870s, however, intense industrial violence occurred in the anthracite region. These events culminated in the mass arrests and executions of the alleged leaders of the “Molly Maguires”, supposedly a secret terrorist society organized among Irish miners. The name “Molly Maguire” first appears during the American civil war, as Irish miners struggled against the inequities of the draft system. There were endemic anti-draft riots in Luzerne, Carbon and Schuylkill counties, and Schuylkill county was occupied by federal troops ,for most of the war.

After 1865, labor violence was directed against exploitative or unjust employers, foremen and company officials. Among the most notorious incidents were the 1868 murder of Alexander Rae, who was killed on the road between Mount Carmel and the village of Centralia; and two attacks which both occurred in 1875, a year of intense labor strife. In the first of the 1875 assaults, terrorists at Tamaqua killed “Franklin B. Yost, a policeman, and a man who had served honorably in the civil war, and a most peaceful and worthy citizen.... Following closely upon the murder of Yost, there came in August, 1875, a Bloody Saturday, as it was called by the Mollys, when they killed on that one day, Thomas Guyther, a justice of the peace, at Gerardville, and, at Shenandoah, Gomer James... James was a desperado himself, having some time before, while drunk, shot down an Irishman named Cosgrove, and this offense the Mollys had sworn to avenge.” (Moffett 1894a). By the mid-1870s, the possessing classes of the coal country give the impression of living like colonists in a third world power on the verge of all-out revolution. Franklin B. Gowen of the Reading Railroad recalled the time “when men retired to their homes at eight or nine o'clock in the evening and no one ventured beyond the precincts of his own door; when every man engaged in any enterprise of magnitude, or connected with industrial pursuits' left his home in the morning with his hand upon his pistol, unknowing whether he would again return alive; when the very foundations of society were being overturned.” (quoted by Moffett 1894a). An 1876 account purported to tell of The Molly Maguires... The Most Noted Band Of Cut-Throats Of Modern Times, Giving Data Never Before Published, And Which Can Be Vouched For By Persons Who Have Belonged To The Organization. Full And Complete Description Of Events In The Early History Of The Blood-Stained Crew.

The investigation of the Molly Maguires was a remarkable story, involving as it did a long-term deep cover infiltration by the legendary Pinkertons detective James MacParlan, who claimed to have joined the group in 1873. Both the investigation and prosecution were overwhelmingly the work of private agencies run chiefly by the coal companies and by the goliath power of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was so heavily invested in the anthracite fields. Harold Aurand has written that “The Molly Maguire investigation and trials were one of the most astounding surrenders of sovereignty in American history. A private corporation initiated the investigation through a private detective agency. A private police force arrested the alleged defenders, and private attorneys for the coal companies prosecuted them. The state provided only the courtroom and the gallows.” (Quoted in Klein and Hoogenboom 326). Nineteen perished in all, including ten hanged on June 21, 1877, a date remembered as “Black Thursday.” Four died at Mauch Chunk, in the Carbon County prison, and six at Pottsville. “The result of the trials... was the complete extermination of the order of Molly Maguires.” (Moffett 1894a)

Debate about the nature of the Molly Maguires has continued since the 1870s, chiefly about whether such a society ever existed (Bloom 1999; Broehl 1964; Bimba 1932). For one school of thought, the Mollies were a very real grouping, which used as cover the respectable Irish Catholic organization known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians. This notion gains some credibility from the countless modern examples of terrorist groups operating behind such safe fronts: the counter-subversion literature even offers a specific name for this practice, namely “insulation”. The virtues of insulation are many: hiding behind a legal group offers an alibi for travel or communication, while the authorities run the risk that in striking at the above-ground group, they will attack and thus alienate many law-abiding citizens, without necessarily catching terrorists. Behind this shield, an authentic secret society undertook the violence that was a desperate necessity given the total official and legal hostility to labor organization that was so characteristic of America and particularly Pennsylvania in the Gilded Age. The numbers involved are uncertain, but contemporary writers spoke of a secret army thousands strong: “there were not really more than three or four thousand active members of the organization, whereas it had been reported through the State that there were ten times that many.” (Moffett 1894a). Even so, three or four thousand armed terrorists would have made for a potent social and political threat, particularly when organized as a parallel terrorist government through an “invisible empire” spanning the hard coal country

Critics of the official position deny, however, that the Molly Maguires ever existed as a genuine phenomenon, or that any of the individuals accused had anything to do with organized violence or terrorism (McCarthy 1969). In this view, the prosecutions were wholly discredited by the total control exercised by corporate interests in the investigation, and the whole affair must be seen as a manifestation of anti-immigrant prejudice and anti-Irish stereotyping. The lead villain was Asa Packer, founder of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, and a deadly enemy of organized labor (<http://www.tnonline.com/coalcracker/mollies.html>) The prosecution was a race war as much as a class struggle, and the executions should be contextualized alongside the lynchings which were so prevalent in the American south a few years afterwards. It is also likely that detective MacParlan served as a provocateur, inciting some of the worst acts for which his agency would take credit for solving. This radical perspective was certainly taken by some writers at the time, and it endured in the work of socialist and communist writers over the next century. In 1878, for instance, Ezra Heywood contextualized the Mollies with other contemporary struggles in a work entitled The Great Strike, Its Relations To Labor, Property, And Government, Suggested By The Memorable

Events Which, Originating In The Tyrannous Extortion Of Railway Masters, And The Execution Of Eleven Labor Reformers, Called Mollie Maguires, June 21, 1877.

For present purposes, the actual guilt or innocence of the accused matters little, though it should be said that recent scholarship has tended to vindicate the idea that a society existed, even if not closely integrated with organized labor structures. The more one observes conditions in nineteenth century Ireland, the more plausible it seems that an underground group might have existed on these lines, bound by secret oaths: terrorist societies of this kind had flourished in Ireland since the mid-eighteenth century. On the other side, the impeccably thorough examination by Kevin Kenny has shown how the sloppy use of the term tended to denigrate all Irish immigrants: "Molly Maguire was expanded from a shorthand term for Irish laziness, violence, and depravity, to a general label covering all forms of labor activism" (p. 286).

For present purposes though, what matters is the reputation left by the Mollies, which was exceedingly unfavorable. This was inevitable, since the main early commentator on the affair was none other than Allen Pinkerton, in his The Molly Maguires and the detectives (1877) and Pinkerton sources were widely used by other journalists. In 1894, notoriously, McClure's magazine published a commemorative article by Cleveland Moffett, who would write several other Pinkerton-biased works (Moffett 1894b, 1897). Moffett saw the affair in strictly black and white terms. Indeed, the article opens with the stark words, "Some twenty years ago five counties in eastern Pennsylvania were dominated, terrorized, by a secret organization, thousands strong, whose special purpose was to rob, burn, pillage, and kill. ... these banded outlaws, the merciless Molly Maguires... the murderers and ruffians who polluted with their crimes this fair treasure garden of a great State... They committed murders by the score, stupidly, brutally, as a driven ox turns to left or right at the word of command, without knowing why, and without caring. The men who decreed these monstrous crimes did so for the most trivial reasons - a reduction in wages, a personal dislike, some imagined grievance of a friend. These were sufficient to call forth an order to burn a house where women and children were sleeping, to shoot down in cold blood an employer or fellow workman, to lie in wait for an officer of the law and club him to death." (Moffett 1894a; In the context of the late nineteenth century, of course, a "reduction of wages" was scarcely a trivial provocation, as such an action might make the difference between survival and ruin for many a laboring family). Countering these egregious villains is MacParlan, who is presented as a brilliant master sleuth. The Pinkerton-based approach focusing on MacParlan is very much that employed in Conan Doyle's The Valley of Fear (1915), by common consent the worst of the Sherlock Holmes novels, and a pale imitation of his other work using an American secret society theme, A Study in Scarlet. Nevertheless, Valley of Fear served to present the Molly Maguire demonology to a worldwide audience.

Towards Tourism

Nevertheless, despite the very grim memories of the Molly Maguire affair, the whole story has in recent years been incorporated in the heritage industry of north-eastern Pennsylvania, in a way which draws more on the radical interpretation of the movement. To understand this, we need to appreciate the economic context of the anthracite country during the twentieth century, and specifically the ruinous decline of the hard coal industry, which had reached its height about the time of the first world war. From about 1920, decline was precipitous as industry and transportation shifted from coal to oil. The coal industry was in critical difficulties by the early 1960s, when it was hit hard by new federal measures, including new clean air legislation, and laws demanding higher health and safety standard: all these measures raised production costs. Pennsylvania produced over a hundred million tons

of anthracite in 1917, as compared with barely three million annually by the 1990s. Taking anthracite and bituminous coal together, the number of miners in the state fell from 375,000 in 1914 to 52,000 in 1960, and to only 25,000 by the early 1990s. The social consequences were calamitous, as the hard coal region experienced permanent mass unemployment, urban decay, and serious depopulation. Between 1930 and 1990, the population of Scranton fell by 43 percent, that of Wilkes-Barre by 45 percent, while Hazleton's contracted by a third. Smaller mining communities likewise experienced near-collapse. As populations and employment fell, so a collapsing tax base ruined local government, leaving the anthracite region one of the grimmest corners of the rust belt. (Today, Pennsylvania stands second in the nation in the proportion of residents aged 65 or over (about 16 percent), and it has the second highest median age, exceeded only by Florida. The oldest populations, the highest median ages, are predictably found in the areas of most acute deindustrialization, especially in the anthracite country and the counties surrounding Pittsburgh. In addition to economic decline, the area felt some of the worst effects of ecological crisis. One memorable symbol of the disastrous by-products of industry was the mine-fire which began to rage underground in Centralia in 1962, and which may continue to burn for centuries to come, issuing smoke and sulfur dioxide into the surrounding atmosphere, and effectively killing the nearby town. Human beings had finally created a reasonable facsimile of hell.

Communities responded to the growing disasters as best they could. Some tried to develop new industries, particularly the garment production fleeing New York City, while some increasingly turned to tourism. One early such effort involved the town of Mauch Chunk, which in 1954 merged with the neighboring city of East Mauch Chunk, and made the odd if creative decision to name the united community after the legendary athlete Jim Thorpe who had died recently: Thorpe had no connection with the area, but his remains were brought from Oklahoma to Pennsylvania, and buried in a special mausoleum. The problem with the Jim Thorpe link was that it really had no local context, and indeed, Pennsylvania as a whole has very few Indian remains: the state's last reservation land was controversially flooded for a dam in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the idea of tourism in the state was scarcely a novelty, as the discovery of the Pennsylvania German country dated back to the beginning of the century, and the Amish continued to be big business; while Philadelphia had always treasured monuments like Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. The potential for tourist growth was all the greater given the easy proximity to the major population centers of the East Coast, and the development of the interstate highways.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the continuing collapse of traditional industries permitted a change of sensibilities, whereby people were for the first time prepared to be attracted by mines and mills which only a few years earlier they would probably have dismissed as rusting eyesores. Communities across the state tried to transform the detritus of the fading rustbelt society into commodified history for a newer post-industrial age. In Altoona, a town overwhelmed by industrial contraction, hopes were pinned on the continued popular fascination with the railroads, an interest that grew as rapidly as the actual possibility of riding on trains diminished. The area cultivated the spectacular Horsehoe Curve, while a Railroaders' Memorial Museum was available in the city itself.

The marketing of industrial history was at its most ambitious in the northeastern anthracite country, where there were much older precedents for a tourist trade, and a preexisting infrastructure. In Mauch Chunk, for instance, the area became a popular summer resort, bringing in thousands of people. During this time, in the late 1800's, Mauch Chunk was known as 'the Switzerland of America' and ranked second only to Niagara Falls as a honeymoon resort. Several presidents and many celebrities were among the many visitors,

and the town had as many as nine hotels at one point, with the Inn at Jim Thorpe and the Hotel Switzerland among the most prominent. One of the major attractions was the Switchback Railroad, which was converted to passenger use and provided a thrilling ride from Summit Hill to Jim Thorpe and back again using natural gravitational forces. It was considered one of the first roller coaster -style attractions. (compare Paul and Collier 1999)

These activities offered a foundation for the new tourist development in the radically changed and impoverished conditions of the mid-twentieth century, when former mining communities hoped to attract tourists from the flourishing destinations of the Poconos. By the 1990s, the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum offered tours of a coalmine which had closed for active operations in 1966: the tours were led by a former miner, a type which presumably will soon be viewed as an exotic species. Visitors could also take in the houses of the coalowners and industrialists, like the Asa Packer mansion in Jim Thorpe - you may recall that Packer was one of the villains of the Molly Maguire saga. The residences of both the very rich and the working class are included in tours without much sense of the gulfs which separated the two, divisions often marked by profound suspicion and hostility. In the Scranton area, industrial facilities now redefined as historic monuments included the city's old iron furnaces, and a collection of rail memorabilia gathered in a National Park advertised as Steamtown USA, which incidentally makes excellent use of an impressive old roundhouse. Collectively, these sites recalled what the tourist leaflets boasted as "Northeastern Pennsylvania's Industrial Golden Age." This "proud heritage" was evoked by "the heavy tools of an anthracite miner, railroad cars heaped with black diamonds, the humming textile mills, the patch homes of the miners and their families." Though it is in many ways a glorious story, a truly proud heritage, the epoch of Pennsylvania's industrial triumphs includes many moments of grief and horror, that can only be romanticized by generations for whom the industrial past has become an utterly foreign country, another world.

Packaging Molly Maguire

Prominent among these once-traumatic memories, which were now sanitized for mass consumption, were the Molly Maguires themselves, who in their time had been regarded as anything but picturesque. The turning point was the 1970 film The Molly Maguires, which starred Richard Harris and Sean Connery, in a treatment of the story which followed very closely the traditional Pinkerton interpretation, and which indeed departed little from the 1894 McClure's article. Harris plays MacParlan and Connery Jack Kehoe, who genuinely is the leader of a deadly terrorist society. One review comments that "The script is decidedly prejudiced in favor of Pinkerton and the owners of the mines. The awful plight of the miners at the time--having no job protection whatsoever, and wholly at the mercy of the owners--is given little attention. Instead, the miners are portrayed as savage, murderous, and unfeeling creatures, not worthy of empathy or understanding. "

(<http://tvguide.com/movies/database/>). Despite these failings, the film's appeal was obvious, starring as it did two of the most popular and attractive actors of the era. Equally important, its settings were stunningly authentic (the film earned an Oscar nomination for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration). The work was mainly filmed at Eckley Miners' Village, an old patch town of the sort once so common throughout the industrial regions, and which now became one of the state's major tourist attractions. Other scenes were filmed on location in eastern Pennsylvania in Llewelyn, Wilkes-Barre, and Bloomsburg. The courtroom scene itself took place in the courthouse at Jim Thorpe, an 1893 structure which stood on the site of the actual building from the time of the Mollies themselves.

The Molly Maguires also had a powerful ethnic appeal, as all the major characters were Irish or Irish-American, the only exceptions being the evil police officers, who are Welsh or English. The film appeared just as the Troubles were reigniting in Northern Ireland, and as Irish-Americans were rediscovering a powerfully political sense of ethnic identity. It was in the 1970s that Irish bars were likely to be the setting for fund-raising for the IRA and its front group. This was also the time of the revival of Celtic folk music, and The Molly Maguires made lively use of many traditional Irish songs. If ever a film latched on to exactly the right social and political trends, this was it.

The film brought the Molly Maguires decisively back into the public consciousness, and offered local communities a potential tourist draw far more plausible than Jim Thorpe, whose memory was already fading. The Mollies' popularity grew steadily from the 1970s onwards. In 1995, the county jail in Jim Thorpe which several Mollies were executed was closed and reopened as "The Old Jail Museum," marking a major upsurge in the process of commemoration, which attracted more than 25,000 visitors from over forty countries in its first two years of operation. (Heyer). The jail was even filmed as part of the PBS series The Irish in America, as a manifestation of the official intolerance encountered by the nineteenth century immigrants.

By the 1990s, the Molly Maguire case had become the subject of historical re-enactments, initially by local lawyers and antiquarians: in 1993, the Schuylkill County Bar Association and the County Historical Society reenacted the trial of John Kehoe. In 1998, the city of Tamaqua dramatically re-enacted the executions as part of the region's new "Molly Maguire Weekend." Based on these attractions, towns like Jim Thorpe acquired a substantial tourist sector, with numerous guest houses. The Molly Maguires became almost a symbol for the old anthracite country, a name conveying deep local color, nowhere more obviously than in Jim Thorpe's Molly Maguires Pub. Visitors to Schuylkill county can avail themselves of the Hatfield-based Molly Maguire Tours, which present "Tours of Schuylkill and Carbon counties emphasizing the Molly Maguire (19th century) story." A record of the emerging "ritual calendar" in Schuylkill county includes entries like the following:

"Well, a quick recap of summer and the things that went on around here recently.... I regret that most of the rest of the weekend I missed due in part to a role in the play Feast or Famine, written by noted playwright Genia Miller (Spirit of the Molly Maguires).... The play is hard-hitting, no dressing up the hard and cruel times that the Irish endured during the "Great Hunger," and it very well summed up the conditions leading up to and during the starvation of our ancestors 150 years ago. ... The Molly Maguire Weekend was also a successful venture again this year with an ever growing number of historians and descendants in attendance. During conversations with various individuals, a need to meet again before next year seemed appropriate. With that in mind, a get-together dubbed "The Gathering of the Minds" is set for mid-October at the Schuylkill County Council for the Arts, Pottsville. The purpose will be for individuals to sit in one room and discuss and exchange information on the Molly Maguire era." (Symons)

We note that it is both "the age of the Molly Maguires" and "Molly Maguire country".

And there are other manifestations of memory:

"During the local St. Patrick's Day parade each year, members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (an Irish fraternal organization) place a large, green-tinted chrysanthemum wreath bound with a black ribbon outside the main door of the Old Jail Museum to commemorate the men who were hanged there. The Mollies are remembered elsewhere in

the region. The Historical Society of Schuylkill County in Pottsville displays portions of the ropes used to hang the men, trial transcripts, and a revolver used by an adversary of the Mollies; and what was once the headquarters of alleged Molly boss Jack Kehoe in Girardville is now a bar run by Kehoe's great-grandson. To get a sense of the conditions the Mollies and their fellow miners experienced, visitors can stop by the No. 9 Mine "Wash Shanty" Anthracite Coal Mining Museum in Lansford and see a collection of mining memorabilia, while the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland offers tours of an anthracite mine." (Techky)

The Mollies could, it was hoped, be to north eastern Pennsylvania what the Amish were to the southeastern regions of the state. The analogy is, of course, intended to be inappropriate or even shocking, since the Amish (at least as popularly presented) epitomize rural simplicity and peasant spirituality, while even according to the most benevolent interpretation, the Molly Maguires were involved in savage violence. Moreover, the affair left bitter memories within the tight-knit communities affected, in which the descendants of the Mollies' victims will often have nothing to do with the families of alleged perpetrators, and the affair remains a source of religious and ethnic tension. Within the past year, a monument has been erected to a policeman who fell victim to the Mollies, the inscription reads "The historic looking marker will be engraved with "Benjamin Franklin Yost, Born May 24, 1841. Tamaqua Police Officer Assassinated July 6, 1875." The language suggests little sympathy for the emerging romanticization of the Irish movement.

Furthermore, the descendants of the Mollies themselves are dubious about aspects of the new tourist traffic. John Kehoe's great-grandson has recently complained that "They were going to re-enact hangings. How do you do that tastefully?" (Bulik) Another niggling issue is that this is above all a working class story, and Americans as a whole are uncomfortable with the whole concept of the working class, preferring as they do the media-induced image in which everyone represents different shades of an amorphous middle class: class, and class conflict, is seen as an alien Marxist concept. Moreover, this was a tale of the origins of labor unions, and unions were in deep disfavor by the 1990s. How then, could the Molly Maguire movement be packaged acceptably?

Discover the Enchantment!

To observe the solution to this dilemma, it is helpful to describe the town of Jim Thorpe itself, which has become one of the most successful tourist centers in the state. It has very much become the capital of Molly Maguire tourism, which is important in itself, since visitors are not seeing the authentic towns in which the Mollies lived and struggled, as these are still impoverished working class communities, generally characterized by a large population of the very elderly. To visit Jim Thorpe is chiefly to see the territory not of the miners but of the owners or, if you will, the oppressors, the center of administration, finance and service industries which lived off the surrounding coal country. Broadway, the principal street of Victorian Mauch Chunk, was home to several millionaires. It was not an area where Jack Kehoe or Yellow Jack Donohue would have felt vaguely comfortable in, or would have visited except in irons. Actually, the dichotomy is still more marked, since virtually all visitors to Jim Thorpe travel to the old elite center of Mauch Chunk, the "historic center", rather than the more working class section of East Mauch Chunk: they travel to the stone-built Victorian houses and offices, not the humbler frame-built homes straggling up the hillside across the river. Broadway is still today dominated by a plethora of law offices clustered around the Carbon County courthouse

So what do visitors go there to see? Though the town is a center of the Molly Maguire industry, this is tamed by being contextualized alongside other more familiar tourist facilities. The town is what brochures tend to describe as a “Victorian gem”, with elegant mid-nineteenth century architecture: this assemblage of fine buildings is of course an incidental effect of the collapse of the area’s economy during the twentieth century, since the town lacked the wealth to tear down older structures and replace them with modern streetscapes. “Victorian” in a tourist context has implications of top hats, hoop skirts, Dickensian Christmases and curiosity shops, aspects all obvious in the various seasonal celebrations of Jim Thorpe. A walk along the beautiful street known as Broadway and West Broadway exposes the visitor to what might be described as “a surfeit of quaint”. Businesses include the following: Rosemary Remembrances (Collectibles and Nostalgia); Joann’s Delicious Country Chocolates; the Stone Row Gallery; Selective Eye Gifts and Antiques; Natural Impressions; the Emporium of Curious Goods; Flights of Fancy; Anthracite Hobbies; Squegy’s Dermographic Art and Body Piercing; the Sequoyah House (Gourmet Cuisine); Dancing Leaf Gifts and Glass; and Chatelaine Handcrafted Jewelry; and Through the Looking Glass, a combination curio shop and cybercafe.

Complicating any sense of historical reconstruction still further, a number of the town’s most successful curio businesses cater to New Age and neo-pagan interests, for which these older facilities are felt to be most appropriate. Indeed, Jim Thorpe seems to have become a commercialized New Age center which seeks to emulate Salem. The Molly Maguires are thus placed in the context of a visitor experience which emphasizes the elegant and the artistic: as so often, this thoroughly depoliticized and non-controversial idealization is the heritage industry’s notion of American history. To quote some Internet promotional materials concerning the town,

“[T]here seems to be more to see and do in our little Victorian village than nearly any other place in Pennsylvania. From its earliest days as a "frontier" town in the first decades of the 1800's, Old Mauch Chunk, now called Jim Thorpe, has like a magnet drawn visitors from all walks of life. Artists. Writers. Enterprising entrepreneurs. Touring parties. Travelers. Visitors famous...and not so famous... have discovered the enchantment of Old Mauch Chunk. Today, Jim Thorpe is blossoming in a period of re-birth. With the beautiful old buildings, the narrow thoroughfares, and the picturesque mountain setting, it's no wonder the Swiss Tourist Board has dubbed Jim Thorpe ‘Americas Little Switzerland.’”

Among these attractions - preserving the order of the original text - we find:

“Carbon County Courthouse

Right below the Asa Packer mansion, the Carbon County Courthouse dominates the lower downtown area. The original courthouse was razed in 1893 for the present structure, built of native Rockport sandstone. ...The main courtroom was featured in the movie "The Molly Maguires."

Downtown Jim Thorpe

Walking north on Broadway, there are many quaint antique and specialty shops, ranging from Victorian antiques to the wares of Ireland. The Inn at Jim Thorpe boasts of President Theodore Roosevelt spending a night in its ornate rooms. There are several other fine restaurants all along Broadway as well, including the Black Bread Cafe, the Molly Maguire's, and Chunkers deli.

.....

Visit The Shops: with quaint antique shops, neat boutiques, jewelry and craft stores, you can shop till you drop. ... How about a Massage? After a rough day of riding or rafting, relax your overworked muscles with a professional deep muscle, Shiatsu or Swedish massage at The Healing Place... St. Mark's Church. Built into the hillside, the spectacular interior includes early Tiffany windows and original English Minton tile floor.. The Old Jail. Tour the famous Old Jail where the Molly Maguires were hung in 1877. See the mysterious hand print on the wall.”

Or, to quote the leaflet on Carbon County itself:
 “With its beautiful old buildings, the narrow thoroughfares, and the picturesque mountain setting, Jim Thorpe will make you feel as if you are back in time. Discover the Enchantment!”

The Old Jail

The actual contact with the Mollies here is largely confined to the prison, and thus only with the executions. This is important in removing the group from any actual crimes or activities with which they might have been connected. One does not generally travel to the site at Shenandoah, say, where Gomer James was murdered in 1875, or the road between Mount Carmel and Centralia, on which Alexander Rae perished some years previously. What is commemorated is not the activism of the Molly Maguires but their victimization, and that is the crucial distinction. All the emphasis is on the place of their deaths, their Calvary, perhaps, where innocents were martyred for their social activism and their persecuted ethnicity. People re-enact the trials and executions, not the midnight death-squads. The tours of the jail constantly stress - and exaggerate - the violence experienced by the Mollies and their Irish compatriots, never so much as referring to their crimes except as trumped up lies. While admitting that these mining communities suffered great injustices, some of the statements offered are simply ludicrous, for example, in claims that for a miner to buy elsewhere than the company store could lead to dismissal or death (my emphasis). In tour-guides' accounts of the executions, there is a gruesome emphasis on the long death agonies of the prisoners, supposedly eighteen minutes of strangulation in the case of one sufferer. While not much historical expertise can be expected of these guides, who are mainly local teenagers, their gothic accounts of the events will be what visitors will take away with them.

The victimization theme is underlined by perhaps the most famous single aspect of Jim Thorpe's Molly Maguire legend, the hand print already mentioned. Legend tells how Alexander Campbell, one of the convicted placed his hand on the prison wall in Cell 17, saying, "this mark of mine will remain as a sign of my innocence." A mark is still to this day pointed out as marking the place. This is common folklore theme, paralleled for example in the German castle of the Wartburg, at which Martin Luther supposedly threw an inkwell at the devil, and the spot likewise remains to this day. The difference at the Old Jail is that the handprint provides material proof of the innocence of the Mollies, and the falsity of the “Pinkerton model” of the case - the model presented in the 1970 film, without which the tourist industry would never have arisen. The handprint remains the primary tourist destination in the town, and serves as the standard logo for the whole tourist experience, rather like the Golem in Prague, or a Mountie at Niagara Falls. After all, a Victorian town needs Victorian ghosts, and supernatural elements often recur in tourist presentations. As one travel writer records, this is “an oddly Gothic pocket of America. Ten miles from the banks of the mournful Susquehanna, and still haunted by the ghosts of trapped miners and

the Irish Molly Maguires hung on "The Day of the Rope" in 1877." (Lyon). Predictably, the town of Jim Thorpe offers a popular Ghost Walk.

The commercialization of the execution site itself produces some of the most remarkable manifestations of "tourist quaint," items which are alternately moving, revolting, and hilarious. In the souvenir shop of the Old Jail, we find T-shirts proclaiming "I Spent Time at the Old Jail" and simply "The Old Jail, Jim Thorpe." This last naturally includes the handprint. You can also buy little scale wooden models of a guillotine and a gallows, coal sculpture and jewelry, or refrigerator magnets with the notice "No Irish Need Apply" and, of course, with the famous handprint. You can buy a chain with prison keys, a sheriff badge, Old Jail mugs, and mugs crying "Remember the Molly Maguires," or videos of the movie. Some of the oddest memorabilia are fairground toys and curios with hand themes, here appropriated to suggest the mystic handprint in Cell 17. You can buy a Groaning backscratcher, a disembodied hand on a long plastic rod ("Hear Me Groan!") or a toy which boasts, "Grow a Gruesome Severed Hand."

More seriously, the image of martyrdom is reinforced by the powerful Irish and Catholic symbolism accorded the site. This is suggested by a news story about a commemorative mass in the jail:

"On June 21, 1997, at the county prison ..., the four men were remembered in a Memorial Mass attended by 100 of their descendants and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America, Inc., Alex Campbell Mauch Chunk division, who sponsored the service. They called it "Day of the Rope." The Rev. John Hilferty, pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Jim Thorpe, celebrated the Mass at an altar set up in the exact spot where the gallows stood 120 years before. A Celtic cross was suspended over it from the second tier of cells. Claiming the men were 'unjustly accused and unlawfully condemned,' Hilferty compared the discrimination levied against the Irish immigrants to that which is in existence today against certain ethnic and racial groups..... 'Each time we hear (racial and ethnic slurs), an 'Irish need not apply' sign appears in the window,' said Hilferty. 'We need to speak out when injustice occurs and see all people created in God's image equally as His own.' Reading from a newspaper account of the execution, Hilferty said: 'Four men, shackled like wild animals, steel manacles on their hands and feet, were taken from their nearby prison cells and led to the gallows of death which had been erected on this very spot.' "

In 1998, the gallows on which the four men perished in June 1877 was recreated in situ, and now stands as a lasting memorial, marked by a green wreath.

A rich symbolism is at work here, as the rhetoric parallels the cross and the rope (and a Celtic cross, to boot). This kind of religious/ethnic parallel is a familiar component of Irish political speech, in which for instance the dominant event of twentieth century politics is the Easter Rising, and the martyrdom by firing squad of its leaders. As one Ulster Catholic recalled, the central message was that Christ had died for the human race, and that Padraic Pearse died for that portion of it that was Irish. Campbell, Yellow Jack Donohue, and the rest are contextualized together with Pearse and generations of other Irish martyrs, their class and ideological convictions made irrelevant by their primary ethnic identification.

It was inevitable that without an anthracite industry to depend upon, the old anthracite country would need some new sense of self-identity, especially one which could be marketed profitably, and "Molly Maguire country" has many attractions, or at least could have in theory. The image conveys drama, ethnic pride and self-assertion, resistance to

tyranny, and the struggle of the underdog for justice, the ideas of elementary social justice proposed by the priest holding the commemorative mass. In practice however, these moving aspects have largely been lost, merged into an ahistorical sense of hazy Victorianism, where the vital issues at stake have been submerged among ghost stories and romanticized tales of apolitical victims slaughtered by evil capitalists. Distressingly, too, visitors to “Molly Maguire country” stand a strong chance of leaving having seen only the houses of Asa Packer and the very rich, and imagining that this was in a sense the landscape of the Mollies. If there is a real Molly Maguire landscape, it is to be found in the decaying patch towns that they drive to on the way to the sumptuous glories of old Mauch Chunk. It is a sad irony.

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