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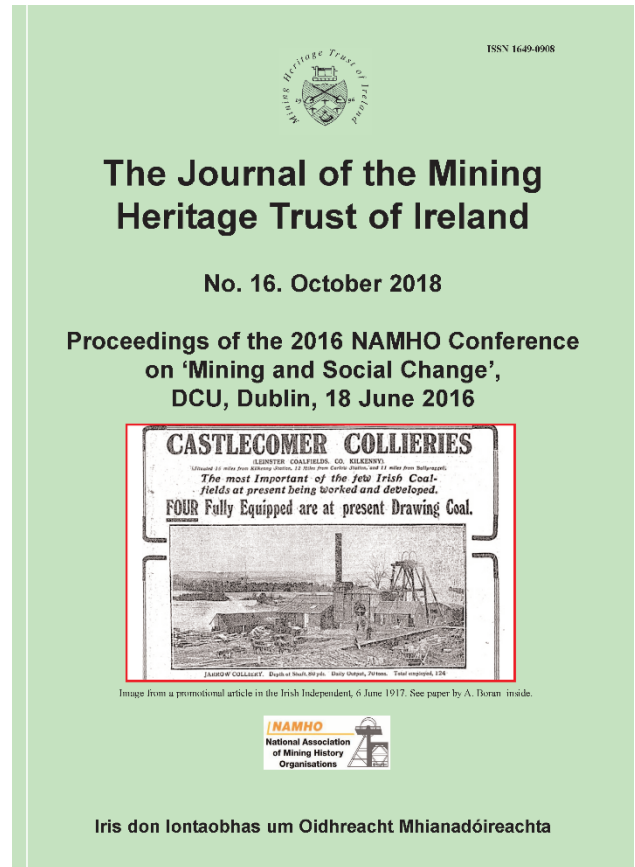
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'THE STRUGGLE YOU HAVE HERE IS THE SAME YOU KNEW IN IRELAND': BUTTE'S RISING DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by Alan J.M. Noonan

Abstract: The events of the Easter Rising of 1916 centre around the military struggle in Dublin and the executions of the rebel leaders. Over sixty-seven hundred kilometers away the large Irish-American population of Butte, Montana played its part in fundraising for the insurrection in the decades before. The seismic consequences of the Rising were intensely felt in Butte as the city convulsed with strikes protesting American support of the British and later entering the war. Divided loyalties between America and Ireland, the new and the old, fractured the Irish community in Butte and marked the end of the era of Irish domination in the copper-mining city. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 16, 2018 51-54.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of this centenary year there was a markedly mature reflection by Ireland as a whole of the Easter Rising. As the decade of centenaries continues, historians should continue to play their part in this process of remembering, especially those ties which are less obvious but important at the time. One such connection is between the events of the Easter Rising 1916 and the American mining city of Butte, Montana. This article represents a small effort to highlight the influence of the largely sidelined Irish-American community on what happened in Ireland in 1916, and likewise reveals how Butte, in turn, was greatly changed by what happened in Ireland and its consequences in the context of a neutral America and the overarching shadow of the First World War.

THE RICHEST HILL ON EARTH

For those less familiar with the legendary copper mines of Butte, Montana, the small mine camp became a mining city as demand for copper fed the electrification of the United States in the 1880s. Marcus Daly, born in County Cavan, had carefully cornered the richest copper properties on the so-called 'richest hill on earth' and within his new mining company he set a preferential tone for the hiring of other Irish. This policy contributed to Butte having a larger percent of Irish than any other major metropolitan region in America, Boston included.

Irish strength solidified into a union, the Butte Miners Union (BMU) with the Catholic Church, and into two fraternities, the respectable Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and the Robert Emmet Literary Association (RELA) which were a Clan na Gael front. In spite of Irish dominance two years before the First World War began, radical labour groups established a foothold in Butte ironically on the heels of a concerted effort to

destroy the base of their support, through the mass firing of 500 Finnish miners in 1912. Many of the men were members of the BMU and together they appealed to the union's committee (Emmons 1989, 268). The BMU looked ready to stand with the Finns but one member managed to get the motion to strike put to a ballot of all members and Irish dominated membership refused to jeopardize their employment to support the Finns or their radical element.

The Bishop of Montana, John Carroll, and national chaplain of the AOH, thanked the miners for "voting them down" and called the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) 'a purely socialistic organization' (Emmons 1989, 268) The ACM now established a rustling card system through the BMU, purportedly to limit infiltration by subversives, however by 1914 the Anaconda Mining Company (ACM) was using the system to lower wages and blacklist workers (Emmons 1989, 269). The ties that bound company to union to community sundered spectacularly when the main union office of the BMU was demolished by a progressive branch of the union who soon after established the inconsequential Butte Mine Workers Union (Emmons 1989, 278).

As the First World War began, the old order continued to waver towards irrelevance. Many Irish-American nationalists supported Germany as a means of helping Irish independence, as did nationalists in Ireland (Emmons 1989, 341).¹ In Butte this support translated into an alliance with the German and Austrian community exemplified in the 1915 St. Patrick's Day parade when thousands of German and Austrians joined the procession. The *Anaconda Standard* reported that it might mark the first time in the history of the world that the German, Irish, and American flags were all carried in the Irish parade (Emmons 1989, 348).

¹ For example Roger Casement's efforts in Germany to form an Irish brigade and the reference to "our gallant allies in Europe" in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916. See Noonan 2013, pp. 68-9.

For the Irish this was not solely an expression of nationalist hope that German victory over Britain might lead to Irish independence, the symbolism was directed at the local crowds watching the parade and emphasized the importance of recent changes in the ethnic make-up of Butte. Irish loyalty and friendship towards these other groups presupposed the continuation of Irish dominance in Butte and forestalled German and Austrian attempts to challenge the established order. As Father Brosnan wrote to his father, the Irish were "beginning to get beat on account of... Austrians... Germans and Dagos," and so made a strategic alliance.² The ethnic-alliance might have succeeded, had the Easter Rising in Ireland not preceded American entry into the war. These two events forced a decisive declaration of patriotism from Irish-Americans and undermined commitment to its dual identity.³

Between the two events the famed Irish labour leader James Larkin visited Butte and these episodes exposed the deeper internal divisions in the Irish community. The Dublin Lockout two years previous garnered the Irish labour leader international recognition and in late 1914 "Big Jim" travelled to the US to collect funds for the rapidly expanding worker's militia the Irish Citizen Army (Noonan 2013, pp. 57-73). The dominant Irish-American establishment feared Larkin's incendiary presence during his first visit to Butte in September 1915 when the acting mayor Michael Daniel O'Connell withdrew permission for Larkin to speak at the city auditorium at the last minute. The Finnish Workers' Club offered to host him and an angry Larkin told the assembled crowd, "I love my native land and I love my race, but when I see some of the Irish politicians and place hunters you have in Butte, my face crimson with shame, and I am glad they did not remain in Ireland" (*Montana Socialist*, 9 October 1915).

Larkin visited Butte again in June 1916 and his focus was on the recent Easter Rising in Dublin. In fierce language he reminded the largely Irish crowd that the rebellion was "a working-class rising to keep Irish boys out of the British army," and drawing closer comparisons he said "you forget that the struggle you have here is the same you knew in Ireland - The struggle against economic and political tyranny" (*Montana Socialist*, 22 July 1916). Larkin's authority on these matters was unquestionable because of the Lockout. The men were well aware that if Larkin had been in Ireland during the Rising he would have been executed alongside Connolly.

Larkin excoriated local nationalists as nothing more than "mercenary phrase mongers," using the cause of Irish freedom to help themselves. James Mulcahy, the editor of the *Butte Independent*, listening in the crowd finally stood up to protest this abuse and challenge Larkin. Larkin turned his fury on him

"Real Irish patriots would scorn to recognize the likes of you" silencing him instantly.⁴ Larkin warned the men not to listen to leaders urging caution, instead "be true to the spirit which inspires the rebellion in Ireland, you must do your own thinking and not delegate it to any judge, lawyer, editor or priest."⁵ He was appealing to the men's deep sense of cultural loyalty while simultaneously stripping local leaders of their own, adeptly undermining their legitimacy.

Larkin visited Butte once more in early 1917 and again he railed against the "parish pump form of patriotism" and those leaders who were little more than "malignant beasts in human form... gombeens in their relations with their fellow Irish, shoneens in their slavish servility" (*Montana Socialist*, 27 January 1917). Using the Irish words gombeen and shoneen added a deep cultural weight to his insults. A gombeen was an Irish person paid to do the dirty work of absentee landlords or the British government whereas a shoneen was an Irish person who adopted the customs, language and traditions of the oppressor. Economic traitors and cultural traitors, two sides of the same coin, being used in the copper-mining city five thousand miles from Ireland. He directly challenged the older, established Irish of Butte with radical statements. For younger Irish immigrants Butte no longer offered secure employment and they saw the RELA and the AOH, filled with an older generation, as relics of an earlier age. Forced to be mobile, their radicalism reflected their economic desperation.

Before this final visit the Pearse-Connolly Irish Independence Club in Butte was established and it represented the ripples of the Easter Rising pushing outward from Ireland throughout the Irish community worldwide. The organisation's dual purpose was to tie the cause of labour with that of Irish independence and to reclaim Connolly as a socialist hero, rather than a purely nationalist one, a development that infuriated Larkin. The AOH lamely protested that there were too many Irish organizations in Butte. By the time St. Patrick's Day came, the AOH, the traditional organiser of the parade, had to abdicate its leadership of the event to the Pearse-Connolly's, ostensibly out of fear that the high tensions would lead to a riot. Instead they simply replied to inquiries that "we are going to mass" (Emmons 1989, p. 359). Acting for the establishment Mayor Charles Lane refused the Pearse-Connolly club the permit for the parade, but in spite of him calling it "an IWW affair" it went ahead (Emmons 1989, p. 360).

The strength of Butte's nationalist and socialist sympathies is illuminated by the unusual presence of a priest named Father Hannan as one of the founders of the Pearse-Connolly Club. He also allowed the group to hold meetings in his church (Emmons 1989, p. 376).⁶ Not all of the Irish-American clergy in Montana

² Brosnan to his father, 18 February 1917. Brosnan letters. Private letter collection of Professor Kerby Miller, used here with permission.

³ Although the war posed serious questions about Irish-American identity and loyalty, it would largely survive; unlike German-American identity. The cultural fugue that occurred during the First World War was completed by the end of the Second World War.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Emmons offered an educated guess at the people Larkin was referring to; Judge/Jeremiah J. Lynch, lawyer/Walter Breen, editor/James B. Mulcahy, and priest/Rev. Michael Hannan. In the case of priest Emmons is almost certainly wrong to think it was the revolutionary and socialist sympathizer Hannan. More likely it was a reference to clergy in general who were, on the whole, opposed to both nationalist and socialist organizations. If it was a reference to a local prelate than it may have been a reference to Bishop John Carroll.

⁶ Liam Mellows described him as a "tower of strength to the movement."

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were as sympathetic to labour organizations as Hannan. The fact that the Pearse-Connolly Club, the MMWU, the IWW and the Finnish Workers Club all shared the same address at 318 North Wyoming, Finlander Hall speaks volumes about how close the groups were as well as the widening rift within the Irish community between the established, more conservative leadership and newer Irish workers lower down on the social ladder (Emmons 1989, p. 364-5). The presence of a priest in the Pearse-Connolly Club certainly helped weaken criticisms of the groups on any spiritual front.

By April 1917 the BMU was no more, and instead Irish and Finnish workers found themselves protesting company treatment and American entry into the war. On 5 June several Pearse-Connolly members helped found the Mine Metal Workers Union [MMWU]. These men saw more in common with their fellow Finnish workers than their compatriots. On 8 June the Speculator Mine disaster resulted in the deaths of 165 men. The MMWU led the workers out on strike from 11 June until 28 December of that year. The United States had officially joined the war but because of the strike, production of copper virtually ceased. As one company official told the Montana Chamber of Commerce "the Kaiser had found one of his most effective allies' in the IWW and the Pearse-Connolly Club" (Emmons 1989, p. 365). Certainly a hatred for Britain was shared in both Butte and in Ireland, but the more complex building of unrest and curious shape of alliances make it a more complicated story than that alone.

This was further seen with the lynching of IWW organizer Frank Little in the early hours of the 1 August. Armed gunmen, posing as police, beat and dragged Little from his boarding-house room into a car and then hanged him on a railroad trestle with a note pinned to his underwear. It read "Others Take Notice. First and Last Warning. 3-7-77" followed by the initials of labour leaders in the town. In the nineteenth century the Vigilantes in Montana used these numbers to identify their murders (*New York Times*, 2 August 1917).⁷ Little's funeral was one of the largest Butte had ever seen and a thousand members of the Pearse-Connolly Club with their bright green sashes marched second in the procession only to the IWW itself (*Anaconda Standard*, 6 August 1917).

Rumours circulated as to who was responsible for the lynching. The perpetrators were never caught but two theories are worth mentioning. The note points to a reformed Vigilante Committee, popular in the 1870s and 1880. Little certainly made inflammatory comments attacking the government, capitalists, and serving soldiers, whom he called "uniformed federal thugs" (*Butte Daily Post*, 28 July 1917, *Butte Miner*, 20 July 1917). Locals believed that company thugs carried out the lynching in hopes that Little's death would incite the workers to violence whereupon the federal troops stationed nearby would be called into action to suppress the strike (Roscoe 1973, 37). Copper, a wartime commodity had greatly increased in value and the company was losing money every day the mines stayed closed so, out of desperation, the company might have tried such a tactic. The federal troops were deployed, and machine

guns positioned on the streets of Butte, but they withheld from acting as strikebreakers in the disputes that rocked the city.

Wherever responsibility lay it was obvious that the unity of the Irish-American world in Butte was shattered by the Easter Rising and the entry of the United States into the war, and these events drove a deep wedge between the hyphenated identity. Yet these events only provoked a confrontation that was already bubbling under the surface between workers and management, between the company upon which the town depended for its prosperity and the workers who were dying in their hundreds for their pay.

John D. Ryan, who became president of the company after Daly's death, and Cornelius "Con" Kelley his vice-president, seemed like the ideal candidates to perpetuate the Daly machine. Both were Irish-American, both had intimate ties to the local community, and both experienced businessmen. However the Anaconda Copper Mining Company under the rule of John D. Ryan was not the outfit it once was under Marcus Daly. The two men focused entirely on the pursuit of profits and wilfully neglected the structures that had made Butte the most Irish city in America. In hindsight, the foundation for the violent eruptions during the First World War had been laid during the preceding decade.

Employment for the Irish became a less than certain affair, one disbelieving report stated "Hibernians got discharged to make a place for members of the compass and square [Masons] and other organizations" (AOH Minutes Book, Division III, 16 July 1906, 216. *Butte Irish Collection*, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula [hereafter listed as Irish collection]). The AOH reacted as it traditionally did, by sending influential local figures to speak with the boss man, Ryan, but this had little effect (Emmon 1989, p. 243). In 1910 they sent another group to Ryan regarding the "employment of our members," i.e. Irishmen, and the AOH records detail that they received a "very chilly reception, thanking this committee for calling upon him" (AOH Minutes Book, Division III, 10 January 1910, p. 448. *Irish Collection*). The confused AOH should have seen this as a sign of things to come. One AOH member noted perhaps it was "not wise any more to be too Irish" (AOH Minutes Book, Division III, 30 November 1908, p. 373. *Irish Collection*).⁸

With the passing of the Sedition Act in 1918 that sentiment became even more obvious and the *Anaconda Standard* published its opinion, without sarcasm, that there were two kinds of people, those afforded rights and those who had no rights. "There is no longer freedom of speech for the disloyal or the pro-German. A man can talk all he pleases if he talks right. The loyal people of this country have and will have all the freedom of speech they want" (*Anaconda Standard*, 28 May 1918). It was a remarkable shift for a paper established by Daly in 1889 to give voice to the Irish Catholic bloc of the Democratic Party in Montana (Swibold 2006, 26-9).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the number is on the badges of the Montana state troopers to this day.

⁸ Father Hannan strongly disagreed stating "his ideal Irishman was the noblest type of manhood and hence the best American."

The older generation heaped scorn on the younger generation "their ideas drifted to pugefights [boxing], dogfights and brutality and not much above animal nature...houses of ill- fame had more attention for some of them than a Div. of the AOH" (AOH Minutes Book, Division III, 6 July 1908, p. 353. Irish Collection). Father Moran stood up for the younger generation and suggested that they provide dances, music or some form of entertainment to keep the young from "bad influences" and "not peddle so much hot air" (ibid.). Their effort to maintain respectability trapped them in an unwillingness to adapt any policy more radical than speaking to the owner of the company, and their preoccupation with attendance and issue of numbers only further highlighted how ineffective they had become.

Strikes and unrest continued in Butte after the war and in 1919 one military officer observed the leaders were "Finnlanders, Sinn Feiners, and members of the Pearse-Connolly Club and IWW" and suggested the situation could only be solved by the prompt deportation of undesirable aliens, mostly Finns and Irish" (Emmons 1989, 398). This was not a new departure, instead it represented a longer and older nativist current that traced its way through the history of the American West.

Butte would dramatically change in the years following the war, and the Irish-American community would evolve too. These changes were heavily influenced by the events in Dublin in 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence and Civil War. In the years before the First World War, the miners' donations to Irish causes enabled rebels to "strike for freedom" Easter week.

These same Irish miners could hardly have imagined that the same violent transformation would be visited on Butte during the First World War. Indeed Butte could be said to have witnessed its own Rising during the war, a struggle against an old order, and one in which the consequences would only become clear in the months and years that followed.

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