

Molly Maguires: history as it was — almost

One of the tragedies of North American history is that so much of the truth about the past struggles in this country has never been able to surface to a wide public. Labor history, we know, is virtually non-existent in public schools and there has been little interest in the academic community to research the strikingly similar parallels between past conflicts and those of today.

And if the history books have failed, what chance is there that the movie makers will succeed, especially at a time when there is an over-emphasis upon violence, physical encounters and shallow confrontations? The results may be entertaining and even moving, but does history still suffer in an effort which tells only part of the truth? The question is central to

the recently-released Hollywood film *The Molly Maguires*.

The film is excellent in many ways: it combines superb photography, exceptional acting by Sean Connery, Richard Harris and Samantha Eggar, a stress upon realism in both setting and time and a better than accurate respect for history. Most important, perhaps, is its relevance to the very real concerns toward rebellion and unrest present today. If nothing else, it should provide some lessons for a generation which has dismissed labor and its past as 'irrelevant.' Unfortunately, the abundance of dynamiting and sabotage, of gun-play and saloon fights (a five minute brawl tops all previous historic film battles, Paramount's hand-out tell us) serves to disarm further some apprehension which may be justified in the message, if any, which *The Mollies* will leave with the audience.

The historical background is the story of a purportedly secret society of miners that continued to struggle against the mine owners after the strike of 1875, when weekly wages were reduced by \$2 to \$8-10 for six days of 70 to 80 hours toil, an occupation described by one historian of that period as "little better than semi-slavery."

While no film director or script writer could be expected to stick to literal history, there is enough of the real story there to expect that some of the principals might have been mentioned. Easy enough to cast America's No. 1 labor spy, fink and informer, the infamous Pinkerton James McParlan (Harris). And no great challenge to portray the prototype of the dedicated, tough leader of the Mollies, Jack Kehoe (Connery), who indeed did hang by his neck until he was dead on June 21, 1877.

Reputable historians, however, have established that Kehoe and many of the nine fellow miners who went to the gallows that day were hung for little reason other than being militant strike leaders. The Mollies on film suggests that they were good but misguided men who resorted to violence and paid the

price for violence. And as with most celluloid history, seldom is the account wholly true. While it might be too much to expect that the names of the real villains might be mentioned — the Morgans, the Mellons, the Rockefellers who owned the mines, the railroads, the Iron & Coal Police, the public officials and the judges who kept the miners and their families in virtual serfdom a century ago — one of the leading actors in the real story of the Mollies is also absent.

History tells us that this man — whose whole life was the personification of the greed for power and money which characterized the Pennsylvania mine, mill and railroad owners of the 1870s — was as compelling, as dynamic and as dedicated as a McParlan or a Kehoe. He was Franklin B. Gowen, known as the King of the Reading Valley, as brutal and vindictive a labor-hating boss as has ever appeared to accumulate a fortune from the blood and sweat of unorganized working people.

Yet Gowen, head of the nation's first real coal trust, president of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad and undisputed czar of the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania, was literally chief of the industry's espionage system, the employer of the police who arrested the Mollies after their entrapment, the special prosecutor who presided at their trials and finally the satisfied spectator witnessing the execution of his labor antagonists.

A movie script writer would not need much imagination to portray that dubious accomplishment, but *The Mollie Maguires* fails the history test and leaves unanswered the gut question: why was it necessary for newly-arrived American citizens to be kept imprisoned in a system which was based on wretched working conditions, with overt and subtle violence perpetrated upon them whenever the cry for dignity became so strong that they were led to strike against it?

The movie account of the *Maguires* is a popular history version, and it is good only because



A pay line in the movie.

it tells part of a story that has gone untold for the better part of a century. In it are scenes which show that the unnamed Gowens, Morgans, Mellons and Rockefellers — the captains of industry and finance and latter-day philanthropists and patrons of the arts — were not above using the most brutal and criminal means to attain their ends (goons, spies, unlawful arrest, frame-ups and murder).

Others need no script to portray the hellish characteristics of the sunup-to-sundown ordeal in the pits; the pay lines with only a few cents for a week's labor after all the deductions were made; their homes, the company-owned shanties where wives and children existed in the bondage of all miners' families.

The entertainment industry has succeeded in making nice guys out of bank robbers, thieves, murderers and rapists, so it is not really too disturbing to see Richard Harris portray McParlan the stoolpigeon as a human being. The movie *Maguires* leaves McParlan as a tortured person but as a sympathetic law and order agent of the 1870s. How many who see this version will know that McParlan in real life was a man who boasted that he sent 19 miners to the gallows on manufactured Pinkerton evidence, and who continued his career as labor spy and fink in the 1890s, being the finger man in the attempt to railroad Western Federation of Miners leader William D. Haywood to jail on a murder charge?

If violence is apple pie-American then some consolation may be found in another unwritten great American tradition: that nobody likes a fink and a stool pigeon.

Clancey Sigel, a troubadour of the *Wobblies*, (Industrial workers of the world) recalled that his miner father always instructed him to consider carefully the social circumstances surrounding the action of Judas, "but that a man like McParlan was simply outside the human pale ... a case of almost pure evil." Scenes of child workers in the collieries, a memory of men living today, seem to make moot the reasons why the miners responded to repression and violence and hopelessness with self-defense and the strike.

The ironies of hard truth followed the movie *Mollie Maguires* to the set: one hundred years after this tale of repression and treachery, the studio found a small coal patch town in Pennsylvania to film on location: the company town with its rows of dismal shacks (only 86 live there today) turned out to be a real company town, owned along with the 8,000-acre coal field by one man. And Gulf-Western, the conglomerate of Paramount Studios, today is indirect employer of thousands of underground miners.

Frank Gowen, the King of the Reading Valley, would have understood. McParlan the all-time Fink, will have to make room, for there are still many professionals following his trade today. Kehoe and the Mollies can see the struggle continuing yet, though they may suffer the condemnations of superficial history. The *Mollie Maguires* is imperfect history, but it is the best so far in telling it like it was about America's untold story of labor.

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