

## **The Molly Maguires**

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### **The Molly Maguires**

"The Molly Maguires" or the "Mollies" is a term that is sometimes applied to the A.O.H. Invariably the epithet is used by those who have not the slightest idea of what they are talking about and it is used too suggest that there is something sinister or discreditable associated with the label of "Molly Maguires". We think differently, but so that you may judge for yourselves, we reprint from a 1909 Hibernian Journal the origin of the term "Molly Maguires".

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#### **A Tale of Antrim Life 100 Years Ago.**

Did Molly Maguire ever exist in the flesh, or was she sort of mythological fantasy of the type of 'Dark Rosaleen' or 'Kathleen Ni Houlihan' or the 'Shan Van Vocht'? Many years have rolled by and many changes have taken place in the conditions of rural life in Ireland since that far-off period when the name of "Molly Maguire" occupied anything approaching the notoriety which it held in the dark days of Ireland's history.

About a century ago there dwelt in County Antrim a Catholic peasant, his wife and children. The peasant tilled his plot of land and earned his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. The times in which he lived were dark and troubled, the neighbors around him were, for the most part, not his friends, nor were they his co-religionists. In all the dark annals of the country there was perhaps no period at which the outlook was more gloomy and more helpless for the Catholic Celt who tilled the soil. He had no hold upon the land – he was simply suffered to live. In his own life from day to day, he could well realize that Ireland had lost everything and gained nothing by the Act of Union. The new "United" Parliament of

Great Britain and Ireland assuredly was not the friend of the Irish peasant. Maguire and his neighbors were leaderless, friendless and desperate. Forbidden by law to practice his own religion, he and his wife and children heard Mass on the wild and barren hillside, or in some remote place away from ever prying eyes of the faces of 'law and order'.

And at the same time Maguire and his neighbors were preyed upon by an army of Tithe proctors. And not only so, but poor Maguire and his neighbors knew full well that the presence of Papists was regarded with disfavor amidst the hills and valleys of Antrim. Daily he witnessed the most heartless evictions. A peasant dies and instead of the tenancy passing to his son or his widow the weeping mourners were thrown upon the roadside ere the body of the dead had been long consigned to the earth and the alien planter was installed in the building.

Night had its terrors for the Catholic peasant of Ulster in those days – terrors which would baffle the powers of the most graphic pen to depict in all their gloomy horror. Under the cover of darkness bands of murderers went abroad and perpetrated without fear of punishment the most brutal outrages upon the unhappy Catholic serfs.

These bands called themselves by various fantastic names – 'Hearts of Oak', 'Hearts of Steel', 'Peep O' Day Boys' and the like. The counties of Armagh, Down and Fermanagh were overrun by these murderous ruffians. "From Scotland come many and England not a few", wrote an Ulster Protestant writer at an early date, "generally the scum of both nations who from death or brewaking, or fleeing from justice, or seeking shelter, come hither, hoping to be free of man's justice in a land where there was nothing, or but as little as yet, of the fear of God...On all hands Atheism increased, and disregard of God; iniquity abounded with contention, fighting, murder, adultery." Such was the class from which these bands of terrorists were recruited. At midnight they fired the thatch of the Catholic peasant's home, they slew the men, and they committed the most unspeakable outrage upon the women and children.

One concrete illustration will throw light upon their character. At Ballymacnab in County Armagh, a band surrounded at midnight the house in which dwelt an aged priest, his widowed sister and her child; they slew the venerable priest, murdered the poor lady, and when the light of morning broke over the desecrated Catholic home a young girl, bereft of her reasoning was the only survivor of the night.

Such was the times in which the poor Catholic peasant Maguire, lived and died amid the Glens of Anteim. When he was dead, his widow and her children were thrown upon the roadside, and the little holding in which the peasant had given his life-work was handled over by the landlord to a Scottish planter. The name of that widow, so the story goes, was Molly Maguire. Friendless now and homeless she was with her children round about her. The day for her was pregnant with unspeakable terrors; but there were men still left in Antrim – and who did not call themselves ‘Hearts of Oak’ or ‘Hearts of Steel’ but simply Irish Catholic peasants, with hearts big enough to think of other people’s troubles as well as there own. And there came a night soon after the widow’s eviction when the house were the Scottish planter now dwelt was surrounded by a band of men. And they broke into the planter’s house and when the planter challenged them who they were a man’s voice answered and said, "We are the friends of Molly Maguire". And they put the planter down on his knees and they made him swear that he would quit the little holding and he did quit in the morrow. And the widow got back her own, for no planter dared take the farm afterwards.

"Such briefly and disjointedly told, is the story of Molly Maguire – a page from the dark history of the Land War in Ireland. And if the name of the Widow Maguire is not to be found like that of Captain Boycott enshrined within the covers of an English Dictionary, the tale is one which like many another, can be told without bringing the blush of shame to the cheeks of a Catholic peasant or any genuine Irish Nationalist"

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