

historical remnants of the stockyards of the meat-packing industry, the Southside Community Arts Centre and several other significant places, including the scruffy building that was the notorious Mayor Richard Daley's political headquarters.

In the circumstances confronting American working-class people at the moment, the Association's objective of linking critical scholarship with social activism is commendable, and never more urgent. The organising committee, especially Jack Metzgar and Maria Doakes, deserve comradely congratulations. Had I the time and money, I'd attend next year's conference at SUNY Stony Brook on 'How Class Works'.

REMEMBERING HUGH MAHON

By Jeff Kildea*

Hugh Mahon is not exactly a household name in Australian political history. Among those who recognise the name, most know little more than that Mahon was the Labor member for Kalgoorlie who was expelled from the federal parliament, the only member of the House of Representatives to have suffered that ignominy.

That was in 1920 when a majority of members of the House approved an expulsion motion moved by Prime Minister Billy Hughes charging Mahon with 'conduct unfitting him to remain a member' by reason of 'seditious and disloyal utterances' he had made at a public meeting severely criticising British rule in Ireland. Yet Hugh Mahon deserves to be remembered for more than that singular act of unsolicited notoriety.

As a parliamentarian Mahon made a significant contribution to the fledgling nation. He was a member of the first Commonwealth parliament and an early and outspoken advocate of Aboriginal rights. He was Postmaster General in the first Labor government and a minister in three later Labor governments, serving as Minister for External Affairs during the first two years of the Great War, relinquishing his portfolio only after he stuck with Labor when the caucus split over conscription.

Outside parliament he also achieved notable success. In 1912 he founded the Catholic Church Property Insurance Co. (still in business as Catholic Church Insurances Limited) and was its first managing director until his death in 1931. Before that he had worked as a journalist and newspaper editor in Ireland and Australia, earning a reputation in the 1890s as the John Norton of Western Australia with his lurid exposés of political corruption in the west.

In Ireland, where he was born, he had been involved in the Irish National Land League and went to prison for his political activities, serving time in Kilmainham Gaol with Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. This article in *Recorder* will outline the life

and career of this remarkable but little-known Labor pioneer with the aim of enlarging the somewhat one-dimensional reputation which so far has been Mahon's historical legacy.

Early Life

Born in 1857 in Killurin, near Tullamore, County Offaly, Mahon learned early of the hardships of tenant farmers in Ireland. In 1867, when he was just ten years of age, his father, who rented a relatively large farm of almost 150 acres (60 hectares), fell into arrears and the family was forced to abandon the farm and emigrate to North America. From there the family crossed to New York, where Mahon learned the newspaper and printing trade. But that is not all he learned. New York in the 1870s was a hotbed of Fenianism and Mahon's compatriots would have schooled him well in the structural causes of his family's particular misfortune.

Murder and Mayhem

In 1880 Mahon returned to Ireland and immediately immersed himself in Irish nationalist politics. In 1879 the Irish National Land League had been established under an arrangement known as the 'New Departure'. It combined the mainstream nationalist political leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, the tenants' rights movement of Michael Davitt and the revolutionary fervour of John Devoy's Fenians.

As editor of *The Standard*, a newspaper in New Ross, County Wexford, Mahon was a strong supporter of the aims of the New Departure. But he was also an activist, involved in the social and economic ostracism of landlords known as 'boycotting'. Mahon used his press to print leaflets that were posted around New Ross warning people not to have anything to do with landlords whom the League deemed to be exploiters.

In August 1880 a despised landlord, Thomas Boyd, and his two sons were ambushed by three masked men near New Ross. Boyd survived but one of his sons, Charles, was shot dead. The police rounded up the usual suspects and charged two brothers Walter and John Phelan with murder.

Mahon knew Walter was innocent as he had interviewed him just before the shooting, so that Walter could not have reached the ambush scene in time to take part. For 12 months Mahon, through his newspaper, campaigned for the brothers' release, organising a legal defence fund and exposing government efforts to gain a conviction by intimidating witnesses. The brothers were acquitted.

When a branch of the Land League was established in New Ross, Mahon was instrumental in setting it up and served as assistant secretary and then secretary. However, in October 1881 the authorities cracked down and Mahon was arrested in a nationwide sweep of Land League agitators, including Parnell himself. Mahon served less than three months in prison, being released on health grounds due to tuberculosis. The

doctors advised him to emigrate to a warmer climate, but on his release Mahon returned to New Ross and his former activities. This led the police to threaten to rearrest him if he did not leave Ireland.

Exiled to the Colonies

* To preserve his liberty, Mahon set sail on 23 March 1882 aboard SS *Orient* bound for Melbourne. Disembarking on 5 May 1882, Mahon was met by fellow Irish émigré, JW Walshe, representative of the League in Australia. Although Mahon had been forced to leave his native land on short notice, the League took the opportunity to employ Mahon in advancing the cause among the Irish in Australia.

But the timing of Mahon's arrival was not auspicious. Within days of his landing newspapers throughout the colony were carrying the shocking news of the assassination in Phoenix Park, Dublin, of the Chief Secretary of Ireland Lord Frederick Cavendish and the Under-Secretary Thomas Henry Burke by a gang of Fenian extremists. Hostility to the Irish, never far from the surface in the Australian colonies, was inflamed by this outrage.

Nevertheless, Mahon travelled widely, addressing meetings on the situation in Ireland and raising funds to support the League's campaign. In February 1883 John Redmond (MP for New Ross) and his brother Willie arrived in Australia as part of fundraising tour of Australasia and America. Mahon, well known to Redmond, was Walshe's assistant in organising the Australian leg of the tour.

Journalism in Australia

As the Redmond brothers' tour of Australia wound down Mahon had to think of his future and so he turned to what he knew best, newspapers. He edited newspapers in Goulburn NSW, then worked for the *Daily Telegraph* as head of its parliamentary staff before acquiring the *Gosford Times*. In the meantime, he married Mary Alice L'Estrange, and later moved to Melbourne. They had four children.

Following the discovery of gold in Western Australia, Mahon left for the west in 1895, where he edited a newspaper at Menzies, 100 miles north of Coolgardie. Once established, Mary and the children joined him. Mahon later moved to Kalgoorlie as editor of the *Kalgoorlie Sun*, a salacious newspaper similar to John Norton's *Truth*, in which he regularly denounced the Forrest government for corrupt practices. Within a year the paper had defeated four libel actions. Mahon's notoriety as a fighting editor helped his election to the first Commonwealth parliament as the Labor member for Coolgardie.

Parliament and Ministry

Upon entry into parliament, Mahon gained a reputation for savage wit and bitter sarcasm. He advocated Aboriginal rights, calling for a royal commission into their treatment in WA. When Labor came to power in 1904, Chris Watson appointed

Mahon Postmaster General. He would later serve as Minister for Home Affairs in Andrew Fisher's 1908-1909 ministry and as Minister for External Affairs under Fisher and Billy Hughes from 1914 to 1916. He served in the parliament as member for Coolgardie and, after its abolition, Kalgoorlie until his expulsion in 1920, with two short periods out of office in 1913 and 1917.

Business

Apart from his newspaper interests, Mahon had invested in gold mining and insurance. In 1911 the Catholic bishops approached him to establish an insurance company to cover the church's buildings. In doing so he adopted a scheme that had operated in Ireland. The Catholic Church Property Insurance Co. opened for business on 1 January 1912 with Mahon as managing director, a position he held until his death in 1931.

Irish and Catholic

Despite his background, Mahon initially remained aloof from Irish nationalist affairs after the Redmond tour. However, in 1905 Willie Redmond requested him to shepherd through the House of Representatives a motion in support of Irish home rule. Thereafter he became increasingly identified as an advocate of Irish nationalism.

In 1907 Cardinal Moran invited him to deliver the St Patrick's Day address in Sydney. In 1909 he was a key player in the St Patrick's Day celebrations in Melbourne, addressed by the Governor General. In July 1910 he moved a resolution in the House requesting the new king George V to omit from the coronation oath references offensive to Catholics. Mahon's failure to win election to Fisher's 1910 ministry was widely regarded as the result of sectarian influences.

War and Conscription

In October 1915 Hughes succeeded Fisher as Prime Minister. Mahon had hoped to take over the Treasury portfolio which Fisher had held. However, he was passed over by Hughes. This embittered Mahon against his leader. The falling out would be cemented in 1916 when the party split over conscription.

Mahon was not opposed to the war – two of his sons enlisted, one receiving the Military Cross. Nor was he opposed in principle to conscription. He regarded it as undesirable but recognised the need for Australia to assist the war effort in whatever way was required. Hughes enlisted Mahon to persuade Archbishop Mannix not to oppose conscription. But when Mahon learned that Hughes was using sectarianism to bolster Protestant support, he refused to assist him further in the campaign. Ultimately, Mahon resigned from the government and remained in the caucus when Hughes walked out.

Expulsion

In May 1917 Mahon lost his seat, regaining it in December 1919. In the meantime events in Ireland were hotting up. Support for the home rule party had

* Subsequent research has established that Mahon set sail on 6 April 1882 on SS *Lusitania*, arriving in Melbourne on 22 May 1882.

collapsed and the Irish War of Independence had begun under the leadership of the more radical Sinn Féin.

In Australia the Irish Ireland League was established in September 1919 with Mahon as President. It supported the right of the Irish people to self-determination. With the introduction of the Black and Tans in March 1920 the war in Ireland escalated and sectarianism in Australia increased. On 25 October 1920 Terence MacSwiney, the Sinn Féin Mayor of Cork, died on hunger strike. His death created outrage in Ireland and around the world, including Australia.

As president of the Irish Ireland League, and in the absence of Mannix who was overseas, Mahon was prominent in the protests. On 7 November he addressed a rally at Richmond Reserve, castigating British rule in Ireland and claiming that the sobs of MacSwiney's widow would one day shake the foundations of this 'bloody and accursed Empire'.

To Empire loyalists of British Protestant stock this was too much and they made known their displeasure to the government. On 9 November the matter was discussed in cabinet. On 11 November Hughes moved his motion to expel Mahon from the parliament. The motion was carried 34 to 17 along party lines. At the ensuing by-election Mahon was defeated following a campaign in which loyalty to the Empire, so recently defended with the loss of 60,000 Australian lives, was a major issue.

Final Years

For the third time, Mahon was out of parliament. He turned to his business pursuits to sustain him and his family. In December 1921 he sailed to Europe for the Irish Race Convention in Paris. However, struck down by illness he missed the conference. After recovering he went to Rome and had an audience with the pope before visiting Ireland. On returning to Australia in June 1922 he expected to be appointed Consul General for Ireland, but the Civil War put an end to that.

In August 1931, while in Sydney for a meeting of the board of the Catholic Property Insurance Co, he fell ill and on his return to Melbourne succumbed to the lung disease that had plagued him all his life. He died on 28 August 1931 and is buried in Box Hill cemetery.

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WE BUILT THIS COUNTRY

WE
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COUNTRY

IRISH LABOURERS
AND THEIR UNIONS

Humphrey McQueen

Humphrey McQueen's much-anticipated book, *We Built this Country: Builders' Labourers and Their Unions*, published by Ginninderra Press is now available. The book tells the story of the 'improvising nomads' and their influence on Australian life and character. A review will appear in the next *Recorder*.

A DEDICATED LIFE

Jack McPhillips, Trade Unionism and the 1940s

By Annette Salt

Leslie John (Jack) McPhillips was a controversial player in Australian labour history. He was a political activist and trade unionist from his youth, a member of the ALP and then an active member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). He was involved in its various divisions, becoming President of the Socialist Party of Australia.

I conducted interviews with him over approximately 20 years and, in the resulting manuscript, maintained Jack's voice – edited, but with his approval. The great advantage in using the interviewee's voice is that the language used gives insight into the source. Jack's language fortunately reflected a number of things, including the nature of the man.

Using such material as an historical source has problems – memory and vested interest to name two. As a type of narrative, it is unavoidably subjective – one person's recollection of his/her role in, and contribution to, events through which he/she has lived. But it is the story from the inside, told by someone who was intimately involved with the events. It provides valuable personal insight of the participant in history.



Jack McPhillips, at age 33, then National Secretary of the FIA. (Photo courtesy of the author).