

Hugh Mahon of 'Benburb', Ringwood*

Introduction

I would like to thank the Ringwood & District Historical Society and, in particular, its president Russ Haines for inviting me to speak to you tonight on a subject that has occupied much of my time over the past ten years or so, in writing a biography of Hugh Mahon, arguably Ringwood's most controversial resident.

Let me say at the outset that the reception I have received from the people of Ringwood has been warm and generous – quite a contrast to that which Mahon received just over one hundred years ago when a public meeting on 24 November 1920 at the Ringwood Mechanics' Hall resolved that: 'Ringwood would be well served if he could make it convenient to reside elsewhere'.

Tonight, I want to explore what it was that led the good people of Ringwood in 1920 to urge Mahon, albeit it with polite prolixity, to bugger off.

Background

The Ringwood public meeting had been convened by the president of the local shire council, Cr J. McGhee, at the request of the Ringwood branch of the Returned Soldiers' League in order to discuss a resolution passed by the league a fortnight before in connection with the reported statements of Hugh Mahon regarding the British Empire. The RSL's resolution was in these terms:

This meeting of returned soldiers views with disgust the disloyal statements made by Mr H. Mahon M.P. as reported in the press, and his treachery in disregarding his sworn allegiance to the King, and that it is the desire of the Ringwood branch of the Returned Soldiers' League that a public meeting be called to discuss the undesirability and danger of having such a disloyal man residing in Ringwood.

The public meeting was duly called and, in addition to its blunt message to Hugh Mahon, it resolved:

We, residents of Ringwood, in public meeting assembled, affirm our loyalty to our king and empire, and express our abhorrence of the reported disloyal utterances of the ex-member for Kalgoorlie, who resides in our district.

To understand what this was all about, we need to appreciate that Australia in 1920 was a very different place to Australia today. In today's multicultural society there is much ethnic and religious diversity. Back then European Australians were almost exclusively of British or Irish heritage, in the proportion of about three quarters to one quarter. Of the Irish, about 85 per cent were Catholics, while the British were almost exclusively Protestants. As a result, there emerged a perception in Australia that to be Irish was to be Catholic and to be Catholic was to be Irish.

As a consequence, the ethno-religious rivalry between Catholic Ireland and Protestant Britain, which had existed for centuries, had found its way from the old world to the new. For the most part it simmered below the surface. But every now and then it would bubble up and boil over, sometimes around 12 July, as in Melbourne in 1846 when shots were fired, or on St Patrick's Day, as in Sydney in 1878 when rioting broke out. But the conflict was mostly rhetorical, erupting particularly when the Irish in Ireland stepped up their campaign

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for self-government, such as during the debates over home rule and land reform in the 1880s, following the Easter rising of 1916, and during the Irish War of Independence from 1919 to 1921. Debates about Ireland often became entangled with local issues such as the Catholic campaign for state aid for its schools.

The year we are talking about, 1920, was undoubtedly the worst year of Australia's sectarian conflict. It coincided with the worst year of violence of the Irish War of Independence, following the British government's introduction of the Black and Tans in a desperate attempt to break the back of the Irish Republican Army. In Australia in 1920, the British Protestant majority and the Irish Catholic minority increasingly defined their relative positions by reference to the struggle in Ireland. Lurid newspaper reports of atrocities committed by the Crown forces or by the IRA were seized upon by local sectarian combatants as confirmation of the evil inherent in the other. The worsening situation in Ireland combined with a series of local events led to what the New South Wales Attorney-General, Edward McTiernan, described as "a veritable hurricane of sectarian strife".

It is against this background that we now turn to consider what it was that so upset the residents of Ringwood.

Mahon's Richmond Reserve Speech

The furore arose from a speech Mahon had made at a public meeting in Melbourne's Richmond Reserve on 7 November 1920 to protest the death of an Irish hunger striker, Terence MacSwiney, the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Cork. MacSwiney's hunger strike had lasted 74 days before he eventually died on 25 October 1920. All the while his slow agonising death was reported in the press around the world.

In Australia, as in many other countries, the death of MacSwiney prompted outpourings of grief and outrage by members of the Irish family abroad. In Australia's federal parliament, Hugh Mahon, the Labor member for Kalgoorlie, sought to have the House of Representatives debate MacSwiney's death as a matter of urgent public importance.

In moving his motion, Mahon became emotional, referring to "the Thugs" who gaoled MacSwiney and comparing the British government to Russia under the Czars and to "some of the cut-throat clubs of the French Revolution". When he described the police in Ireland as "agents provocateurs of a foreign Government", members on the government benches accused Mahon of disloyalty. Prime Minister Hughes alleged Mahon was using MacSwiney's death as a peg on which to hang his diatribe against England. Debate on the motion was abruptly ended when a government member moved that the question be put, and Mahon's motion was defeated.

At the Richmond Reserve meeting two days later, Mahon, unencumbered by parliamentary procedures, gave full vent to his anger at Britain's treatment of MacSwiney and of Ireland generally. The next day the *Argus* newspaper gave a short summary of Mahon's speech in which he was quoted as saying:

Never in Russia under the worst rule of the Czars had there been such an infamous murder as that of the late Alderman McSwiney. They were told in the papers that Alderman McSwiney's poor widow sobbed over his coffin. If there was a just God in heaven that sob would reach round the world, and one day would shake the foundations of this bloody and accursed Empire.

Mahon had made his speech just four days before the second anniversary of the armistice that had brought an end to the war in which 60,000 Australians had died fighting for 'this bloody and accursed empire'.

Public reaction was swift and brutal. Protestant, loyalist and ex-service organisations flooded the government with telegrams, letters, and personal representations demanding Mahon's removal from parliament.

Newspaper editorials followed suit. The *Argus* declared, 'By his statements Mr. Mahon had done treason to Australia and had insulted and humiliated the overwhelming bulk of his fellow citizens.' The *Sydney Morning Herald* complained that Mahon had 'uttered the most vulgar diatribes on the Empire of which this country is a part.' The *Age* agreed, arguing that 'the government will be compelled to take further action, and in doing so it will merit approval.'

Hughes readily obliged by moving Mahon's expulsion in parliament. Let me paint the picture, as I describe it in the Mahon biography:

It was just after 2.40 on the afternoon of Thursday 11 November 1920 when Prime Minister Billy Hughes approached the despatch box of the House of Representatives in the parliament building in Melbourne. He cast his eyes around the galleries high above the chamber. They were filled to overflowing. Outside in Spring Street at the top of Bourke Street it was a mild spring day, cloudy but dry. Inside, however, the atmosphere was stormy and electric. The public and the pressmen, tightly squeezed into their respective galleries, fell silent in expectation. Like spectators at the Roman Coliseum, they had come to witness an execution, albeit a political one. They would not be disappointed.

In his high-pitched, nasally voice, Hughes read from the piece of paper he held in his hand:

I move-

That, in the opinion of this House, the honorable member for Kalgoorlie, the Hon. Hugh Mahon, having, by seditious and disloyal utterances at a public meeting on Sunday last, been guilty of conduct unfitting him to remain a member of this House, and inconsistent with the oath of allegiance which he has taken as a member of this House, be expelled this House.

For the next 14 hours, interrupted only by breaks for dinner and a midnight snack, the House debated Hughes' motion and a Labor amendment that would have disavowed the parliament's right to try Hugh Mahon. Then, as the dawn glow began to appear in the eastern sky, the Treasurer, Sir Joseph Cook, rose and, interrupting Labor's Frank Anstey who was in full rhetorical flight, moved the closure of the debate. The members of the House divided and voting along party lines 34 to 17, Labor's amendment was defeated and Hughes' motion passed. For the first and only time a member of the House of Representatives had been expelled from the Commonwealth parliament.

Mahon was not in the chamber to see it. He had refused to come to the parliament to defend himself. Nevertheless, as depicted by a cartoon in the *Australian Worker*, the House had delivered Mahon's head to Salome Hughes.

Mahon's life and career

So, who was this Hugh Mahon who stirred up so much trouble?

Born in County Offaly in 1857, Hugh was the 13th of 14 children of James and Anna Mahon. In 1869 James, Anna and eight of their children, including young Hugh, gave up their farm and emigrated to America, first to Ontario, Canada and then to Albany, the capital of New York state, where Hugh trained as a printer and newspaperman.

Unfortunately, their American dream failed and in 1880 the family returned to Ireland, where Hugh's brother Patrick had retained a small remnant of the family farm.

For Hugh, the American experience had not been pleasant. But the newspaper trade was not all Hugh learnt in America. At the time, Albany was the country's most Irish city. It had an Irish Catholic mayor years before Boston or New York. It was also a stronghold of Irish nationalist fervour.

On Hugh's return he soon found employment as editor of a newspaper in County Wexford, the *New Ross Standard* and as a reporter for another newspaper, the *Wexford People*. Both newspapers were owned by Edward Walsh, a prominent Wexford nationalist, who in the late 1880s served three prison terms for his newspapers' outspoken opposition to Irish landlords.

Like his employer, Hugh was an activist as well as a journalist, using the newspapers in support of the tenants during a period of civil unrest in Ireland known as the Land War. He also used the *Standard's* printing press to print leaflets calling for boycotts of landlords. These activities brought him under police notice. Sub-Inspector Wilson of New Ross reported to the government, 'Mahon is by occupation a reporter and by inclination a rebel'.

When a landlord's son, Charles Boyd, was murdered in an ambush at Shanbogh, across the river from New Ross, Mahon organised a defence fund to help two brothers, Walter and John Phelan, who were charged with the crime, and used his newspaper to criticise the police and prosecution authorities, whom he accused of intimidation and sharp practices. Mahon was also an important witness at the trial, providing an alibi for one of the accused, both of whom were acquitted.

In September 1880 Mahon helped organise a meeting at New Ross, where, according to the *Wexford People*, thirty to forty thousand turned up to hear Charles Stewart Parnell speak about the Land League. Soon thereafter, a branch of the league was established in the town, with Mahon as assistant secretary and later secretary.

In October 1881 Mahon was arrested and interned without trial during the government's crackdown on the Land League. He was imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol with Parnell. After two months he was released on health grounds following a diagnosis of tuberculosis.

Mahon immediately returned to his Land League activities in and around New Ross, but after being threatened with re-arrest he took his doctor's advice and emigrated to Australia.

On arriving in Melbourne in May 1882 Mahon was employed by the local branch of the Land League and travelled extensively, collecting money to send back to the league in Ireland. When John and William Redmond visited Australia in 1883 to promote and raise funds for the new Irish National League, Mahon helped organise their tour.

He then resumed his calling in journalism as a reporter, editor and ultimately newspaper owner. In 1886 Mahon joined Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* as a political reporter, rising to become chief of the *Telegraph's* parliamentary staff.

In 1888 Mahon married Mary Alice L'Estrange of Melbourne. They had four children. Hugh and Mary initially lived in Sydney but moved to Gosford when Hugh became owner of the *Gosford Times* newspaper.

In 1891 Mahon attempted to enter the New South Wales parliament, but his ambition was thwarted by the skulduggery of his Free Trade faction which led to another candidate being nominated in his place.

Following his disappointment, he moved to Melbourne with his family, where he took a job with the *Australian Mining Standard*, a newspaper providing news and comment concerning mining. There he met James MacCallum Smith, with whom he formed an investment syndicate after Smith moved to the newly discovered goldfields of Western Australia.

In 1895 the fortunes of the *Mining Standard* turned for the worse and Mahon left for Western Australia at the invitation of Smith who had acquired newspapers in the goldfields.

In partnership with Smith, Mahon established the *Menzies Miner* in the boom town of Menzies, two-days ride from Kalgoorlie in the arid outback of the colony. During his time in Menzies Mahon was elected to the inaugural town council and in 1897 unsuccessfully stood for election to the Western Australian parliament. But he also became embroiled in a libel action in which Henry Gregory, the popular Mayor of Menzies, sued him for £5000 after Mahon in his newspaper accused Gregory of fraud over a float of shares in the Compass goldmine.

In 1898, Mahon was appointed editor of the *Kalgoorlie Sun*. It was a Sunday newspaper which aimed to reach the masses, to be critical of society, to expose social abuses and to promote contemporary literature by publishing reading matter of a high literary standard.

Mahon quickly fitted into the role, often criticising the government of Sir John Forrest. With colourful headlines such as "In the Clutches of Corruption/Land of Forrests, Fakes and Frauds/Some Instances of Robbery and Jobbery", he soon gained a reputation amongst his fellow journalists as a pugnacious and racy editor.

A contemporary later wrote, "Mahon could put more venom into a stick of type than any man I ever knew. Mahon's headlines were masterpieces of alliteration and venom". During Mahon's twenty months as editor of the *Sun* he successfully defended five libel actions, four of them prosecutions for criminal libel. But he also exposed corruption in the government railways. Another contemporary wrote, 'He may be acclaimed as one among the best newspapermen in the Commonwealth'.

Mahon's career as a journalist effectively ended in 1901 when he was elected to the first parliament of the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia. Initially representing the seat of Coolgardie, he became the member for Kalgoorlie in 1913 following a redistribution of electoral boundaries.

During his time in parliament Mahon was an early advocate of Aboriginal rights. He served as a minister in four Labor governments, including Postmaster-General in the first Labor ministry in 1904 and Minister for External Affairs during the First World War.

In 1916 he made the decision to oppose Hughes' plans for conscription and remained with the Labor Party after it split. This was a fateful decision. As we will see, Hughes never forgave him for what he perceived as Mahon's treachery. It was a contributing factor to Hughes' decision to move for Mahon's expulsion from parliament.

Mahon lost his seat in the 'khaki' election of 1917 but regained it in 1919. It was at that time that Mahon moved from Stanhope Street, Malvern to an orchard at Ringwood. There he had built a home designed by Walter Burley Griffin. He called it 'Benburb' after the 1646 battle in County Tyrone in Ireland.

No longer a minister, Mahon had more time to devote to promoting Irish self-government. Originally a supporter of home rule and the Irish Parliamentary Party, Mahon, like many Australian Catholics of Irish descent, became radicalised by events in Ireland following the 1916 Easter Rising, transforming into a supporter of Sinn Féin, the party in Ireland that wanted full independence rather than devolution. In 1919 Mahon was elected president of the pro-independence Irish-Ireland League of Victoria. It was the league which organised the meeting at the Richmond Reserve, at which Mahon made his fateful speech.

The injustice of Hugh Mahon's expulsion

One hundred years on, it is difficult for us to comprehend how Mahon's speech justified his expulsion from parliament. The words allegedly used by Mahon seem no more shocking than what one might expect in the everyday cut and thrust of political debate. But in making a judgment about events in the past we must always be careful to avoid viewing those events through the lens of attitudes prevailing today. We must take account of the context of the times. Clearly, those residents of Ringwood who attended the public meeting at the Mechanics' Institute and expressed their abhorrence had been scandalised by Mahon's words.

When Mahon gave his speech, the second anniversary of the armistice was just days away and the sacrifices of the nation in aid of the Empire were uppermost in many peoples' minds, particularly those who had lost loved ones. Furthermore, most Australians then believed their national security as a white outpost in a hostile Asian region depended on the continued strength and dominance of the British Empire. For many Australians in 1920, the most immediate threat to the Empire came from an independent Ireland that would leave Britain vulnerable to an enemy attack on its western flank.

Yet, even taking into account the sentiments of the times, it is my contention that Mahon's expulsion was unjustifiable – a miscarriage of justice carried out for party-political purposes and as an act of revenge by a vindictive Billy Hughes. Let me explain what I mean.

As we know, Mahon's so-called 'trial' by his parliamentary colleagues began on the afternoon of 11 November 1920. Yet, two days before, the cabinet had resolved that Mahon should be expelled, and on 10 November the Nationalist Party caucus unanimously agreed to that course unless Mahon 'was prepared to disavow entirely the sentiments expressed in his speech at Richmond'. Country Party members also unanimously agreed. Thus, even before Mahon's 'trial' began the jurors on the government benches had determined his guilt and his punishment, which could only be avoided if he were to confess and recant.

Furthermore, the government's case was based on hearsay: the report in the *Argus*. No witnesses were called to testify to what Mahon had said, not even the *Argus* reporter. And

when Labor's Frank Anstey tried to move an amendment to require witnesses to be brought before the House, the government gagged the debate.

The report in the *Argus* was patently deficient as a means of ascertaining what Mahon had said. It contained a short, 200-word summary of Mahon's speech. Articles in the *Advocate* and the *Tribune* used 1250 words to report that same speech. Their accounts differed in significant respects from the report in the *Argus*, as did a short report appearing in the *Age*.

The government did not even attempt to establish as a matter of law that Mahon's alleged words constituted seditious and disloyal utterances. Instead, government speakers used rhetoric rather than legal analysis to make their case, loading Mahon's words with all the fears, anxieties and indignation of an insecure and grieving nation, riven by sectarianism.

If the government had believed that Mahon's words constituted seditious and disloyal utterances, it could have prosecuted him under the *War Precautions Act 1914*, which still applied in 1920. That was the action it took against another Labor member, Mick Considine, who was prosecuted in July 1919 for saying in public, 'Bugger the King, he is a bloody German bastard'. Although Considine was convicted and sentenced to three weeks imprisonment, Hughes did not seek his expulsion, for he knew that the electors of Broken Hill would have regarded Considine as a hero and would have returned him with a huge majority.

In Mahon's case a prosecution would have meant delay and an uncertain result. One government MP admitted during the debate that a conviction would be difficult to obtain. But a vote in the House allowed Hughes to control the process and the outcome. And being quick, a by-election could be held within weeks when public opinion was still seething, thus maximising the chance of winning Mahon's seat.

And Hughes was desperate to pick up an extra seat. After the December 1919 elections Hughes' Nationalist Party was one seat short of a majority. Unlike when Considine was convicted, Hughes now depended on the support of members of the newly formed Country Party, who though anti-Labor did not always vote with the government. There had recently been a couple of close shaves in the House when Country Party members had voted against it. The capture of Mahon's seat at the resulting by-election would give Hughes the majority he needed to secure his survival.

A further consideration is Hughes' deep, personal animus against Mahon. Once friends, they had fallen out over Mahon's failure to support Hughes during the conscription campaign of 1916. Hughes had expected Mahon to help him persuade Australian Catholics of Irish descent to support conscription. However, Mahon, though not in principle opposed to conscription, was unconvinced that it was needed at that time and feared it would lead to civil disorder. Not wishing to undermine Hughes by saying so, he kept a low profile during the campaign, neither supporting nor opposing a Yes vote.

But, in the last week of the campaign Mahon was flushed out when a newspaper erroneously reported he would be addressing a pro-conscription rally at Kalgoorlie. In denying the story, Mahon said he had never made a public utterance in favour of conscription. Hughes responded by claiming that in the ministry Mahon was a wholehearted supporter of conscription and that he had supported the policy of the government 'with voice and vote in the cabinet'. Mahon rejected that claim, saying 'I have not supported and am not supporting conscription publicly or privately, directly or indirectly'.

Two weeks after the conscription referendum was defeated, Hughes walked out of the caucus. Mahon, who had lost respect for his erstwhile friend because of his erratic, cynical and dictatorial behaviour during the campaign, refused to follow him. Hughes' deep resentment of what he perceived as Mahon's double betrayal was on show during the 1917 and 1919 election campaigns when he launched bitter attacks against Mahon. Mahon's impulsive Richmond speech gave Hughes a not-to-be-missed opportunity to exact revenge.

Mahon chose not to attend the House to defend himself, telling his leader, Frank Tudor, 'I wish by my absence to show my scorn and contempt for the whole servile crew'. Mahon well knew it would be futile to seek to persuade government members of his innocence, writing to Hughes, '[I]f one spoke with the tongue of an angel he would not alter in one iota their clandestine decree'. Mahon believed his best chance was to appeal to his constituents.

At the by-election for his now vacant seat, he went up against the Nationalist candidate George Foley. Mahon campaigned on the issue of free speech and the injustice he had suffered. Not unexpectedly, the Nationalists framed the main issue quite differently. At a meeting at the Boulder Town Hall, Senator George Pearce identified it as follows:

This was not a fight between Labour and anti-Labour, or between Labour and Nationalists, but it was a clean-cut issue between loyalty and disloyalty and between those who stood for country and those who would destroy the Empire.

The Nationalists incessantly played the empire-loyalty card, reminding voters repeatedly of Mahon's seditious and disloyal utterances and shamelessly enlisting the memory of the nation's war dead who had fallen in defence of the Empire.

Despite the confident predictions of Mahon and his Labor colleagues that the electors would return the member for Kalgoorlie, Mahon was defeated by 443 votes out of 16,321. In many ways, it was not a bad result, taking into account the avalanche of vituperation that Mahon had endured for the previous six weeks. It is the only occasion on which an opposition seat has been lost to the government in a federal by-election.

Assessment

So, what do we make of Hugh Mahon and of the residents of Ringwood who were so troubled by his presence in their midst that they wished him to reside elsewhere?

Hugh Mahon was arguably one of Australia's most controversial politicians in the early years of the Commonwealth. He was both revered and reviled. Keith Murdoch, father of Rupert, described him as 'Towering in ability above nearly all his fellows in the Labor party'. Another contemporary described him as 'a democrat whose snobbish coldness of demeanour would make a snake shudder'. Another suggested, 'He must have been nourished in his infancy on the venom of a squid'. One newspaper wrote of him:

[P]oliticians of all shades of opinion are agreed that [Mahon] was one of the ablest administrators Australia has known. In manner, he is reserved; but once you penetrate the reserve you find a warm heart and unchanging friendship. His word is his bond.

Another newspaper wrote:

That sour and poor-spirited bounder, Hugh Mahon, has been at it again. ... His small, mean mind, his singularly ungracious personality, his gift of guttersnipe,

vituperation, and his petty persecution of [Alfred Deakin], a statesman whom Australia delights to honor, render his administration a source of humiliation rather than pride. ... a small, narrow, bitter and revengeful man ... a politician who is two ends and the middle of a jaundiced bounder.

To me, there is much to admire about Hugh Mahon:

- He was a creative thinker who was ahead of his time on many issues. In one of his first speeches to the House of Representatives, Mahon argued for the Constitution to be amended to give the federal parliament power to legislate for the Aboriginal race, a change that occurred only in 1967. He is reputed to have introduced to Australia the writings of Henry George, the American political economist, whose ideas of a single tax on land were influential in the early Labor Party.
- He was resilient in the face of adversity, as exemplified by the problems he encountered when he first moved to Western Australia. Shortly after arriving in Coolgardie to run the *Goldfields Courier* newspaper, the town's main street burned down, destroying the Courier's offices. Undeterred, he established a newspaper in Menzies, a frontier town 160 km north of Coolgardie. But the printing press he ordered was destroyed by fire en route. A second press met the same fate. On the third attempt the press arrived, but much of it was broken and the type mixed up. A long way from family and friends, a lesser man would have given up. Nevertheless, within days he published the first edition of the *Menzies Miner*.
- He was dogged in his pursuit of justice and prepared to stand up to overbearing authority whether that be the Irish Chief Secretary trying to intimidate him during the Land War, or the police attempting to harrass him, or a bench of magistrates determined to defeat his forensic tactics during the libel actions.

But there is also much to dislike about Mahon:

- His racist attitudes towards Chinese and Afghan immigrants, albeit commonly held at the time, would make Pauline Hanson blush.
- His sometimes-partisan pursuit of justice: while it is commendable that he sided with the accused Pheland brothers in the Shanbogh murder case, he did not show any sympathy towards or seek justice for the victim or his family, whom he tormented in his newspapers and printed leaflets.
- He often lacked judgment and perspective: in the Compass goldmine affair he unjustifiably accused the promoters of a mining venture of fraud; in another case, he publicly questioned the morals of a café owner, Mrs Salinger, in order to get at his real target, the Licensing Bench who had granted her a liquor licence; in his failed bid to win a seat in the Western Australian legislative assembly in 1897 he claimed victim status rather than counter-attacking his opponent. And, of course, his ultimate lack of judgment was to launch his attack on the British empire just a few days before the second anniversary of the armistice that brought an end to the war in which 60 000 Australians had died fighting for "this bloody and accursed empire".

But it is these contradictions that make Hugh Mahon such a fascinating subject for biography.

But what of the residents of Ringwood who wished to see him gone?

Firstly, some of Mahon's supporters did not take too kindly to their condemnation of Mahon. The Perth *Sunday Mirror* wrote:

These Ringwood or ringneck or ring-parrot swashbucklers believe in the brutal subjugation of the Irish race ... To maltreat one old man for his opinions is about the true forte of such cowardly dogs.

Secondly, a question to you: the public meeting at the Mechanics' Institute was attended by what the Box Hill *Reporter* described as 'over 40 gentlemen'. How representative of Ringwood was that? How many people resided in Ringwood in 1920? I ask this because two weeks later, a special meeting of the Ringwood RSL was called to censure the secretary for having improperly called the public meeting as only eight members were present at the earlier RSL meeting instead of the necessary 43, equal to one-third of the branch membership. I'm not sure what happened to the censure motion but the figures suggest that there were 129 members of the Ringwood RSL. Yet only about 40 gentlemen attended the public meeting.

Thirdly, it might have been the case that the 40 gentlemen of Ringwood were carried away by the heat of the moment, for in March 1921 Hugh Mahon was a member of a three-man delegation who, on behalf of the residents of Ringwood North, met with the Minister for Education, Sir Alex Peacock, to lobby for the erection of a new school for Ringwood. Perhaps all was forgiven and certainly it would help having an experienced politician in your delegation when lobbying a minister.

Epilogue

Out of parliament but not out of a job, Hugh Mahon continued to run his business interests. This included being the managing director of the Catholic Church Property Insurance Company, which he had formed in 1911 at the request of the Catholic bishops. It continues to exist today as Catholic Church Insurances.

In 1922 Mahon made his first and only visit to Ireland since his exile forty years before. In August 1931 he died at his home in Ringwood and is buried at Box Hill cemetery.