

Kilmainham to Kalgoorlie: The Life and Times of Hugh Mahon*

by Jeff Kildea

Introduction

Hugh Mahon is not exactly a household name in Australian political history. Those who have heard of him mostly know that he was expelled from the Commonwealth parliament in 1920, the only person to have suffered that fate.

This followed a speech he made at the Richmond Reserve here in Melbourne in which he criticised British rule in Ireland and referred to the British Empire as ‘this bloody and accursed empire’.

But Hugh Mahon was not a ‘one-trick pony’. As a columnist in the Melbourne *Punch* observed: ‘The Honourable Hugh Mahon is one of the most interesting personalities in the national legislature. There has been more stirring incident in his career than in a dozen ordinary men’s lives’.

Nevertheless, it is Mahon’s expulsion from the parliament in 1920 which is his enduring historical legacy. And today I will describe that event and the context in which it occurred before touching on his formative years in Ireland, America and Australia that were the making of the Hugh Mahon, whose provocative speech at the Richmond Reserve led to his expulsion.

Mahon’s expulsion

On 25 October 1920 Terence MacSwiney, the Sinn Féin mayor of Cork, died in Brixton prison after 74 days on hunger strike. A fortnight later Hugh Mahon, the Irish-born Labor member of the Australian parliament for the Western Australian seat of Kalgoorlie, stood in front of 3000 people at a public meeting at the Richmond Reserve and declared:

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.

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Four days later, on 11 November, a date that resonates in Australian history, the Australian prime minister Billy Hughes approached the despatch box in the House of Representatives, which then sat in the parliament building in Melbourne. It was 2.43 pm. He cast his eyes around the galleries high above the chamber. They were filled to overflowing. Outside 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. And 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's motion and a Labor amendment that disavowed the parliament's right to judge one of its members for conduct outside the House.

Then, as the dawn glow appeared in the eastern sky, the Treasurer Sir Joseph Cook rose in his place and interrupting Labor's Frank Anstey, who was in full rhetorical flight, moved the gag.

The members of the House divided and voting along party lines 34 to 17, Labor's amendment was defeated and Hughes's motion passed. For the first and only time a member of the House of Representatives had been expelled from the Commonwealth parliament. As depicted by a cartoon in *The Australian Worker*, the House had delivered Mahon's head to Salome Hughes.

Putting aside the melodrama and the political theatre so obviously an element of this unique event in Australian political history, the expulsion of Hugh Mahon is rightly regarded today as an injustice and an 'abuse of power by a partisan vote'. Such was the

finding of an all-party joint committee of the federal parliament in 1984, which resulted in legislation removing the federal parliament's right to expel its members.

Yet, these events took place in the charged political and sectarian atmosphere of 1920 when, in the words of New South Wales Attorney-General Edward McTiernan, Australia witnessed 'a veritable hurricane of sectarian strife'. In that year, against the background of the ever worsening Black and Tan war in Ireland, a number of events occurred.

Among them:

- in May Father Charles Jerger was deported from Australia;
- in July Sr Liguori fled her convent at Wagga Wagga and placed herself under the protection of the Orange Lodge;
- in August Archbishop Mannix was hijacked on the high-seas while on his way to Ireland; and
- for the previous six months calls had been made in parliament, press and public meetings to ban the Mannix Sinn Féin propaganda film *Ireland will be Free*.

While many Catholics of Irish descent regarded Mahon's expulsion as yet another event in that year's 'hurricane of sectarian strife', other Australians saw it differently, believing that the parliament had done the right thing by ridding itself of a seditious and disloyal member; among them, the majority of the electors of Kalgoorlie who declined to re-elect Mahon at the ensuing by-election fought mainly on empire loyalty grounds.

So, who was Hugh Mahon and why had he become a principal participant in that dramatic scene that played out in the Australian parliament on 11 November 1920.

Hugh Mahon

Born in 1857 at Killurin, just south of Tullamore, in King's County (now County Offaly), Hugh was the 13th of 14 children of James and Anna Mahon. Hugh's father was a substantial tenant farmer on the Geashill Estate owned by the 9th Baron Digby, an absentee landlord who lived in Dorset, England.

In the 1860s Killurin was the estate's most troublesome townland, with fenian influences and discontented tenants causing problems, sometimes with violence. In 1865 the estate manager, the efficiently ruthless William Steuart Trench, reported that peace prevailed throughout Geashill 'with the exception of one portion of your Lordship's estate around Killurin in which a good many outrages have taken place'.

In 1869 James surrendered his farm and, in search of a better life, emigrated to America with Anna and eight of their children, including young Hugh. They settled first in Oxford County, Ontario and then in Albany, the capital of New York state, where Hugh trained as a printer and newspaperman. Unfortunately their American dream failed following a severe economic downturn and the death of Hugh's older brother, James junior. By 1880 the family had returned to Ireland, where Hugh's brother Patrick retained a small remnant of the family farm.

For Hugh, the American experience had not been pleasant. In 1929 he wrote to a niece who had moved to America, 'For goodness sake, don't become a slave to these Yankee bloodsuckers. Having suffered from them myself I am qualified to sympathise with you. They worked me – a child of 13 – 59 hours a week, from 7am to 6pm & I had to walk 3 miles each way from home to the printing office'.

But the newspaper trade was not all that 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 fenian stronghold, attracting such visitors as Michael Davitt, John Dillon and Charles Stewart Parnell.

On Hugh's return to Ireland he soon found employment as editor of the *New Ross Standard* and a reporter for 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 landlords.

Like his employer, Hugh was an activist as well as a journalist, using his newspapers during the Land War to support the tenants' cause. He was instrumental in establishing the New Ross branch of the Land League, serving initially as assistant secretary and then as secretary.

The public meeting to establish the branch attracted between thirty and forty thousand people, with Parnell as the main speaker. It was full of pomp and ceremony with floral arches, bannerettes, brass bands and a cavalcade of one hundred horse-drawn vehicles carrying the guests to the meeting ground.

The warm-up speakers, mostly priests and MPs, castigated the system of landlordism. Mahon's mentor Father Furlong railed against 'the accursed reign of English misrule over the hearts and the homes of our plundered and persecuted nation' and urged his

audience to 'prepare ourselves for a relentless crusade against the system of landlordism ... the system of legalized plunder which has been desolating Ireland so long'.

Another priest described landlordism in Ireland as 'a tyranny, a despotism, the equal of which is not to be found on God's earth'. It was a despotism worse than that of the Tsars: 'Talk of the despotism of the Emperor of all the Russias. Why it is mildness itself compared to the irresponsible power possessed by an Irish landlord'.

Edmund Leamey, the member for Waterford, suggested that landlordism continued to exist in Ireland because 'it is maintained by English laws and maintained by English bayonets'.

By contrast Parnell's speech was measured and restrained. But that did not stop the *Times* from complaining of 'the wildness of Mr Parnell's preaching'.

The meeting, with its pageantry and the high-blown rhetoric of its speakers, would have made a strong impression on the 23-year old Hugh Mahon, who had already joined Father Furlong's 'relentless crusade'.

Using the *Standard's* press, he printed leaflets calling for boycotts of landlords and publicising evictions in order to attract a crowd that would intimidate the bailiffs.

When, in August 1880, a landlord's son, Charles Boyd, was murdered in an ambush at Shanbogh in Kilkenny, across the River Barrow from New Ross, Mahon organised a defence fund to help the two Phelan brothers, Walter and John, who were charged with the crime, and used his newspapers to criticise the police and prosecution authorities, whom he accused of intimidation and sharp practices. He was also an important witness at the trial, providing an alibi for one of the accused, both of whom were ultimately acquitted.

Mahon's activities brought him under police notice. Sub-Inspector Wilson reported to the government, 'Mahon is by occupation a reporter and by inclination a rebel'. Kilkenny Crown Solicitor Samuel Lee Anderson described him as 'mischievous and dangerous'.

In October 1881 Mahon was arrested and interned without trial during the government's round-up of Land League activists 'reasonably suspected' of crime. 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.

Hugh Mahon in Australia

On arriving in Melbourne in May 1882 Mahon was employed by the local branch of the Land League who sent him to New South Wales where he travelled extensively throughout the colony, 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 newly established Irish National League, Mahon helped organise their tour.

This was a particularly difficult time in Australia to be an Irish nationalist. A few days after the Redmonds landed in Australia, James Carey began giving evidence in the Police Court in Dublin about the assassination the year before of the Chief Secretary of Ireland Lord Frederick Cavendish and the Under-Secretary Thomas Burke in Phoenix Park. Carey, one of the Phoenix Park assassins who had turned informant, made allegations of Land League involvement in the murders, claiming they had been supplied with funds subscribed in America and paid by the Land League.

The news broke in the Australian press as Redmond was preparing to give his main address in Sydney. The *Daily Telegraph* claimed that Cavendish and Burke had been murdered by 'the knives of Mr Redmond's Land League' and that John Redmond was an 'itinerant preacher of sedition' who was 'inviting us to contribute to what is literally a murder fund'.

The prejudicial effect of Carey's evidence on Redmond's mission was palpable, particularly as the press reports included Carey's detailed descriptions of how the gruesome murders were carried out. As a result, many prominent Irishmen stayed away from the Redmond meetings. In Melbourne, William Redmond complained of 'cowardly Irishmen who hadn't the common manliness to stand by their side and adhere to the principles which they professed to hold'. This prompted a rebuke from Frank Gavan Duffy, son of Charles Gavan Duffy, who pointed out that colonial Irishmen had made their own sacrifices in following their consciences. And he had a point.

In New South Wales three Irish-Catholic magistrates who had signed an address welcoming John Redmond as 'a member of that noble band which has won a world's

admiration by its resolute resistance to the oppressive proceedings of a foreign senate' had been dismissed from office. In Victoria, three Irish-Catholic MPs who had signed an address in support of Irish self-government organised by the Grattan Memorial Committee had been voted out of office at the recent elections. Two others scraped back in, one of them was Duffy's brother John.

After the Redmond brothers left Australia following a gruelling ten-month tour of the country, the heightened sectarian tensions aroused by their visit began to subside. By then Mahon had 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 its parliamentary staff.

In 1891 Mahon unsuccessfully attempted to enter the New South Wales parliament. Following his disappointment he moved to Melbourne with his family. His wife, whom he had married in 1888, was Mary Alice L'Estrange, the daughter of prominent Richmond Catholic, Joseph L'Estrange.

After gold was discovered in Western Australia Mahon left for the goldfields in 1895 where he established a newspaper, the *Menzies Miner* in what was then the boom town of Menzies. It was 160 kms or two-days ride from Kalgoorlie in the arid outback of the colony. The discovery of gold there in 1894 had seen an influx of miners hungry for news. In 1900 it had a population of 10 000. Today it is less than 100.

Nevertheless, a handful of substantial buildings remain, including the Town Hall, testament to the town's foregone grandeur. During his time in Menzies Mahon was elected to the inaugural town council as evidenced by the plaque on the Town Hall.

In 1897 he unsuccessfully stood for election to the Western Australian parliament. The following year he was appointed editor of the Kalgoorlie *Sun*, a Sunday newspaper which aimed to reach the masses, to be critical of society and to expose social abuses.

Mahon quickly fitted into the role, often criticising the government of Sir John Forrest with 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.

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.

In one of his first speeches in parliament Mahon called for a royal commission into the treatment of the Aborigines of Western Australia and for an amendment of the Constitution to give the federal parliament power to legislate for the Aboriginal race in the states. In May this year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the referendum which approved that amendment – 66 years after Mahon first proposed it.

Mahon served in four Labor ministries, including as Postmaster General in the first Labor government in 1904 and as Minister for External Affairs during the First World War. He remained with the Labor Party when it split over conscription, losing his seat in 1917 but regaining it in 1919. After the war his passionate campaigning in support of Irish self-determination during the War of Independence led to his expulsion from parliament.

In 1922 Hugh visited Ireland for the first and last time since his exile 40 years before. On returning to Australia, he saw out the rest of his life as managing director of the Catholic Church Property Insurance Co., which he had established in 1911 at the request of the Australian bishops. He died in 1931 at his home at Ringwood and is buried in the Box Hill Cemetery.

Accounting for Mahon's political demise

As was the custom upon the death of one of its former members, the federal parliament paused for the traditional condolence motion. Such motions are usually heard in dignified silence. Erstwhile bitter political opponents of the deceased will often join the chorus of valedictory praise or, at the very least, remain mute.

Yet, tradition was cast aside in the House of Representatives when Roland Green, the 46 year old Country Party member for the New South Wales seat of Richmond, rose to

speak. Supported on crutches, for he had lost a leg in the Great War, Green passionately declaimed:

The late gentleman ... ultimately fell foul of Australian sentiment. ... [H]onorable members can themselves decide whether this Parliament should place on record an expression of its appreciation of his public services, in view of the fact that he was expelled from this House ... I do not desire to be associated in this expression of regret.

To Green and others like him, Mahon's words still rankled more than a decade after the event. Delivered just four days before the second anniversary of the armistice that ended the war in which 60 000 Australians had died fighting for 'this bloody and accursed empire', they implied that that sacrifice had been for an empire whose deeds were comparable with the worst excesses of Czarist Russia.

But what is curious about this affair is that, while Mahon in Ireland was an outspoken nationalist who was imprisoned for his activism, in Australia Mahon was quiescent on the Irish question for two decades after the Redmond brothers left Australia in 1883, with hardly a mention of Ireland's cause in any of his newspapers.

It was not until William Redmond's return visit in 1904-05, when he persuaded Mahon to steer through the parliament resolutions in support of Irish home rule, that he once more publicly identified with Ireland's cause.

But even so, Mahon was not considered to be a demagogue given to outbursts of hyperbole. He was generally regarded as measured and aloof. One contemporary wrote:

Mr Mahon can ... put his thoughts into words clearly, but he is a cold, uninspiring speaker, without spontaneity or verve.

Another opined:

[Mahon] never perorates, and sets little store by eloquence. He never rants – not even on Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett commemoration days.

While it is clear that MacSwiney's death struck a chord, triggering Mahon's anger, I do not understand him to have known MacSwiney personally, though he may have met MacSwiney's father who lived for a time in Melbourne.

It is ironic therefore that Mahon, of all people, became the quintessential Irish rebel by being thrown out of parliament for his attack on British rule in Ireland.

So the question arises: what was it that led Mahon to make his passionate, ill-timed and politically fatal attack on the Empire?

While the second volume of the biography, which I plan to publish before the centenary of Mahon's expulsion, will cover Mahon's parliamentary career and examine in detail the circumstances of his expulsion, it is this volume, in which I describe the troubled Geashill Estate in King's County where Mahon spent his childhood, his formative years in America in the fenian stronghold of Albany and his journalism and political activism in Wexford, which holds the key to understanding how and why Mahon's expulsion from parliament came about.

Mahon was very much a man shaped by his times, with the experiences of his childhood in Killurin, his youth in America and his young adulthood in Wexford being indelibly marked on his character. So much so that the inflammatory language he used at the Richmond Reserve can be traced back to the rhetoric of his earlier days in Ireland.

Billy Hughes once suggested that 'with him love of country was an all-absorbing passion', evoking the tragic demise of Othello: 'Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well'. And at a time when British rule in Ireland was once again 'maintained by English laws and maintained by English bayonets' what Irish émigré would not be moved to cry 'poor fellow my country'.

Nevertheless, there is no simple answer to the question as Mahon was a complex person. An Adelaide journalist gave a hint of that complexity when he wrote:

In many respects [Mahon] seems an embittered man. One would think, to see him, that he had suffered at some time from constituted authority. Not that he is a blatant revolutionist. He is very far from that. He is quiet, reserved, and intense; but it is the very intensity of his speech which make him appear as one suppressing a bitter hatred of something.

Over the years of my research I have discovered much evidence of Mahon's complexity. Let me mention just three instances:

- he was a creative thinker who was ahead of his time on many issues. An example being his support of Indigenous Australians. Yet his attitude towards Chinese and Afghan immigrants was racist and extreme, even by the standard of the times.
- he was dogged in his pursuit of justice; yet he was often partisan in doing so. While it is commendable that he assisted the accused tenant farmers in the Shanbogh murder case, he made no attempt to seek justice for the victim or his family. Instead, he continued to torment them in his newspapers and printed leaflets.
- he was prepared to stand up to overbearing authority; yet he sometimes used his newspapers to intimidate others, including the promoters of a goldmine whom he unjustly accused of fraud to forestall their bid to open a rival newspaper. And he impugned the morals of a Kalgoorlie café owner, Mrs Salinger, in order to get at his real target, the Licensing Bench who had granted her a liquor licence.

As a result, Mahon was both revered and reviled. The *Freeman's Journal* described him as 'one among the best newspaper men in the Commonwealth'. On his elevation to the ministry, the *Perth Sunday Times* described him as 'the ablest member this country has sent to Melbourne' (where the parliament then sat). A Bathurst newspaper, the *National Advocate* said: 'Mr Mahon is a man of high intellectual attainments, besides being a fluent speaker and one of Labor's best debaters. ... [He] is regarded by friends and foes alike as one of the leaders of political thought in the Commonwealth.'

On the other hand, the *Westralian Worker* described him as 'a democrat whose snobbish coldness of demeanour would make a snake shudder'. A political foe, Henry Gregory, suggested, 'He must have been nourished in his infancy on the venom of a squid'. A Perth newspaper, the *Call* opined: 'We remember Mahon always as a sour, acrid, selfish, churlish person with a poisonous tongue and vindictive pen'.

Conclusion

Hugh Mahon will forever be remembered as the only member to have been expelled from the federal parliament. But, as I have endeavoured to show today, there is more to the man than that singular, spectacular event.

This biography aims to discover and explore Mahon's life in its many, fascinating dimensions in an endeavour to appreciate as a whole this little-known but significant Irish-Australian and to understand better the times in which he lived.