

‘For goodness sake, don’t become a slave to these Yankee bloodsuckers’: Hugh Mahon’s early life in America*

by Jeff Kildea

The reference to “Yankee bloodsuckers” in the title of this paper is not intended as an insult to my hospitable American hosts, though perhaps those from the South might consider such an epithet to be a fair description of their compatriots in the North and not an insult at all. Rather it is taken from a letter which Hugh Mahon, the subject of this paper, wrote in 1929 to his great-niece Mary Mahon, a recent emigrant from Ireland to America. The avuncular admonition set out in the title was based on Mahon’s own experience as an Irish emigrant to New York some 60 years before aged 12. Returning to Ireland after more than a decade in America, Mahon began a lengthy, three-fold career as patriot, pressman and politician, the alliterative subtitle of the biography of Mahon I am currently researching.

The aim of this paper is to examine Mahon’s formative years in America and the influence they had on his public life in Ireland and Australia.

Hugh Mahon’s main claim to fame is that he is the only person to have been expelled from the House of Representatives of the Australian federal parliament. This followed an impassioned speech which he made at a public meeting on 7 November 1920 when he criticised British rule in Ireland, describing the British Empire as “this bloody and accursed Empire”. The speech was made just a few days before the second anniversary of the armistice that ended the war in which 60 000 Australians had died fighting for that “bloody and accursed Empire”. Outraged Empire loyalists demanded that Prime Minister Billy Hughes discipline Mahon. As a result, Hughes rose in the parliament on 11 November and moved for Mahon’s expulsion. By a majority the members of the House adopted the motion and declared Mahon’s seat of Kalgoorlie vacant.

Although Mahon is best known for this single, spectacular event, he had already built a reputation as an Irish patriot, a journalist and newspaper editor, and as a member of parliament and minister of the Crown. As a journalist in Ireland, he had been involved with the Irish Land League, and in 1881 was imprisoned in Dublin’s Kilmainham Gaol with the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. On his release Mahon fled to Australia to avoid further arrest. There he helped organise the Australian stage of a fund-raising tour in 1883 by two Irish nationalist leaders, John Redmond and his brother William, who after ten months in Australia moved on to the United States. Mahon then resumed his career as a journalist in New South Wales and Victoria. In the 1890s he went to Western Australia after gold was discovered there, establishing and editing newspapers in the goldfields. When the Australian colonies federated in 1901 he was elected to the first Commonwealth parliament for the seat of Coolgardie.

Mahon served as a minister in the first Labor government in 1904 and in three subsequent Labor administrations, rising to Minister for External Affairs from 1914 to 1916 in the Fisher and Hughes governments. He stayed with the Labor Party after it split in 1916 over the issue of conscription for the First World War. During Ireland’s War of Independence from 1919, Mahon became the leader of the Melbourne-based Irish Ireland League and was a strong supporter of Irish self-determination. It was at one of the league’s meetings that Mahon made his caustic speech that led to his expulsion from parliament.

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While Mahon's public life was conducted in Ireland and Australia, he had spent his youth from age 12 to 23 in North America, firstly in Oxford County, Ontario and then at Albany in New York State. It was at Albany he learned his craft as a printer and journalist. But judging by the fact that on his family's return to Ireland in 1880 he immediately became heavily involved in Irish nationalist politics and the Land League, it is likely that Mahon had learned more during his time in America than merely the technical skills of a newspaperman.

The Mahon family emigrated to America from Killurin in King's County (now County Offaly). Landing in New York City in 1869 they travelled north to Ontario, where members of the extended family had earlier established themselves. In Ireland Hugh's father James had been a tenant farmer with a substantial land holding exceeding 250 acres. In Ontario James purchased 50 acres of rich farming land in Oxford County, about 170 kilometres south-west of Toronto. Yet James and his family lasted less than four years there, selling the farm in April 1873 and moving to East Albany across the Hudson River from the New York state capital. Financial difficulty and a family tragedy seem to have precipitated the move.

James was getting on in years for a man running a farm, having turned 64 at the end of 1871. The elder of his two sons with him in North America was James junior, then aged 20. During the winter of 1871-72 the young man contracted tuberculosis and died the following year. Hugh was then only 15 and still at school. Even had Hugh been available to help run the farm, Hugh's subsequent life as a journalist and politician suggests that he was not cut out for that type of work. A priest friend later wrote to him, "The pen is your forte, not the ploughshare".¹

James purchased a two-storey framed house in East Albany, which, until the construction of rail bridges across the Hudson River in 1866 and 1871, was one of the nation's most active rail centres, attracting many immigrants looking for work, mostly German and Irish. In his mid-60s James, the erstwhile independent farmer, found himself living in an urban centre and employed as a labourer, if employed at all. For, soon after their arrival in Albany, the Panic of 1873 struck, shutting down the New York Stock Exchange for ten days and precipitating an economic depression that hit railroad companies particularly hard, with many going bankrupt.

It was in Albany that Hugh began his training in the printing and newspaper business. And it was that experience that prompted him in 1929 to write to his great-niece Mary Mahon:

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.²

Mahon's recollection, almost 60 years after the event, that he was only 13 when working in the printing office is clearly wrong. He was 16 when the family moved to Albany. Nevertheless, the tone of the letter indicates that he did not find the experience pleasant.

¹ Letter 6 May 1883 from Fr Patrick Michael Furlong to Hugh Mahon (Mahon Papers National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 937/273).

² Letter 8 July 1929 from Hugh Mahon to Mary Mahon, quoted in a letter which Mary Mahon wrote to Mary Sharland, a copy of which she sent to Mahon biographer Jim Gibbney in a letter dated 28 January 1968 [sic. 1969?] (Jim Gibbney correspondence, NLA).

By 1877 the 20-year old was working for himself selling printing materials. But the times were not auspicious and he became embroiled in litigation with the editor and publisher of the *Albany Evening Times* to recover monies for materials he had supplied the newspaper. No wonder Hugh had a jaded opinion of his Albany days.

By 1878 the Mahons had left Albany. From that year James's name ceased to appear in Albany street directories. When they left and where they went is not clear, at least until 1880 when Hugh turned up in Ireland working for the Wexford *People* newspaper group.

For the Mahons the "American dream" had failed to materialise. Despite James's hopes for his family of a new life in a new land, the venture had proved a disaster, not least because he and his wife Anna had lost their son James junior. Financially it had not worked out either. The economic depression and the transfer of the railway yards to the Albany side of the Hudson meant that East Albany declined as an economic hub. When James eventually found a buyer for the house he suffered a substantial loss on its sale.

For Hugh, the family's American venture occurred at an important stage of his life, for he had gone there as a child of 12 and returned to Ireland a young man of 23. We know from his letter to his great-niece that his experience of working in Albany had left him somewhat embittered. More significant, however, was the manner in which the American sojourn shaped Hugh's political views given that on his return to Ireland he immediately became immersed in Irish nationalist and Land League politics.

While no direct evidence has emerged of Hugh's involvement with radical Irish-American organisations such as the Fenian Brotherhood or Clan na Gael, or even of more moderate nationalist groups supporting Irish home rule, what is known is that he came of age in a milieu of fervid Irish-American nationalist politics. Albany in the 1870s was a very Irish city. British anthropologist Reginald Byron has described Albany as "one of the most Irish places in America", noting that by 1855 "the city had been transformed from a mainly Anglo-Dutch and Protestant settlement to one that was largely Irish, German and Catholic".³ According to American historian Brian Greenberg, Irish Catholics by 1855 constituted almost 40 per cent of Albany's population. Societies such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the United Irishmen of America, the Robert Emmet Association, the Emmet Guards and the Wolfe Tone Guards were active in Albany at this time. Discussing the political influences within the city's Irish community Greenberg wrote:

Fenianism served as an important social link as well as political force in Albany's Irish community. ... In Albany during the 1860s and early 1870s Fenian circles frequently held lectures and sponsored balls, picnics, and other social gatherings. ... The Fenian Brotherhood appears to have been a popular ethnic society in Albany, attracting Irish-Americans from all classes. ... By the 1870s Fenianism had become good politics in Albany.⁴

Indeed, Terence Quinn, who in June 1866 had led a contingent from Albany to reinforce the Fenians attempting to invade Canada and who in 1870 had organised a mass Fenian

³ Reginald Byron, *Irish America*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 4, 12.

⁴ Brian Greenberg, *Worker and Community: Response to Industrialization in a Nineteenth Century American City, Albany, New York, 1850-1884*, SUNY Press, New York, 1985, pp. 120, 136-137. American historian William Rowley has estimated that by 1875 "the Irish held their proportionate population strength, if they did not actually increase it" (William Esmond Rowley, "Albany: A Tale of Two Cities 1820-1880", PhD Thesis, Harvard, 1967, p. 385).

rally in the city, was elected to Congress in 1877. The following year Quinn's son-in-law and business partner Michael Nolan became Albany's first Irish Catholic mayor, preceding New York by two years and Boston by seven.⁵ Byron has noted that even though the number of Irishmen from Albany taking part in the Fenian raids on Canada was small, "Irish independence remained a popular, vote catching issue, and even the most patrician leaders of the Democratic Party were forced to bend to popular sentiment by taking public notice of specifically Irish issues and aspirations".⁶

From time to time nationalist politicians and agitators from Ireland visited New York to rally Irish-American opinion and to raise funds for the cause. Some stopped off in Albany. In August 1878 Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish Land League, visited America. On one speaking tour he came to Albany, making contact with local Fenians.⁷ In January 1880 Charles Stewart Parnell and his nationalist parliamentary colleague John Dillon began a two-month tour of America that included a visit to Albany, where they addressed a large audience at Tweddle Hall on 27 January. Parnell spoke of the injustices of the Irish land system and of the work of the Land League. A few weeks later a branch of the Land League was established in Albany.⁸

Whether Hugh Mahon met Davitt, Parnell or Dillon in America or heard them speak there is not known, but he could hardly have been unaware of their visits and of the appeals they made for the American Irish to aid the cause of Ireland. But what is certain is that not long after these envoys of Irish nationalism made their exhortations in America, the young Hugh Mahon was himself back in Ireland and heavily involved in the campaign to rally the Irish to their nation's cause.

The *New Ross Standard*, which he managed and edited, and the *Wexford People*, for which he wrote, were owned by Edward Walsh, an Irish nationalist who was imprisoned three times for his support of home rule and tenants' rights. In promoting Ireland's cause Hugh used the skills he had learned in America both as a journalist and printer. In line with his proprietor's politics Hugh ran a strongly nationalist and tenants' rights editorial line, reporting extensively on the activities of the Land League, which was then engaged in what was called the Land War. This was an organised campaign of resisting landlords who evicted tenants and of boycotting anyone who supplied goods and services to them. But Mahon was not content simply to report on the Land War. He was also an activist, serving as secretary of the local branch of the league and using his press to print leaflets as part of the league's boycott campaign.

Hugh's activities brought him to the notice of the police and at 3am on 27 October 1881 he was dragged from his bed and taken to Naas prison. Soon he became ill and was transferred to Kilmainham gaol and admitted to the prison hospital. During his time in Kilmainham Mahon associated on occasions with Parnell. Mahon's health did not improve. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and the prison doctor recommended his release and advised him to emigrate to a warmer climate. In January he was set free, but

⁵ Greenberg, *Worker and Community*, pp. 137-9. William R Grace of Queens County (now County Laois) became the first Irish Catholic mayor of New York City in 1880, while Cork-born Hugh O'Brien was sworn in as Boston's mayor on 5 January 1885 (Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2008, pp. 141, 148-149).

⁶ Byron, *Irish America*, p. 66.

⁷ TW Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution 1846-1882*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 240. In May 1880 Davitt made a second visit to America, this time staying almost six months.

⁸ *Albany Evening Times* 28 January 1880, p. 2; *Albany Evening Journal* 28 January 1880, p. 1; *Albany Argus* 19 April 1880, p. 8.

instead of leaving Ireland he returned to New Ross and resumed his political agitation. Soon thereafter, the police warned Mahon that he was about to be rearrested. Consequently, Mahon decided to take the doctor's advice.⁹

On 6 April 1882 he sailed from London for Melbourne, where he was met by fellow Irish émigré, JW Walshe, representative of the Land League in Australia and a cousin of Michael Davitt. Although Mahon had left his native land on short notice and for health reasons, the League's leaders in Dublin took the opportunity to employ him in advancing the cause among the Irish in Australia. The Australian Central Committee of the Land League sent him and Walshe on a tour of New South Wales to promote the league. When the Redmond brothers arrived the following year, Mahon helped to organise their visit.¹⁰

The conclusion of the Redmond brothers tour brought an end to Mahon's period as an Irish patriot and activist. For the next decade and a half he pursued his journalistic career in Australia, barely mentioning the Irish cause in his newspapers. After his election to parliament in 1901 he did use his position to support Irish self-government, but in a constitutional and responsible manner, including organising a 1905 parliamentary resolution in favour of home rule.

One of the great ironies of Mahon's public life is that from 1884 through to 1920 he was never perceived as a hot-headed Irish radical. Yet when he made his public speech in 1920 condemning British rule in Ireland and intemperately describing the Empire as "this bloody and accursed Empire", it was as if the radicalism of his youth had reasserted itself, overwhelming the more calm and considered statesman he had become.

I am yet to explore fully the circumstances of that sudden seismic shift in Mahon's approach to the Irish question, but what my research already makes clear is that in formulating an explanation for Mahon's transformation significant weight needs to be given to the deep influence of Mahon's formative years in America.

⁹ National Archives of Ireland, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers 1882/22625.

¹⁰ Immigration to Victoria: inward passenger lists, British ports, 1852-1923, Fiche 403, SS *Lusitania*, p. 7; *The Advocate* 27 May 1882, p. 12.