



Mother Jones: Ireland to North America to Ireland

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Although we don't hear her name so often anymore, Mother Jones was one of the great figures of the early twentieth century. She and her family were refugees from the Famine, and I want to argue here that her early life in Ireland, Canada, and the United States molded her, made her the great crusader for social justice and tribune of the working class that she became as an old woman. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," Kris Kristofferson has written, words that well describe the life of Mother Jones.

The Walking Wrath of God

"There broke out a storm of applause which swelled into a tumult as a little woman came forward on the platform," wrote the novelist Upton Sinclair. "She was wrinkled and old, dressed in black, looking like somebody's grandmother; she was, in truth, the grandmother of hundreds of thousands of miners." Sinclair, famous for his classic 1906 novel *The Jungle* about life and labor in the stockyards, turned his attention then to the coal wars in Colorado: "Hearing her speak," he said of his old friend Mother Jones, "you discovered the secret of her influence over these polyglot hordes. She had force, she had wit, above all she had the fire of

indignation — she was the walking wrath of God.”

Mother Jones, Sinclair went on, “would tell endless stories about her adventures, about strikes she had led and speeches she had made; about interviews with presidents and governors and captains of industry; about jails and convict camps... All over the country she had roamed and wherever she went, the flame of protest had leaped up in the hearts of men; her story was a veritable Odyssey of revolt.” Sinclair wrote fiction, but his words about Mother Jones were literally true. For twenty-five years, this elderly woman had no home. As she explained to a congressional committee when asked where she lived, “my address is like my shoes; it follows me wherever I go.”¹

So who was Mother Jones? With organized labor’s declining fortunes in the twenty-first century, we don’t hear of her so often anymore. Except for a progressive magazine named in her honor, and her famous battle cry, “pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living,” her memory has faded. Yet she was one of the most famous women in America during the first decades of the twentieth century.

John Brophy, who later became a United Mine Worker official, first met her when he was a young miner at the turn of the century: “She came into the mine one day and talked to us in our workplace in the vernacular of the mines. How she got in I don’t know; probably just walked in and defied anyone to stop her.” Above all, Brophy observed, Mother Jones was *with* her people: She would take a drink with the boys and spoke their idiom, including some pretty rough language when she was talking about the bosses. This might have been considered a little fast in ordinary women, but the miners knew and respected her. . . . They knew she was a good soul and a friend of those who most lacked friends.” Brophy marveled at Mother Jones’s oratorical powers, how her voice dropped in pitch and intensity with the drama of her stories, so that “it became something you could almost feel physically.”²

It was her passion that moved men and women. To the many immigrant workers who didn’t understand her every word, she made her feelings clear through what Brophy called gestures and “French Classics,” which is to say, swearing. Above all, she embodied courage. Again Brophy: “She had a complete disregard for danger or hardship and would go in wherever she thought she was needed. And she cared no more about approval from union leaders than operators; wherever people were in trouble, she showed up to lead the fight with tireless devotion.” Introduced once as a great humanitarian, Mother Jones snapped, “Get it straight,

I'm not a humanitarian, I'm a hell-raiser."³

Famous contemporaries knew and loved her. "She is a wonder," the poet Carl Sandburg wrote of Mother Jones during World War I; "Close to 88 years old and her voice a singing voice; nobody else could give me a thrill just by saying in that slow, solemn, orotund way, 'The Kaisers of this country are next, I tell ye.'" Clarence Darrow, America's most famous trial lawyer of the twentieth century, wrote of his old friend, "her deep convictions and fearless soul always drew her to seek the spot where the fight was hottest and the danger greatest." The feminist writer Meridel Le Sueur was only fourteen years old when she first heard Mother Jones speak, but she never forgot it: "I felt engendered by the true mother, not the private mother of one family, but the emboldened and blazing defender of all her sons and daughters."⁴

In her sixties, seventies, eighties, Mother Jones renounced friends, family, and possessions to live on the road with her people, and out of that commitment grew working families' powerful sense of identification with her. Hearing that she had been arrested once again, a worker named T. J. Llewellyn from Missouri wrote to the secretary of labor, "I have carried a gun three times in the industrial wars in this country, and by the eternal, if any harm comes to the old Mother, I'm not too old nor by the same token too cowardly to carry it again." Margaret R. Duvall warned of an aroused working class "more dreadful than this country has ever seen" should any harm come to Mother Jones. And A. Van Tassel of Ohio begged President Woodrow Wilson to free the Miners' Angel: "This beautiful hero of the labor movement has committed no crime, but is being slowly murdered because she insisted on agitating and educating the workers to realize their true status in society."⁵ Mother Jones organized women into boisterous demonstrations, and she cajoled and browbeat union men to stay true to their organizations. As Mother Jones, she spoke for the family of labor with deep moral authority. Her speeches rejected the untrammled rule of the marketplace and upheld instead an ideal of humane communities of working families. She invoked wrenching images of blood spilled, bodies mangled, and youth exploited to dramatize the injustice of poverty in America. Above all, she gave working people hope and told them that their collective aspirations were in the best traditions of American freedom.

These were hard times for American workers. Coal was America's fuel, and three-quarters of a million men mined it. They were paid roughly \$400 a year, often in company scrip, which forced them to live in company towns and buy



Mother Jones tends to children in a West Virginia mining camp. She proved herself to the working classes by meeting with them where they lived and worked. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago, IL. Call Number: Midwest MS Kerr, Series 5, Box 6, Folder 97.

goods at the company store, while private armed guards routinely abrogated their civil liberties. Half a million steel workers labored on twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. Millions of women and children worked in mills and sweatshops for pennies, often with little choice but to work or starve.

Mother Jones was one of many radicals of her era, including Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs, anarchist Emma Goldman, champion of black freedom W. E. B. Du Bois, communitarian journalist Julius Wayland, and Industrial Workers of the World organizer Big Bill Haywood. All responded to the crushing weight of corporate power by mobilizing Americans with new ideas — with unions, syndicalist organizations, alternative political parties — even to the point of rebellion. Mother Jones was at the center of these radical, often violent times.⁶

She worked more for the United Mine Workers than for any other organization, especially in the early days when it was the largest industrial union in America. She organized anthracite miners in Pennsylvania and bituminous workers in the Middle West's Central Competitive Field, but she broke with the UMW leadership as it

turned more conservative early in the twentieth century. In 1903 she organized a protest against child labor, the “March of the Mill Children,” from Philadelphia to President Theodore Roosevelt’s home on Long Island. Between 1905 and 1912, she went out on the road stumping for the Socialist Party, and for the radical Western Federation of Miners. She was the founding mother of the Industrial Workers of the World, and a signer of that group’s original charter. She organized copper miners in Calumet, brewery workers in Milwaukee, and garment workers in Chicago. She organized female as well as male workers, telling them all that God Almighty made women but the “Rockefeller gang of thieves” made the ladies. She rejoined the Mine Workers as a paid organizer around 1912, just as it launched two massive efforts that turned violent in West Virginia and Colorado. “Medieval West Virginia,” Mother Jones said of the Mountain State, “with its tent colonies on the bleak hills! With its grim men and women! When I get to the other side, I shall tell God almighty about West Virginia.”⁷

She did not win all of her strikes, but she was the most prominent and successful organizer of the United Mine Workers, which in the early twentieth century was America’s largest and most successful industrial union. But we miss her larger importance if we focus only on the nuts and bolts of daily organizing. Mother Jones, above all, captured the spirit of the labor movement and the American left. She had a gift for words. When someone introduced her as a great humanitarian, she snapped, “Get it right; I’m a hell raiser, not a humanitarian.” Thrown into prison once again during the Colorado strike, she told reporters, “I can raise more hell in prison than out.” When a convict told her that he was serving time for stealing a pair of shoes, she replied that he should have stolen a railroad, then he’d be a United States senator. Reminded of Jesus’s self-abnegation, Mother Jones declared, “Christ himself . . . would agitate against the plutocrats and hypocrites who tell the workers to go down on their knees and get right with God. Christ, the carpenter’s son, would tell them to stand up on their feet and fight for righteousness and justice on the earth.”⁸

And fight she did, traveling thousands and thousands of miles by rail and car, in horse-drawn carriages and on foot, giving hundreds of speeches across America. In the nineteen teens, she worked with Mexican revolutionaries in the Southwest, political prisoners in California, and steel workers in the Midwest. The 1920s found her back in the coalfields, but now, in her mid-eighties, her health increasingly broke down, and her great oratorical powers began to flag. She continued making

appearances, and she worked on her autobiography, which appeared in 1925. On May Day, 1930, she and hundreds of well-wishers celebrated her hundredth birthday (she was really 93). Six months later, she passed away.

They buried Mother Jones in the Union Miners' Cemetery in Mount Olive, Illinois, alongside the "brave boys" who fell in labor's cause. Thousands came to hear Father John Maguire's funeral oration, and tens of thousands more listened on radio station WCFL, Chicago's voice of labor:

"Today," Maguire said, "in gorgeous mahogany furnished and carefully guarded offices in distant capitals wealthy mine owners and capitalists are breathing sighs of relief. Today, upon the plains of Illinois, the hillsides and valleys of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, in California, Colorado and British Columbia, strong men and toil worn women are weeping tears of bitter grief. The reasons are the same. . . . Mother Jones is dead."

For working men and women, Mother Jones was one of their own. She organized thousands of workers in a range of trades. But perhaps her greatest achievement was being heard at all. Who was more silenced in early twentieth-century America than an elderly, working-class, immigrant widow? Yet she created a character, Mother Jones, and lived that persona until the day she died. And having found a voice as Mother Jones, she raised it like a prophet in the cause of America's workers, and they responded to her call.⁹

Mary Harris, Mary Jones

But where did this remarkable woman, this Mother Jones, come from? The essential answer is that there was no Mother Jones. Or to put it more precisely, Mother Jones was a persona created by a woman named Mary Jones, who, before she married, was known as Mary Harris. So who was Mary Harris? Here are the opening words of the *Autobiography of Mother Jones*:

I was born in the city of Cork, Ireland, in 1830. My people were poor. For generations they had fought for Ireland's freedom. Many of my folks have died in that struggle. My father, Richard Harris, came to America in 1835, and as soon as he had become an American

citizen, he sent for his family.

That's it. That is her whole treatment of her childhood, five short sentences. Note what she doesn't talk about: her mother's name or her siblings, where she went to school, if she was baptized, if she spoke Irish, if the family attended church, how they made a living. In a book of 250 pages, she devoted six to the first half of her life. And much of what she wrote was wrong.¹⁰

The *Autobiography of Mother Jones* was written in 1925, when, according to her calculation, she was 95 years old, so perhaps this is an instance of her simply not remembering well. Then, too, she grew up in less publicly confessional times than our own. Above all, the *Autobiography* was meant less to reveal Mary Harris's early life than to inspire others to action, and to perpetuate the memory of Mother Jones.

Mary Harris was not the sort of person for whom much biographical information is available. The poor rarely write or preserve many letters. Even less often do they write memoirs. Archives in the past were not much interested in whatever papers they left behind. So if Mother Jones was not particularly interested that we get to know her in her youth, and if there isn't much evidence to go on, how do we say anything about her? By working with the bits and pieces we can find.

For example, when she was already quite famous, she gave her birthdate as May Day, 1830, in interviews, in speeches, and she repeated it in the *Autobiography*. But the very first newspaper stories about her, back in the late nineteenth century, said she was born in the late 1830s. As it turns out, research in Irish parish records gives a baptismal date of August 1, 1837, so she exaggerated her age by seven years. Why would she do that? To enhance her venerability, to make her remarkable story even more remarkable.¹¹

Here is what we know. Richard Harris and Ellen Cotter were married in the tiny town of Inchigeelagh, County Cork, on February 9, 1834. Their first-born son was baptized in Inchigeelagh parish; Mary came next, and she and the rest of the Harris children were baptized in the North Cathedral in Cork. Probably the family had moved to the city for work, though Inchigeelagh parish was only thirty miles distant, connected by the River Lee as well as by a carriage road. A patch of land about six by nine miles, containing about 6,000 people, a contemporary described the parish as "a country gradually assuming wilder and more imposing features; everywhere it is broken up by rocky hills, partially clothed with purple

heath and furze. . . . Slight patches of cultivation diversify the succession of crag and heath, snatched as it would seem from the surrounding barrenness."¹²

The Irish population was growing rapidly in these years, and in rural parishes land was divided and subdivided into tiny farms, for which landlords often charged exorbitant rents. Most families subsisted on potatoes, perhaps supplemented with milk from a dairy cow. Commerce had penetrated all over Ireland, and cities like Cork were marketplaces for goods from the hinterland. Still, Inchigeelagh parish was a bit more remote than most, a little poorer, with a lower literacy rate and a higher likelihood of hearing the Irish language. It also had a strong history of rebellion, of "Rockite," "Molly Maguire," and "White Boy outrages," kept alive in local legends and ballads. There is no way of knowing for sure, but when Mother Jones wrote in her *Autobiography* that many of her folks died in the struggle for Ireland's freedom, she well might have been referring to these dramatic moments in the early nineteenth century. West of Inchigeelagh, in 1822, for example, as crops failed and famine threatened, 5,000 men took up positions on the cliffs along the road connecting Bantry and Cork. Hundreds of insurgents, led by a mysterious "Captain Rock," engaged local magistrates before melting back into the landscape. The rebellion was immortalized in "The Battle of Keimaneigh," a song still circulating in the twentieth century. We'll never know if Mary Harris's ancestors participated in such "outrages," but clearly the memory of rural rebellion was part of her inheritance.¹³

The Harris children no doubt carried much of the culture of the parish with them, but they were raised mostly in Cork City. Here, as in the countryside, the Irish economy was expanding, commercializing, but wealth was concentrating in fewer hands, so that many Irish people, even in the early 1840s, faced poverty or emigration. To a large extent, the skew in wealth coincided with religion, and Catholics like the Harrises were the losers in this race. We'll never know for sure, but Richard Harris was a laborer in North America, and he probably was the same before he left Ireland. Perhaps he worked in the famous Butter Market.¹⁴ It would make sense; the family lived in North Cork, attended mass at the North Cathedral, and certainly the butter trade offered employment to men like Richard Harris. In fact, most Irish dairy, beef, and pork bound for North America shipped out of Cork Harbor, offering lots of work in packing, crating, and hauling.

Again we can only speculate on the quality of life for young Mary, but just imagining North Cork, we can conjure the sight of the poor wandering the streets,

of the hospitals and asylums in that part of town, the pungent smells of the lime works and the local tannery and the offal from hundreds of pack animals bringing produce in from the countryside, the sounds of straining men hauling goods from the Butter Market down to port, and the sounds too of the famous bells of Shandon, from the still-standing Church of Ireland house of worship.¹⁵

Cork of Mary's youth was a poor town, with eighty thousand residents, most of them in the slums. Wages had been stagnant for decades, as more and more people poured in from the rural parishes. Politics were volatile, with cross-cutting schisms along lines of class, religion, and nationalism. Here Daniel O'Connell held monster rallies for repeal of the hated Act of Union; here too, it was alleged, the original St. Mary's North Cathedral was burned down by Protestants, and that Catholics came close to burning down St. Anne's Shandon Church in retaliation.

But what about Mother Jones's claims, made much later in life, that she witnessed severed heads at the ends of swords, and that her father fled for his life because of his revolutionary activities? It all seems pretty unlikely. Richard Harris's name shows up in no official records that I was able to find, nor was Cork the sort of place where rebels bled into the streets, not in Mary Jones's era. Perhaps some distant kin were involved in the secret societies that flourished in the Southwest, including parishes like Inchigeelagh, and maybe the Harrises told stories as part of family lore. Certainly the city of Cork was plenty turbulent during her youth, and while we have no direct evidence about her family, working-class Catholics before mid-century found ways to make their grievances known, and surely the Harrises were at the least keenly aware of Ireland's deepening schisms.¹⁶

Many of those who fled Ireland in this era later told stories of rebellious kinfolk who resisted the English until forced to flee. There was much mythmaking in this, so Mother Jones trod a well-worn path. In fact, most left Ireland filled with bitterness and shame, not righteous rebellion. The Harrises, like hundreds of thousands of others, were Famine immigrants, desperately poor. In fact, given what we know about where Mary's father ended up and when, Richard Harris and his eldest son must have been aboard one of the "coffin ships" of 1847, "Black '47," the one year of the Great Hunger when the majority of refugees disembarked not in the U.S. but in Canada. Although not the year with the largest total number of refugees, 1847 almost certainly had the highest death rate. Mary and her mother and siblings followed a few years later, after Richard settled in Toronto.

The Famine scarred everyone. Late in the summer of 1845, farmers found

the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* in Cork gardens. Crops had failed before, but this new disease was particularly virulent. By fall, damage was extensive; a year later, with hopes high for a good harvest, the potato crop in the west failed utterly. Over the next five years, a million Irish perished; and over the next decade, two million left their homeland. What was understood then and now was that the Great Hunger had natural causes, but humans made the tragedy far worse than it needed to be. Landlords pushed tenants off their estates, and then under the rigid rules of the English Poor Law Unions, dispensed charity to the “lazy Irish” with such parsimoniousness as to starve people. Fearing budget deficits, conservative English politicians offered very limited solutions to the Famine, while evangelical Protestants regarded it as some sort of judgment on Irish “sloth.” There is truth to the expression “God made the potato blight, but the English made the Famine.” So if it is wrong to say that the London government caused the disaster, it is nonetheless true that rigid belief in *laissez-faire* capitalism, in the justice of markets, and the laziness of the poor prevented sufficient relief measures.

Though she never spoke of herself or her family as Famine immigrants, Mary Harris was deeply affected by what she witnessed in Cork. The poor and the dying poured into town from the countryside, seeking aid or passage out of the country. Ten years old when her father and eldest brother departed, she must have witnessed terrible scenes of suffering, and they continued until she finally left with her mother and her other siblings about four years later. In Cork, feverish children were everywhere, and whole families died of dysentery, cholera, and bloody flux. Mary witnessed too the “American Wake,” that sad custom of waking the emigrants as if they had died. So if Mary Harris’s people were not quite the rebels she later claimed, they all left Ireland with abiding anger at the English, with a deep consciousness of themselves as “the poor,” with tales of heroes and martyrs who fought the oppressors, and with pointed resentments against the greedy ones who pillaged the land and drove them out. Her stony silence through the decades about the Famine spoke volumes about how it scarred her and all who lived through it. More, those days gave an emotional charge to her future political beliefs. The Hunger fueled her anger decades later, and stories about the persecution of her people left her with a sense of social injustice as drama, where victims rose up to chastise their oppressors.¹⁷

In other ways too, Ireland came with Mary Harris to Canada. Toronto had a very large Irish population, both Protestant and Catholic, and the latter

community was very active with parish organizations. The Harris family lived in a respectable working-class section of town, with large numbers from Ireland, but their neighborhood certainly was not exclusively Irish. We know that the family was active in the Church, that the children mostly went to Catholic schools, that Mary's youngest brother, William, studied for the priesthood, that when she needed a character reference to enter the teachers' college, Mary turned to her parish priest.

But Toronto in the 1850s was a turbulent place. The economy boomed with construction, attracting large numbers of newcomers, but there were also lean years. Mother Jones used to say that she first learned of the clash of capital and labor when a boss tried to cheat her father out of his wages. There certainly was plenty of labor conflict in these years, often worsened by inflation or recession. Violence and intimidation accompanied efforts at labor organization. Richard Harris worked on building the railroads, and, as a man sensitive to labor rights, the words of a fellow worker probably resonated for him: "Are we to be trampled under the feet of despotic, dollar-hunting railway contractors? . . . Freedom says no! Common sense and public opinion echo no!"¹⁸

There was plenty of ethnic conflict too. Known as the Belfast of North America, the town was a third Irish but with a very large Protestant population. Orangemen were longer established in town than most Catholic Irish, and they used their ties to conservative politicians to have greater access to hiring for the police force and for public works. In the Famine years and after, prejudice, particularly aimed at the Catholic Irish, was right on the surface. The *Toronto Globe* declared "the monstrous delusion of Catholicism" to be the "enemy of the human race." Rome's goal was the subversion of religious and civil liberty. Indeed, the newspaper added that the sloth, filth, and drunkenness of Irish Catholics made them a plague to Canada West like the locusts of Egypt. The Irish responded to such sentiments with organizing of their own, from the Hibernian Benevolent Society to the Fenian movement, in which there are hints that Richard Harris was active. Irish nationalism was very much in the air as Mary grew to adulthood, and so were longings for the old country, as songs like "My Inchigeelagh Lass" and "Remember Skibbereen" rang out from the pubs.¹⁹

Of course, as the eldest daughter, Mary Harris must have shouldered many of the household responsibilities in Cork and Toronto: cleaning and cooking, caring for the young ones, shopping, washing the clothes. She became so proficient with

a needle and thread that later in life she earned her bread as a seamstress and dressmaker. But she was ambitious to learn and at the age of 20 in 1857 she gained admission to the Toronto Normal School, the crown jewel of pedagogy in Canada West. The school's mission was to train teachers, but also to spread British bourgeois culture through Canada's western territories. There were very, very few Irish students when she entered; she was one of only two Catholics in the whole school, and the only one who was a woman. She never finished her education — she must have been very uncomfortable there. But she stayed for almost a year — she had enough training to secure a position. Teaching, of course, was one of the few careers open to women, and she landed a job teaching at a convent school in Monroe, Michigan, in 1859 when she was 22 years old.

So, her baggage included ideas and feelings and memories from Ireland and, now, Canada. Her family saga was part of a much larger story of poor people in Europe and America caught up in a booming capitalist marketplace. In Cork she witnessed the most abject misery firsthand — years of it — and there, too, she developed a way of thinking about oppression, of personalizing its origins and glorifying the martyrs who resisted it. In Toronto she was exposed to the vagaries of working-class life in an industrializing city, to labor's struggles, to the Church's teachings about the need for womanly renunciation in the name of Mother Mary, and to the heady rhetoric of freeing Ireland from the English oppressors. All of this she took to the United States.

We don't know why she left her home and family — if there was some rift between them, or if she really wanted to see the world, or if this was just her ambition speaking. We know that Irish women were unusually adventurous, that compared to other immigrants they often traveled and sought work while unmarried and alone, so there was nothing that unusual about her venturing off. She truly was footloose for a little while. She didn't stay but a few months in Monroe, Michigan, travelling from there to the booming western city of Chicago, where she opened a dressmaking shop, but less than a year later, on the eve of the American Civil War as it turned out, she took a teaching job in Memphis, Tennessee. That didn't last that long, either.

She met and married a man named George Jones. Memphis was a boom town on the eve of the Civil War, a key city for the grading, packing, and shipping cotton. Four railroads converged on the Bluff City, two more were under construction, and the town grew, in no small part, because of an influx from abroad, with over

4,000 Irish immigrants by 1860. The Irish were poor enough to compete for jobs with African Americans — both slave and free — and they settled primarily in the first ward, a neighborhood known as “Pinch,” short for “Pinch-Gut” because of the leanness of its denizens.

There, in Pinch, Mary and George Jones made their home. They survived secession, the siege of Memphis, emancipation, and a terrible race riot in 1866 in which Irish immigrants participated in large numbers against the newly freed slaves, killing forty-six blacks, shooting and beating about 200 more, raping five black women, burning eighty-nine homes, four churches, and eight schoolhouses;²⁰ all of it a prelude to the violent intimidation that the Ku Klux Klan, founded by Memphian Nathan Bedford Forrest, would bring against the freed men, beginning in 1867. In these turbulent times Mary and George Jones started a family, and by 1867, when Mary was 30 years old, they had four children.

As a schoolteacher, she had attained the top of the occupational pyramid for Irish women. As was expected of women with children in this era, of course she quit her job to raise them. George, though, was part of what in later years would be called the “aristocracy of labor.” He was a skilled worker, a union man, an iron-molder, in an era when there was high demand for heavy industrial goods: boilers, rails, freight cars and the like, especially with war. Mary wrote about the workplace disputes involving her father in Toronto, but here was her first encounter with organized labor as she and George spoke about the nascent union movement, and as they read the *Iron Workers International Journal*, that came into the home each month.

So Mary Jones had come a long way from the dire scenes she witnessed in the streets of Cork. Tragedy, though, was about to strike again. The Jones’s neighborhood, the Pinch, was in a part of town always susceptible to flooding, and in the fall to seasonal outbreaks of disease. In early September of 1867, yellow fever appeared once again along the Gulf Coast, and by the end of the month it had made its way up the Mississippi River. Through October it had its way with Memphis — statistics are very hard to come by — something like 2,500 people fell ill. Epidemics are never socially neutral; as had been the custom, the rich fled the city at the first signs of outbreak. Yellow fever was often referred to as “stranger’s disease” because newcomers, like the Irish, had no previous exposure to it and therefore little immunity.

Those stricken with yellow fever first developed flu-like symptoms, then,

within a few days, they were hemorrhaging, literally, from every orifice, vomiting black blood and dying in agony. All four of Mary Jones's children died. So did George Jones. The matter-of-fact tone of her autobiography as she recounts the event only heightens the emotion:

In 1867 a yellow fever epidemic swept Memphis. Across the street from me ten persons lay dead from the plague. The dead surrounded us. They were buried at night quickly and without ceremony. All about my house I could hear weeping and the cries of delirium. One by one my four little children sickened and died. I washed their little bodies and got them ready for burial. My husband caught the fever and died. I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine. All day long, all night long, I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart.²¹

So, first the death cart's wheels in Cork, then resurrection from those horrors, and now that sound again, death carts, real or imagined, bearing away her family.

After a short time — we don't know how long, weeks or months — she left for Chicago. Now, this was in 1867, and she managed to start a dressmaking shop in Chicago again, with a partner. In 1871 they were burned out of their shop in the Great Chicago Fire. She, like a hundred thousand other Chicagoans, was left homeless. Her life — famine, plague, and fire — was biblical in its tragedy.

The next three decades for Mary Jones were her years in the wilderness. Working, trying to make a living, trying to put the horrors of her past behind her, and at the same time imbibing radical labor ideas, going to lectures, witnessing the infamous labor events of the late nineteenth century — the railroad strike of 1877, the hanging of the Haymarket Martyrs, the Pullman strike of 1894. Chicago was the most radical city in America in this era. It was the crucible where events of the first thirty years of Mother Jones's life mixed in her imagination with the great national dramas of immigration, the building of enormous fortunes, the city rising before people's eyes, the growth of massive industries, and worker rebellion against oppression. Here she got to know many of the nation's union leaders, a group that was heavily Irish and Irish American. And it was in Chicago that she created Mother Jones, for it was in Chicago, the great shock city of the late nineteenth century, that people came to change their luck, change their lives, change their identities.

Mary Harris was a poor Famine immigrant, a young schoolteacher and dressmaker, who drifted away from her working-class Toronto family to pursue a life in the United States. *Mary Jones* was the wife of a working-class man and mother of a young family until plague took them all, and left her a middle-aged widow, making ends meet sewing dresses in Chicago. By the late 1890s, she was almost as dispossessed as an American could be — poor, working class, Irish, widowed, elderly (she turned 60 years old in 1897).²² With precious little left to lose, she invented and inhabited the role of *Mother Jones*. Out of the tragedies of her life — the Great Hunger, the yellow fever epidemic that took her family, the Chicago fire that destroyed her small business — she forged a new persona that transformed her. She never called herself Mary again; all of her letters were signed “Mother Jones,” and businessmen, union leaders, even presidents of the United States, addressed her that way. She wore antique black dresses, exaggerated her age, spoke of her impending mortality, and invoked a mother’s claim to moral virtue. But she merged that saintly image with hellfire oratory and raw physical courage. She defied police officers, private detectives, and National Guardsmen; she flouted judges’ injunctions, belittled governors, and assailed businessmen; she served several jail terms, declaring she could raise more hell inside prison than out. She became the heroine of a thousand fights for justice.

Back to Ireland

The persona of Mother Jones was created out of the need to forget. To continue being Mary Jones was to live with memories of unbearable loss, and, too, to live within the limits of a life constrained as an immigrant woman and an aging worker. To become Mother Jones was to take on a whole new identity, but also to acquire power.²³

Forgetting and remembrance are keys to the Mother Jones story. In her day, Mother Jones was one of the most famous women in America. And in the twenty-first century, though her name does not ring out as it did decades ago, she is remembered where she was most active, in Appalachia, Colorado, the anthracite country of Pennsylvania, and the coal towns of the Midwest. A plaque in Philadelphia commemorates the Children’s Crusade, and one in Hyattsville, Maryland, notes where she finished her long life. New books continue to be published and she still gets a shout-out and sometimes more in college courses on labor history and women’s history. Her words yet echo on the stage, and there are plans in downstate



Here is the embodiment of Mary Harris Jones's transformation into Mother Jones, complete with antique black dress, "granny glasses," and the stern stare of the forbidding grandmother. She was clearly a force to be reckoned with. This photo is dated 1914 when she was 77. She died in August 1930, but celebrated her 100th birthday on May 1 of that year to commemorate both her commitment to labor and her role as the mother of all workers. Harris and Ewing Collection of the Library of Congress. LC-H261- 4468 [P&P].

Illinois to commemorate her life with driving tours of the mine country.

But Mary Harris's beginnings in Cork were long forgotten back in Ireland. She left with her family as impoverished refugees from the Famine, and while she no doubt remembered and sometimes spoke about the land she left behind, she was not remembered in Ireland. When she died in 1930, only a slim paragraph in a Cork newspaper mentioned her passing.

Yet out of the pools and eddies of history, memories sometimes bob to the surface. Gerard O'Mahony, from Cork, told me this story: "I first heard of her [in New York City] from a guy in Harlem when I worked there in 1977. He claimed that she was a 'great woman,' and had helped his grandfather in some strike or other but he was definite she was from Cork where I came from."²⁴ O'Mahony wrote to *Mother Jones Magazine* in San Francisco, but they seemed to know very little — they weren't even aware she was from Cork. Years later, he mentioned her to a local historian, Jim Fitzpatrick from Blackpool on Cork's north side, who began to dig in. They discovered that the celebrated Irish folk musician Andy Irvine had written and performed "The Spirit of Mother Jones," a fine song about her life. A Cork city councilman, Ted Tynan, knew of her from reading labor history, and in 2011 he proposed that a plaque be erected in her honor. Soon, community workers such as James Nolan, a local butcher who works tirelessly in the Shandon Street area, housewives, a local hotel manager, and community arts people got involved. The idea took hold of staging a festival on August 1, 2012, to coincide with the 175th anniversary of Mary Harris's baptism in Cork's North Cathedral.

This has turned into an annual event, and I was lucky enough to attend the first one, along with Kaiulani Lee, an American playwright and actress who created a wonderful stage performance of Mother Jones's life; Rosemary Feurer, a professor at Northern Illinois University who made a brief documentary about Mother Jones; and Marat Moore, who is writing a novel based on Mother Jones's early life. The first festival was quite a success, filled with music, concerts, presentations, lectures, all held in Shandon on Cork's north side, in the very streets and lanes that Mary Harris walked as a child. Andy Irvine came and performed in St. Anne's Church, Shandon — the first time ever it was used for such an event — whose famous bells Mary Harris heard as a girl.

As O'Mahony expressed it, the goal of the festival was to bring back to Ireland and to Cork some of its real history through the life of this remarkable woman. Especially on the north side of town, over and over people noted that she embodied

Cork's rebel past. It is this vibrancy that O'Mahony keeps coming back to, her strong voice in the face of injustice, her utter fearlessness when confronted with evils like child labor. These annual Mother Jones commemorations have been less about her political and social ideas, which were controversial in their day and remain so, but more about her insistence that we not flinch from hard realities. It was her resilience and courage in the face of terrible repeated tragedies — the Famine, the loss of her family in Memphis, the Great Chicago Fire — that bears remembrance. More, she didn't just survive these tragedies. She raised her voice, made her ideas known, touched others' lives, despite all the handicaps of being an elderly immigrant woman of the working class. And she insisted that people confront their social problems together.

Of course the Mother Jones festivals are good for tourism in Cork. The last night I was there, hundreds of people packed the bar at the Maldron Hotel to listen and sing with some great Irish bands. Thanks to a local brewer, we drank "Mother Jones Porter" — or at least had one and then went back to Beamish stout — and talked and joked long into the night. But before that celebration, people came out in droves to hear stories about one of Ireland's own, lectures about her commitment to the poor and to workers when they needed all the friends they could get. An exhibit in the old Butter Market traced her life, and that plaque finally went up on John Redmond Street in Shandon, where she no doubt walked as a girl.

To paraphrase the great English historian E. P. Thompson, the Mother Jones Organizing Committee rescued her from the enormous condescension of posterity. O'Mahony and the other organizers are acutely aware that they are contributing to a living public history for Cork and for Ireland. Part of the mission is to remember something more substantial than the "paddywhackery" packaged for tourists, the leprechauns and shillelaghs and the obligatory photo with a pint of Guinness. Mother Jones's story reminds people of a deeper connection between Ireland and America, a shared history of social struggle and the fight for workers' rights. The committee hopes to keep the annual Mother Jones festival alive for years to come, so that everyone in Cork and especially schoolchildren learn what a great woman came out of their town, a woman of the world.

Ideally, the spirit of Mother Jones spreads back to America, and to wherever battles for social justice are fought. Last year, the organizing committee presented the first "Spirit of Mother Jones Award," given annually now to individuals who demonstrate something of her courage and resolve for the public good. There are

hopes of raising the money to erect a statue of Mother Jones near the old Firkin Crane,²⁵ and maybe installing a permanent exhibit on her remarkable life. Ask the organizers and they will tell you that Mother Jones has returned to Cork to stay. And they'll say that Mother Jones herself is responsible for much of their success so far, that as each festival approaches, she takes charge to assure that all goes well, that the spirit of Mary Harris really has returned to Cork.

And they say that maybe, just maybe, her fighting and passionate spirit will also inspire the Cork hurling team, known as The Rebels, to again bring the All-Ireland hurling title back to her hometown. ♦

Endnotes:

¹ Upton Sinclair, *The Coal War* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1976), 88–90, 268–269.

² John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 74–75.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Quoted in Elliott J. Gorn, *Mother Jones, The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 4.

⁵ T. J. Llewellyn to William Wilson, March 20, 1913; Margaret R. Duvall to William Wilson, March 13, 1913; A. Van Tassel to Woodrow Wilson, May 2, 1913, all in General Records, Department of Labor, 1907–1942, Chief Clerk's File, record group 174, box 24, file 16/13, "Conditions of Coal Fields in West Virginia," National Archives and Records Administration.

⁶ Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 64–71, 299–303.

⁷ Mother Jones, *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, ed. Mary Field Parton (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1925), 235.

⁸ From *Autobiography*.

⁹ Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 286–293; Father John Maguire, "Panegyric to Mother Jones," reprinted in the *Illinois State Federation of Labor Weekly Newsletter*, 16(37) 1930, 1–3.

¹⁰ Mother Jones, *Autobiography*, 11.

¹¹ Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 7–8.

¹² Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 9–12; J. Windle, *Historical and Descriptive Notices of the City of Cork* (Cork: Bradford and Company, 1849), 278–281. Also see W. Maziere Brady, *Clerical and Parochial Records of Cork*, Cloyne, and Ross, vol. 1, (London: Longman, 1864), 122–23.

¹³ Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 21–35; Gearoid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland Before the Famine 1798–1848* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 5–7, 129–155; James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 16–59; Peter O'Leary, "Cath Cheim an Fhia: Its Place in the Rockite Campaign," *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 97 (1992), 97–103.

¹⁴ Cork had the largest butter market in the world during the 1860s, exporting butter as far as India, South America, and Australia. The Butter Exchange was in Shandon.

¹⁵ Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine*, 151–156; Patrick O'Flanagan and Cornelius G. Buttimer, eds., *Cork: History and Society* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1993), articles by A.M. Fahy,

- "Place and Class in Cork," 793–796, and by M. Cronin, "Work and Workers in Cork City and County, 1800–1900," 721–729; Maura Murphy, "The Working Classes of Nineteenth Century Cork," *Cork Historical and Archaeological Society Journal*, 80 (1980), 26–27; Maura Murphy, "The Economic and Social Structure of Nineteenth Century Cork," in David Harkness and Mary O'Dowd, eds., *The Town in Ireland*, (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1981), 125–154.
- ¹⁶ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 61–67, 82–84, 92–101; Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 64–66, 104–136.
- ¹⁷ Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 14–17. The literature on the Famine is enormous, but see Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 280–344; Donnelly, *Land and People*, 86–131; Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, eds., *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 209–259; and especially essays in Poirteir, ed., *Great Irish Famine*, including James S. Donnelly, "Mass Eviction and the Great Famine," Peter Gray, "Ideology and the Famine," Christine Kinealy, "The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine," and Mary E. Daly, "The Operations of Famine Relief, 1845–1857," 86–134, 155–173. Finally, for the full horror of those days, see the essays, documents and maps in John Crowley, William J. Smyth, and Mike Murphy's magisterial *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845–1852*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁸ McKay, *Flight from Famine*, 266–294; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 291–292, 315–316; Edwards and Williams, *The Great Famine*, 368–373.
- ¹⁹ Brian P. Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850–1895* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 19–30, 153–167; Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Canada's Age of Industry, 1849–1896* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 17–61; Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 13–40; Mark McGowan and Brian Clarke, eds., *Catholics at the Gathering Place*, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993), 43–48.
- ²⁰ James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community during Reconstruction," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 62, no. 3, July 1977, 243.
- ²¹ Mother Jones, *Autobiography*, 12.
- ²² Mother Jones, *Autobiography*, 11–23; Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 53–58.
- ²³ The rest of this essay concerns the revival of Mother Jones's memory in Cork, Ireland, through a series of annual commemorations of her baptismal day, August 1, 1837. My most important source is a long e-mail communication with Gerard O'Mahoney, one of the founders of the Mother Jones Day festivities. Our e-mails have spanned April 10, 2013 through April 25, 2014. In addition, I attended the first Mother Jones Day celebration in Cork in the summer of 2012, so my comments come from direct observation and from conversations with one of the principal organizers.
- ²⁴ E-mails with Gerard O'Mahoney. See note 23 above.
- ²⁵ Firkin Crane is a unique rotunda close to the famous St. Anne's Church of Shandon. Designed by Sir John Benson and opened in 1855, the building was part of Cork's original butter exchange. Firkin was a measure of butter. The butter market slipped into decline and closed in 1924 at which point James Daly and Sons took over the building and used it until the 1970s when a cap and hat company took over for a few years. After being gutted by a big fire in 1982 the Firkin Crane reopened in the 1990s and is now a dance center.