

# Down in the Mines

Film review

Dave Riddle

1970

Eldridge Cleaver has a rap about how immigration screwed up the unity of the American working class. How the English immigrants came and kicked the Indians off the land and then had to import black people to do the work, so that the Indians and blacks were always at the bottom of the heap. And then how later the Germans, French, Polish, Italians and Irish made the scene, each group starting at the bottom of the white job market and clawing its way up, only when the next immigrant group arrived and was forced into the shittiest jobs.

“The Molly Maguires” is a film about the Irish when they were at the bottom—before a few of them made it as police commissioners and presidents.

The Irish immigrated to America from the 1840s on. In the 1850s a group of revolutionary saboteurs called the Molly Maguires sprang up among the Irish mine workers in Appalachia. They carried on sabotage against the mine owners’ property, a lot like the machine-breaking Luddites did in England 60 years earlier. When the strikes and the legislation failed to improve mining conditions, the Mollys took to blowing up shit.

The film is set in the 1870s. The ‘70s were heavy depression years for U S capitalism—the years of the Great Pullman Strike. One of the things the ruling class does in these periods is to open up a whole new employment opportunity area: pigdom.

The film is a story about how a poor but ambitious Irishman becomes a pig. How he infiltrates and helps destroy a bunch of Molly Maguires. His name is James MacParlan. In fact, a guy named MacParlan did infiltrate the Mollys in the 1870s

It’s a good flick. One good thing is that it’s anti-pig. You can’t help but think of Fred Hampton’s death when you see the police break into a Molly Maguire’s house and murder him and his wife in their bed. The other thing is that it outlines the whole system of repression and social control under capitalism.

On the one hand there’s the pigs—everywhere, with shotguns and billy clubs. Tightassed motherfuckers who know what the workers will do if they turn their backs on them.

Then there’s the priest. An old dude whose cynicism is simply the worldly wisdom of the Church. He tells the people to forget about the class struggle, hold out for the pie in the sky. Violence begets violence. But the heaviest elements of social control is the promise of social mobility. This is what turns our poor Irishman into a pig. At one point his girlfriend says it: “The boss is Irish like you. All it takes is brains. You can be the same as him.”

The Molly Maguires didn’t think so. They had been down in the mine too long to believe that shit. They were too desperate. A lot of us today have decided that we don’t want any part of that promise of social mobility either. It’s based on a class thing. It depends on the greater exploitation and repression of other people, like Vietnamese and black people. This gives us a certain desperation too. Which makes us dig the film.

Another thing you dig in the film is the subtlety of certain parts of it. It is a woman, a wife of one of the Molly Maguires, who warns her husband not to trust MacParlan. But she is only a woman, so he ignores her. It makes you wonder how many revolutionary movements have failed because of male chauvinism.

For ecology freaks who can't see the connection between capitalism and pollution there are some good shots of what the mine operators did to the Pennsylvania countryside. On the other hand, the scenes of working conditions in the mines are too mild, if anything. You don't see the women and children pushing the coal wagons. You don't see the mutilated bodies of the coal workers. The men are too healthy looking.

The basic weaknesses of the film have to do with the fact, as another reviewer said in the Guardian, that Hollywood is not capable of producing revolutionary people's art. The character 'delineation is best with the pig. The Molly Maguires in the flick are just character types. People's art portrays the people as heroes. There are no heroes in this or any other example of present-day bourgeois culture. Just pathetic figures involved in one another's repression.

Because it isn't revolutionary art, but rather a progressive sort of fluke within an increasingly reactionary and stale bourgeois cinema, the film's meaning is ambiguous. The message that comes through depends on your own set. If you tend to see things in a cynical light, you will shrug your shoulders—you may even identify with the pig.

On the other hand, you might have a healthier reaction. What you will get from the film is a glimpse of your own history. The history of working peoples' struggles in this country is much heavier than the Man wants us to think.

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