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Fenian Bastards

or: the disappointing legacy of Irish-Americans

Margaret Killjoy

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I don't take much pride in being Irish-American. If you've met me, that might come as a surprise to you—I never shut up about my Irish heritage or about the 800 years the Irish have been fighting to be free of the colonial yoke. I've clearly, and slightly embarrassingly, made it a pretty large part of my personality. It's not the Irish part of being Irish-American that I don't take any pride in, it's the American part, and where the two words meet.

To be blunt, us Irish Americans sure fucked up. In Ireland, we were revolutionaries. In America, we were cops and colonizers and race-rioters. We took the devil's bargain as soon as we could, trading heritage and language for whiteness and for watered-down remnants of culture that look like green beer and shamrocks.

I say "we" like I wasn't born several generations into this, like my grandmother didn't scarcely speak her parents' mother tongue. She was born in Boston (naturally) to immigrants from Galway who desperately wanted their kids to assimilate. Her father escaped Ireland just before the Rising, but each of his brothers fought in it and were arrested for their trouble.

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Perhaps the proudest moment of my life is shaking the hand of one of those brothers on his hundredth birthday. That man lived in three different centuries, and near as I can tell he fought in a failed uprising, a mostly successful revolution, and a civil war against the revolutionaries who sold out the country—all before he turned twenty-five. When I met him, he'd been blind for decades but he was grinning ear to ear to meet his brother's descendants. He lived a longer life than the famously long-lived queen who later ruled the empire he took up arms against, and he did it living in a stone hut.

Meeting him is something I take pride in. That's a legacy that matters to me.

My grandmother's family name, I can trace it back to the Battle of Clontarf, in the year 1014, when the Irish drove the vikings from their shores.

St. Patrick's Day? I couldn't give a fuck about St. Patrick's Day. I drank a St. Patrick's Day green milkshake at a cafe this morning and it tasted like toothpaste.

I drank it anyway, because it was made of sugar and I'm fundamentally a goblin. I hope me drinking it anyway doesn't somehow become part of the metaphor I'm building here.

Neither Ireland-Irish and Non-Irish-Americans can stand us when we get on about our heritage, whether we're wearing green plastic garbage and screaming about whiskey or we're singing IRA songs and claiming a legacy of rebellion that we sure don't seem to live up to. No one can stand us and I don't blame them. It's reasonable to distrust (or dislike) any white person who claims oppression points by going on about how she didn't used to be white (the things we have in common with our Italian-American brethren are complaining about not always being white, being Catholic, and abandoning our history of radical leftism).

so much as working in support of anticolonial struggles and importing indigenous methods of rebellion, which then got digested in Europe and exported again. You've got the Greek anarchist doctor Plotino Rhodakanaty, who went to Mexico to learn about traditional land use from people and wound up inspiring a generation of indigenous Mexican anarchists. You've got the veteran of the Paris Commune, Louis Michel, who threw down with the indigenous people of New Caledonia while she was in exile and developed her anarchist thought while there. You've got the naturalist Peter Kropotkin, who developed most of his theories of anarchist communism by studying nature and anthropology, including in Siberian communities. And you've got... British anarchists who were consistently the only people (that I've found) in Britain who supported Irish independence and the violence of the oppressed. The editors of British anarchist newspapers in the 1880s and 1890s weren't trying to export anarchism to Ireland, they were trying to raise funds for Irish revolutionaries and they were taking notes about Irish methods of socialism and resistance. Like the Irish secret societies. Possibly (I haven't traced this on my red string board just yet) the precursor to affinity groups.

Direct action, insurrection, and communal land use were already core principles in Irish culture.

Somewhere in me I've got a good and proper essay about the abolition of whiteness, about how in order to destroy white supremacy we need to destroy whiteness as a social construct. I'll write it some day (other people have written it already, but who doesn't like learning to play a good cover song? It's like folk music; the abolition of whiteness is for everybody).

In the meantime, remember: if we wanted to celebrate Ireland properly, we'd fly Palestinian flags today, not wear green.

It's true that the Irish weren't quite white for most of American history, but we never had it half as bad as Black or indigenous people here, and we've been white for a hundred years now because we met the devil at the crossroads and sold him our soul. To be frank, and to open a can of worms no one feels like eating, Irish Americans have faced at least as much oppression in Protestant America for being Catholic as for being Irish (look at the history of the second incarnation of the KKK for more about that). But once again, Catholicism is not currently an axis of oppression in this country and while history matters, the present conditions matter more.

There *is* a legacy of Irish Americans worth caring about, but they're buried under cops, white supremacists (but I repeat myself), and leprechaun hats.

As for a legacy worth caring about, I can point in a few directions. First, and what I know best, are the Molly Maguires of the coal fields of Pennsylvania. When Britain did its second genocide of Ireland in the 1840s by starving the island, people fled to North America and brought some time-honored workingclass traditions with them. (The first genocide of Irish people came at the hands of Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century in the wake of the English Civil War. Ask me why I don't give a shit about the early anti-monarchy movement in England.)

It's a bit of an oversimplification, but I can point to two competing theories of labor struggle that vied for relevance in the 19th century. One, imported primarily from England, was labor unionism. Strikes, walkouts, collective bargaining. Socialism as something you have to strive for and build. The other, from Ireland, was basically "form a secret society with your friends, get drunk, put on women's clothes, and kill the rich while they sleep in their beds." It's a pretty cool tradition. It comes from the people that Engels (of Marx and Engels) considered too barbarically socialist to ever become good and proper Marxist socialists.

(Seriously, it's fascinating how obsessed with Ireland Engels was, in all the wrong ways.)

But the Molly Maguires. So there have been these looseknit secret societies all throughout Irish history (or at least since there have been English landlords to strangle), but the most famous today is the one that made it to the coal mines of America, the Molly Maguires. Their crossdressing wasn't quite a gender thing, and it wasn't quite a disguise. It was more of a magical act of transformation. They became something else when they got dressed up to go do sabotage and violence. That's a tradition of drag I can get behind.

Most of the Irish miners were happy enough to join the British-style unions, and frankly unionism is probably a better way, overall, to build the power of the working class. But whenever the bosses started to crack down on the unions and began to criminalize organizing, the Fenian bastards were always waiting. Insurrection and revolution are not opposites; they are complimentary strategies. Accept the unions or you'll deal with the Mollies.

Though the state is a powerful thing, and the Molly Maguires largely disappeared after a ton of them were hanged. So it goes.

Ireland won most of its independence in 1922, though Michael Collins and some of the other revolutionary leaders accepted a compromise and soon went to war against their own country, leading to the partition the country has today. (My Irish family doesn't like to talk about politics, but told my aunt that my revolutionary uncle would spit every time he heard the name Michael Collins, to the end of his days.)

But revolutionaries, all over the world, rely on having somewhere to go when things get too hot at home. For the Russians, it was Switzerland. For the Irish, it was America. This is a his-

tory I've peeked at here and there, in the scripts for various episodes, but it's one I haven't looked fully at yet. A history of the Irish American revolutionaries who fundraised, bought arms, returned to Ireland ready to do war, and even invaded Canada. (Seriously. They figured if they could capture Canada they could ransom it to the British for Ireland's freedom. It's not the most anticolonial move, but it's weird and it happened and I'll cover it someday.)

This went on for decades. The Fenian Brotherhood was formed in 1858, an American counterpart to the Irish Republican Brotherhood that became the Irish Republican Army. But you've also got folks like the Irish (not -American) syndicalist Jim Larkin who helped found the Dil Pickle Club in Chicago in 1917 alongside an American IWW bombmaker named Jack Jones (I don't think he was in a bombmaker's union, he was just a union guy who made bombs to blow up bosses. It was the style at the time). This club was a nightlife spot and one of the only racially integrated places in Chicago. And it was where Jim Larkin hung out while in exile, before he returned to a mostly-free Ireland.

There wasn't a lot of anarchist history in Ireland before the revolution (though by the early 20th century syndicalists and anarchists played a larger role in revolutionary struggle), but I have a theory about why there wasn't a capital-A Anarchist movement there. I even have notes somewhere about this theory, but they're not in front of me, because this isn't a well-considered essay, this is a rant I wrote because I was grouchy that my St. Patrick's Day milkshake tasted like toothpaste and that I still drank it. Shit, I think that milkshake is part of the metaphor after all.

All throughout anarchist history, I find European anarchists less concerned with exporting anarchism to the colonies