

## THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

by Mike McCormack, AOH Div. 8 Historian

A year or so ago, I was asked for information on a Michael McGovern, who was known as the ‘Puddler Poet.’ I didn’t even know what a Puddler was! However, the desire to learn more about McGovern urged me into a search and what I found astounded me in two ways: first, that such a man existed and secondly that he was virtually unknown. I researched local newspapers in Ohio’s Mahoning valley where he died, the Mahoning Valley Historical Society and other sources and I found that though forgotten, he wasn’t that unknown to a select few. However, I think he should be better known to a wider audience, so let me to share what I found.

Michael was born near Williamstown, Co. Galway in October of Black ‘47, the worst year of the Great Hunger. He attended one of the illegal Hedge Schools and learned a bit of his nation’s history along with classical Latin and the three Rs. He later learned more history around a fireside in the days when education was a luxury and storytelling took the place of books. Unable to make it as a farmhand, he was apprenticed to a shoemaker at a time when few could afford shoes. Unable to make it there, he sailed for England around 1866 in search of work. There he found a bride in the person of Anne Murphy in 1872. He also found employment in Sheffield, as a steel mill laborer. In the course of the next 15 years he worked his way up to the position of Puddler. A Puddler is a highly skilled worker who stirs molten pig iron with a 15-foot bar removing impurities then shaping and rolling it into ingots of purified wrought iron. It was hot, back-breaking and dangerous work; Michael worked 10-12 hours a day 6 days a week at work that few could do.

In addition to being the steel capitol of England, Sheffield was a center of trade unionism and Irish nationalism. In February 1867, a Fenian raid took place on nearby Chester Castle to secure arms for an upcoming Irish rising. An informer betrayed the plan and it failed. An angry McGovern then joined the Fenian IRB and worked as an organizer until 1882 when his activities were discovered and police were sent to arrest him. He was smuggled out to America by fellow Fenians. He sent for his family and they settled in Youngstown, Ohio where McGovern found work as a puddler in the steel mills. While McGovern stirred the iron, he also stirred his thoughts and impressions and molded them into poetry that made a tremendous impact and for which he should be lionized today.

He wrote about the injustices imposed upon both his native land and the American working class. His writings were rallying cries for worker’s rights and union recognition. They circulated among workers and were soon featured in many newspapers and Irish-American periodicals as he wrote:

*With justice in this noble fight wealth's private armies we defy;  
With votes as weapons wielded right, the cause of labor shall not die.*

They were a significant weapon in the campaign to bring about radical social and political change in 1800s America. His verses were memorized and recited wherever labor cried out against the barons of industry. In all, he wrote more than 1,000 verses in support of rights in the factories to which immigrants were flooding to seek a new life. They called him the Puddler Poet and he became their hero. In reading his verses, people also absorbed his American patriotism, an immigrant’s love of his native land, Irish freedom and mistrust of British rule. In Ohio he became a member of the AOH and a supporter of Clan na nGael, a branch of the IRB. When the “Catalpa Rescue” of six Fenian prisoners from a penal colony in Western Australia was organized in 1875, Michael wrote:

*She showed the green above the red as she did calmly lay  
prepared to take the Fenian boys to safety cross the sea.  
On the seventeenth of April last the Stars and Stripes did fly  
on board the bark Catalpa, waving proudly to the sky;*

He became involved in organizing St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Youngstown and in 1894 performed at an AOH concert giving a recitation in the AOH Hall which concluded with an exhibition of manual drill by armed members of the Hibernian Rifles. In 1898, Michael, was an officer of Youngstown AOH Division 2 of the 6 Divisions in the city, writing poetry about St Patrick and St Patrick’s Day celebrations – something he would do for the next 20 years. His engagement in the labor movement made him Secretary of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in 1890. Sometime later, he moved from being a Puddler to become an Inspector in the Mills; he later left the steel industry to work as a State of Ohio Oil Inspector and a foreman in

the Youngstown Street Department. In 1910, he was one of the first public figures to denounce the racial lampooning suffered by the Irish in the media. The archives of the Youngstown AOH contain many of his articles and poems in the early 1900s including WELCOME AOH MEN written for the 1904 AOH Ohio State Convention Youngstown. After the Easter Rising, like many Irish-Americans, he was shocked by the barbarity of the Black and Tan campaign in Ireland and was a constant critic of the atrocities committed by the Brits. In the 1920s, when Britain had agreed to talk treaty with Ireland, he was quick to remind Michael Collins of British deceitfulness in a verse he concluded with the words:

But Ireland more distrustful seems to grow and warning gives to her fighting sons  
Beware of Perfidy! Trust not the foe; to foil him, keep your hands on your guns.

On 3 April 1933, Michael McGovern, puddler poet and philosopher, died of a heart attack at age 85 in his home. Heroes die and soon after, their storytellers die too. Michael McGovern was left without a memorial and was soon forgotten. In his native Williamstown, his story had also been forgotten. However, a group led by Irish journalist Jim Fahy is changing that. In 2017 a Youngstown Ohio literary club, hosted a night of McGovern work and they and the Youngstown AOH have been exchanging information with Mr. Fahy. He wants to erect a memorial to the Puddler Poet; it's about time.