

THE UNION CLUB RIOT

of

THANKSGIVING DAY, 1920

By Hugh E. O'Rourke

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As compared to the many civic disturbances and riots that have occurred throughout the history of the city of New York, the British flag riot in front of the Union Club was a rather minor affair. However, an examination of this incident that occurred nearly seventy years ago reveals the intensity of the Irish-American community's feelings during the on-going struggle for Irish independence and tells us something about the gulf between the classes in the post World War I period.

The day began with the mourners assembled at East 67 Street and Third Avenue on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1920 for a march down Fifth Avenue to Saint Patrick's Cathedral for a memorial Mass for the soul of the late Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of the City of Cork who had died on hunger strike in an English prison. The day ended with a riot in front of the Union Club involving an estimated 5,000 people, 300 police officers, several thousand dollars of damages to the Union Club, scores of injuries to the rioters and four arrests.

The memorial Mass had been requested by the Corkmen's Association and the members assembled shortly before noon at East 67 Street and Third Avenue for a short march to the Cathedral. The several hundred marchers were to meet others already at the Cathedral for the Mass. As the Corkmen and their supporters arrived at East 51 Street and Fifth Avenue, they were shocked to find the Union Jack flying from a building housing the Union Club, directly opposite Saint Patrick's. After a brief conferral a group of about fifty angry mourners rushed the doors of the Club and demanded that the flag be taken down.

Telfair F. Minton, a club member, met the mob and refused to lower the flag. With that the angry mourners took matters in their own hands and assaulted Minton and other club members who came to his aid. During the melee, a club employee hauled in the offending banner and called the police. With their mission accomplished, the Irish withdrew and went into the Cathedral for the Mass.¹

An hour later at the end of the Mass the Irish were again met by the sight of the Union Jack flying from the Union Club. This time the Club was protected by over 300 police officers who were brought to the scene from every precinct in Manhattan. Acting Police Commissioner John A. Leach was also notified and he rushed to the scene from his home in Brooklyn. Another attempt to push into the Club was repulsed by the police on the scene.

In an attempt to calm the situation the Acting Police Commissioner and Msgr. Michael Lavelle, the rector of the cathedral, visited the Club and requested the Union Jack be taken down to defuse the situation. However, they were rebuffed by the Union Club leadership who refused on the grounds that the club had the right to display the flag and that they would not haul in the flag until sunset.

Next Msgr. Lavelle addressed the crowd and urged their disper-

sal. Flanked by two other priests still dressed in vestments from the Mass, he urged the crowd, "Go home for the love of this country. For the love of Ireland, go home." The crowd by this time was too emotionally involved in the events to follow the church leader's advice.²

Interestingly, both the *New York Times* and the *New York Daily News* accounts of the incident credit women in the crowd as being most vocal and assuming a leadership role in urging violent action by the men in the crowd. The *New York Daily News* story begins with the sentence, "Sinn Fein sympathizers, led by women . . ."³ The *New York Times* in its sub headline used the phrase . . . "Mob is Led by Women".⁴ The story continues with the description of the riot. "Urged on by a medley of hysterical screams from the women—they were the ring leaders—and by curses and improbations from the bolder men, the mob flowed out into Fifth Avenue and besieged the club . . ."⁵

In reading of the incident in both papers one area of contrast stands out in the two accounts. The conduct of the New York City Police Department was described in the *New York Times* as using no force in ending the incident:

No clubbing was the order and the policemen went to their task armed only with their weight and good natured, "Keep moving" commands. Despite their handicap, the policemen cleared the streets rapidly and not a single case of police clubbing was witnessed or reported. Nor during the entire display of mob fury was anyone injured.⁶

However, in several photographs published in the *New York Daily News* police officers are seen clubbing demonstrators. In a caption under one photo the story reads: "An aged man is shown dodging a policeman's blow." Other captions describe the accompanying photographs: "A woman rioter rising after being struck down by police," and "A male rioter felled by a policeman's club."⁷

In another part of the story the *Daily News* writer stated, "Reserves (policemen) met the rush and were forced to wield nightsticks right and left upon the mob who were reviling the patrolmen and calling them 'black and tans'.⁸

The crowd, unable to reenter the Club and restrained by the police, observed a group of the wealthy club members watching the event from the second floor of the club and apparently enjoying the spectacle being played out before them. Some of the Irish obtained broken bricks, stones and other construction debris from a nearby site and began to break all the windows that were reachable by hand thrown missiles. The Club members were not seen after that.

The crowd remained on the scene after the windows were smashed and all traffic on Fifth Avenue came to a stand still for over three hours.

Four men were arrested during the riot. William Hoffman, 22 years old, a Harvard graduate and Union Club member, was arrested for carrying a sword cane. At his arraignment in the Yorkville court, he claimed that he was on his way to St. Thomas' Church

5,000 IRISH IN BRITISH FLAG RIOT IN 5TH AV.; M'SWINEY MOURNERS FROM ST. PATRICK'S SMASH FIVE WINDOWS OF THE UNION CLUB

British Flag Raised in Honor of Pilgrims; Didn't Know of MacSwiney Mass, Says Union Club

J. Frederic Tams, a member of the House Committee, last night made the following statement on behalf of the Union Club:

"In accordance with the custom of the club we display the national flag on holidays, as we did today. In honor of the return to America of Ambassador Jusserand the French flag was displayed and the British flag was flown as a part of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims.

"Neither the club authorities nor any of the members knew that a MacSwiney service was planned for St. Patrick's Cathedral this morning. Certainly the British flag was not raised with the MacSwiney service in mind."

"The club authorities and members are united in the decision to fly the flags of friendly nations on all fitting occasions, as we have done since the beginning of the war.

"It is a matter of principle with us and we shall continue to do so."

MOB IS LED BY WOMEN

Enraged by Emblem Flying from Building Opposite the Cathedral.

300 POLICE CALLED OUT

Invasion of Clubhouse and Fight With Members Followed by General Attack.

Front page headline, *The New York Times*, 26 November 1920.

when he was attracted to the incident by the large crowd. He was unable to explain why he was bringing a sword cane to church but added that somehow the sword worked its way out of its case. He was held for trial in Special Sessions on the complaint of Detective John J. Walsh.⁹

On January 11, 1921 Hoffman was acquitted of the charge in Special Sessions Court by Judges Kernochan, Herman and Vorrhees. Hoffman claimed that the sword cane was one of four that he owned and that he picked up the cane by chance when he started out for St. Thomas's Church on the day of the riot. The cane apparently came out of the case "accidentally". The arresting officer stated that he did not see the defendant make any effort to use the sword.¹⁰

Three Irish supporters were arrested. William Donlon, a 32 year old laborer of 17 Walcott Street, Brooklyn, was arrested for disorderly conduct. Sergeant Schrey testified that he saw Donlon throwing stones at the building. Donlon denied the charge and presented Mrs. Anna Whitacher and Mrs. Catherine O'Connor as witnesses in his behalf. Both testified that they were with him and that they never saw him throw anything at the Union Club. Magistrate McQuade found him guilty and fined him \$25.

Hugh O'Rourke, 26, a laborer of 151 West 117 Street and Michael Kennedy, 27, a steamfitter of 100 Vanderventer Avenue were arrested on charges of malicious mischief. The complainant was Edward J. Haynes, clerk of the Union Club who charged the two with breaking windows. Both were held for a hearing. The Corkmen's Association arranged for bail and an attorney.

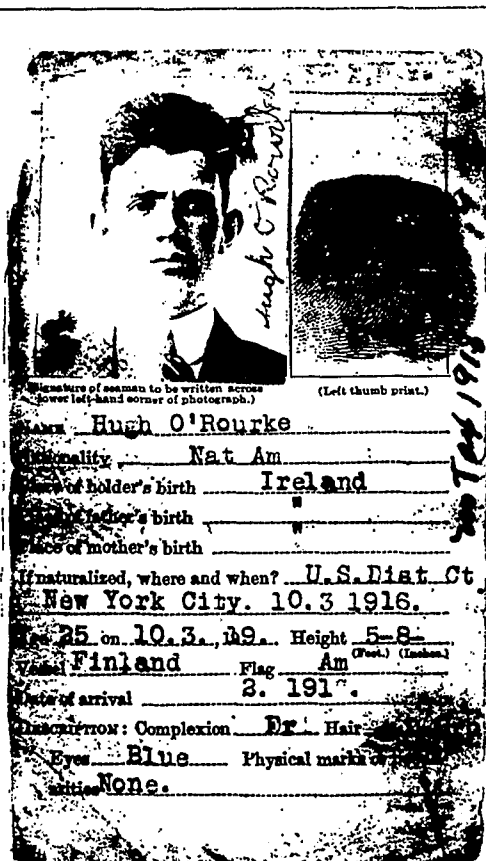
On February 3, 1921 both were acquitted in Special Sessions court. The only witness to appear against them and several

witnesses in their behalf stated that there were so many stones being thrown that it was impossible to pick out individuals among the rioters.¹¹

Hugh O'Rourke was perhaps typical of the more activist Irish during these troubled times. Born in Eligh, Stewartstown, Co. Tyrone on September 30, 1894, he emigrated to New York in 1911 at the age of sixteen. After working in a number of marginal jobs he joined the United States Merchant Marine and sailed on a number of ships that traveled between New York and Liverpool. After the uprising of 1916, he was contacted by the Clan na Gael in New York to deliver communications and other items to Irish sympathizers among the Liverpool longshoremen. In 1917 he was arrested by customs agents in Liverpool and served two years and nine months in prison. Returning to New York, he continued to be active in Irish affairs. He supported the De Valera faction in the Friends of Irish Freedom.¹²

In follow up stories to the incident, the Union Club admitted no wrongdoing or responsibility in instigating the riot. In a statement to the press J. Fredrick Tams, a member of the House Committee, released this statement:

In accordance with the customs of the club we display the national flag on holidays as we did today. In honor of the return to America of Ambassador Jusserand the French flag was displayed and the British flag was flown as a part of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims. Neither the club authorities nor any of the members knew that a MacSwiney service was planned for St. Patrick's Cathedral this morning. Certainly the British flag was not raised with the MacSwiney service in mind.



Hugh O'Rourke's Citizen Seaman's Identification Card, October 1919, just over a year before his arrest on Thanksgiving Day 1920.

The club authorities and members are united in the decision to fly the flags of friendly nations on all fitting occasions as we have done since the beginning of the war.

It is a matter of principle with us and we shall continue to do so.¹³

The Union Club was supported by the Congress of State Societies. Their President, Mrs. Thomas J. Vivian, sent this letter to Mayor Hylan:

November 26, 1920

To His Honor Mayor Hylan:

The Congress of States representing every State in the Union, hereby makes a protest against the public act of tearing down the British flag from the Union Club building on Fifth Avenue on Nov. 25 by an irresponsible mob and recommend that steps be taken at once to prevent the recurrence of such acts of violence.¹⁴

Ironically, shortly before the incident, Mayor John F. Hylan had presented Eamon De Valera, provisional President of the Irish Republic, with the Freedom of the City. Perhaps significantly, De Valera spoke about MacSwiney to a crowd of 35,000 at New York's Polo Grounds on 31st October 1920. According to the *Daily Tribune's* report the next day, the crowd shouted, "We will avenge MacSwiney's murder!"

At this time the Union Club, founded on June 17, 1836, was the most prestigious institution of its kind in New York. It was referred to as the "Mother of Clubs" as most of the other exclusive clubs were formed in imitation of the Union Club. The Century Club (1891), the New York Club (1845), the Metropolitan Club (1891), the Manhattan Club (1863), and the New York Yacht Club (1844) used the Union Club as a model. Many of the members of these clubs were also members of the Union Club.

In a privately published book celebrating the first hundred years of the Club's history, the Thanksgiving Day riot is described as a principled stand for the right to display whatever flag the Club deems appropriate.

The fist fight that resulted from the invasion of the 25 to 50 Irish who intended to remove the Union Jack was proudly referred to as "... a little Thermopylae" that like the original battle was won by a small band of heroes who stood their ground.¹⁵ After the Mass and with the renewal of the riot, the flags flew despite the shower of stones that destroyed the club windows. The official history reported:

As twilight fell the old club house with its window frames gaping like so many eyeless sockets, was left to nurse its wounds, but the three flags, true to the principles of liberty for which our country was founded still flew in the breeze.¹⁶

The Corkmen's Association, or more correctly the Corkmen's Benevolent, Patriotic and Protective Association, was founded on October 2, 1889 to "relieve its sick and distressed members, to bury its deceased members and in general, to do and perform all such other charitable acts as may be necessary for the relief or advancement of its members."¹⁷

Its aims were similar to numerous Irish organizations founded by the post famine Irish. The organizations were able to provide information, jobs and support to the newly arrived immigrant. Social activities and an opportunity to maintain some ties to the "old country" were added benefits. Obviously, politics and the conditions in Ireland were always topics of interest and during the year 1920 dramatic events were taking place in the City of Cork and the surrounding county. Confrontations between the Irish Republican Army and the "Black and Tans" were well covered in the New York newspapers and helped fire an extreme hatred of British rule in Ireland.

The British flag was a visible symbol of misrule and repression and its display galvanized Irish-American action during this period. The Union Club riot was but one of several disturbances during the month of November caused by the Union Jack. On November 10, 1920 five hundred Irish attacked the Capitol Theatre on Broadway and West 50 Street which had displayed the Union Jack as a part of an Armistice Day display. The group came equipped with a pole and a hook to pull down the flag which was flying from the theatre. A small band of policemen responded and attempted to restore order. George McManus, 42, of 154 E. 112 Street was arrested for disorderly conduct. The management of the theatre took down all flags except the United States flag. The Capitol Theatre was the site of disturbances for four nights in a row due to the display of the Union Jack.¹⁸

Non-Irish New Yorkers took a dim view of all this. The vast majority of letters to the editor in the *New York Times* were opposed to the actions of the Irish. The editorial in the *Times* on November 27 was headlined, "Hurting Their Own Cause", and attacked Irish activism on behalf of the problem in Ireland.¹⁹

Interestingly, John Devoy, publisher of the leading Irish-American newspaper in New York, the *Gaelic American*, was not sympathetic with the actions of the rioters. In an editorial he questioned "... what practical good is done by tearing them (Union Jacks) down?" He acknowledged that the mourners were provoked, but urged more action in supporting the Friends of Irish Freedom and their efforts for Ireland.²⁰

Devoy was undoubtedly preoccupied by Eamon De Valera's meeting in Washington, DC on November 16, 1920 at which he urged his supporters to leave the Friends of Irish Freedom which at its peak in 1919 had about 250,000 members. The split

was in part caused by a clash in personalities and in style between De Valera and the leadership of the Friends of Irish Freedom, namely Devoy and Judge Daniel F. Cohalan. The split would lead to the formation of the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic and the decline of the Friends of Irish Freedom, which eventually supported the Treaty faction in Ireland.²¹

A group of sixty Catholics, members of the Catholic Club, which was considered to be the most important organization of Catholic laymen, sent a letter to the Archbishop of New York, Most Rev. Patrick J. Hayes, criticising his apparent identification with extremists and with the infusion of policies into the Church. The group resented the Archbishop's support for the Irish cause. They pointed to the Archbishop's subscription to a \$1,000 loan to the Irish Republic, to his recognition of Eamon De Valera as President of the Irish Republic, and to his speeches and sermons which were sympathetic to the Republic. The group believed that the Church was in part responsible for the riot as it occurred immediately after the Mass.²²

Archbishop Hayes did not take the public criticism of him by this group very well. In a public letter to the group he replied that he "... has neither apology to make nor regret to express to a very small group of Catholics who, in violation of the most elementary rule of ordinary politeness among well-bred people, have seen fit to address him through the medium of the public press."²³ The Archbishop regretted the attack on the Union Club but stated that the Church was in no way responsible for the event. He made no apology for his support of Irish causes.

Another group within the Catholic Club came to the Archbishop's side in the dispute. Assistant District Attorney A.J. Talley, a member of the Catholic Club, attacked those who sent the public letter to the Archbishop. He stated that the Archbishop had never engaged in politics and that the group was "... more ready to attack upon the Church than in defense against unjust assaults upon it."²⁴ His letter was endorsed by the leadership of the club.

In examining this almost forgotten incident, it is difficult to understand the rationale of the Union Club leadership. Clearly, they understood that the flaunting of the Union Jack in the face of 5,000 Irish-American mourners was an act of provocation that could lead to violence. The Club leadership also refused to accept the good advice of Msgr. Lavelle and Acting Police Commissioner Leach who tried to get the Club to lower the flag. The ensuing reaction was predictable.

The post riot statement by J. Fredrick Tams, explaining that the Club was upholding a cherished principle in flying the Union Jack when it deemed it appropriate, must be viewed with some skepticism. It certainly appears that the Club displayed the flag to get a reaction from the mourners and to have a bit of sport, knowing that they would be protected by the police. The Club members undoubtedly had not considered the possibility of the shower of stones that drove them from their vantage point overlooking the battle.

Footnotes

¹ *New York Daily News*, November 26, 1920, p. 2.

² *New York Times*, November 26, 1920, p. 2.

³ *New York Daily News*, November 26, 1920, p. 2.

⁴ *New York Times*, November 26, 1920, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* My late father who was present and arrested at the riot recalled that American born women were the most vocal and emotionally involved at the sighting of the Union Jack.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *New York Daily News*, November 26, 1920, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ *New York Times*, November 27, 1920, p. 2.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, January 12, 1921, p. 8.

¹¹ *New York Times*, February 3, 1921, p. 11.

¹² He later became a licensed stationary engineer and worked for over 35 years with the City of New York. Ironically, he retired from the Department of Corrections at the Rikers Island jail.

¹³ *New York Times*, November 26, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ R.T. Townsend, *Mother of Clubs* (New York: privately published, 1936), p. 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Liam Dunphy, "County Cork in New York: A History of the County Cork Association", *New York Irish History*, Journal of the New York Irish History Roundtable, Vol. 3, 1988, pp. 21-23.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, November 11, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, November 27, 1920, p. 12.

²⁰ *Gaelic American*, December 4, 1920, p. 5.

²¹ M.J. McManus, *De Valera* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1946), p. 79.

²² *New York Times*, November 28, 1920, pp. 1-2.

²³ *New York Times*, November 30, 1920, pp. 1-2.

²⁴ *New York Times*, November 29, 1920, p. 1.

9th Regiment, I. V., N. Y. S. M.

ATTENTION!

THE
NEW YORK
IRISH DRAGOONS

Meet at Montgomery Hall, 76 Prince Street,
every Wednesday evening, at 8 o'clock.

Gentlemen desirous of joining the troop are
respectfully invited to attend.

P. KERRIGAN, Captain.
DENIS MONK, Orderly.

CARROLL GUARD
Company E, Irish Volunteers.

This Company have received many valuable
members within a few weeks. They drill on
Tuesday and Friday evenings, at K. P. H. House,
No. 29 Second Avenue.

Respectable young men, wishing to join a mili-
tary company, will do well to fall in with this
corps.

JOHN KAVANAGH, Captain.
c1079

IRISH VOLUNTEERS - 9th REGIMENT.
COMPANY A

The members of this Company meet
every FRIDAY at 8 o'clock, P. M., at the Eagle
Drill Rooms, corner of Christie and Delancy sts.

Young men desirous of seeing the Irish Regiment
progress, and of becoming citizen soldiers, will do well
to join this company.

M. WALSH, Captain.
H. M. DOWNS, Orderly Sergeant. r16

By 1852, 2,600 Irish belonged to a New York militia company. Irish companies of militia sprung up in part because foreigners were denied entry into native units. These ads are from *The Irish-American*, 4 January 1850, p. 3.