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Feature article

Butte, Montana

The Richest Hill in the World

Cover image: Anaconda Hill, Butte, Montana, U.S.A 1904.

Image from <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018651201>

BOOK OF THE WEEK

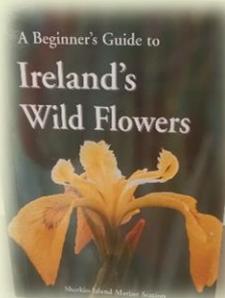
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THE RICHEST HILL IN THE WORLD AND THE MOST IRISH CITY IN AMERICA

In 1864,¹ Butte, a remote mining operation in the American west, developed into a formal settlement. Butte, however, turned out to be like none other. Fourteen hundred miles west of Chicago, 6,000 feet above sea level in the thin clear air of Montana's Big Sky Country, and sitting on the Continental Divide, Butte's initial mining heritage was in gold, but this was quickly exhausted. By 1874, Butte was almost abandoned.² Silver proved to be its saviour.

By 1878 \$900,000 worth of silver bullion was coming from the Butte area. This gave way to the exploitation of rich copper seams and it was copper that Butte became famous for. By 1902, almost 20% of all the copper mined in America came from Butte.

In 1904, the population was 60,000, and \$600 million dollars' worth of material had come out of earth underneath it.

The city could boast that it was 'the largest mining camp on earth' and it was the largest city between the Mississippi and San Francisco. It was a cosmopolitan town; the no-smoking signs in the mines were translated into 12 languages.³

The Irish came in their thousands. In 1900, they made up 36 per cent of the population of Butte and the surrounding area.⁴ Many of these were from Mayo. It was regarded as the most Irish city in America, with a larger concentration of Irish than any of the large east coast cities.

Newcomers lodged in boarding houses, usually run by the widows of miners.

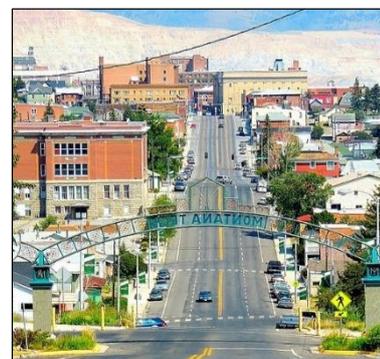
The dangerous conditions in the mines meant that anyone who avoided death was almost certain to develop some respiratory disease.

Many miners were unable to work beyond their mid-40s.⁵ An estimated 2,500 men died in mining accidents⁶ during the course of Butte's heyday.

By the early 1900s, many in the city were agitating for better conditions, not least the women, who organised themselves into the 'Women's Protective Movement'.⁷ Within two decades, Butte was nicknamed the 'Gibraltar of Unionism'; it had powerful unions and even a left leaning Mayor.⁸

But the struggle between unions and corporations (and the three 'Copper Kings'; William A. Clark, Marcus Daly and F. Augustus Heinze)⁹, was never ending and often extremely violent. In 1914, dissident miners turned on their union and destroyed the headquarters of the Western Federation of Miners in the city.¹⁰

Today Butte has a population of 34,000. Mining continued to play a big part in the local economy well into the 20th century, but it no longer does. Butte is fiercely proud and deeply knowledgeable of its Irish heritage, and it hosts several Irish festivals throughout the year.¹¹



Modern view of Butte

A brief history of The Townland of **GEEVERAUN**

(*Gaoth Bhran,*
Bran's Strandstream).

Gaoth is here "a shallow stream into which the tide flows, and which is fordable at low water." The gaoth is shallower than the fearsad. Located in the north-west extremity of the parish of Ballycastle (also known as Doonfeeney). Bounded on the north by the sea; east by the sea and Belderrigbeg; south by Belderrigbeg; and west by Kilcommon parish. It contains 762 acres, 0 roods, 8 perches*.

The property of Lord Arran, Esq. Agent, John Perkins, Esq., Ballybroony. It is leased to a Mrs. Crofton, who has it sublet to tenants at will, at the yearly rent of £80 for the whole townland. It is all mountain, of which a small part is reclaimed, and produces rye and potatoes. Houses are of stone, and the inhabitants are very poor. On Benivee, in the north of the townland, there is a Triangulation Station.

* *There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.*

Extract from Ordnance Survey
Namebooks of 1838

¹ Ring, T.; Watson, N; & Schellinger, P. (eds) (2013) [1996]. *The Americas: International Dictionary of Historic Places*. Routledge.

² Gibson, R.I. Butte History Overview, buttehistory.com.

³ Curran, F. 2011. 'The Most Irish Town in America?'. *The Irish Times*, the 16-Mar-2011.

⁴ Emmons D. (1987). An aristocracy of labor: The Irish miners of Butte, 1880–1914. *Labor History*, 28:3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ From the Irish Consulate, San Francisco.

⁷ <https://montanawomenshistory.org/the-women-protective-union/>.

⁸ O'Carroll, R. 2016. 'The mysterious lynching of Frank Little: activist who fought inequality and lost.' *The Guardian*, the 26-Sep-2016.

⁹ <https://co.silverbow.mt.us/481/History-Culture>.

¹⁰ <https://libguides.msibillings.edu>.

¹¹ Curran, F. 2011. 'The Most Irish Town in America?'. *The Irish Times*, the 16-Mar-2011.

A brief history of the **COX** surname

Mac Coiligin / Cox: a Cork surname ; probably an attenuated form of *Mac Colgan*.¹

Cocs / Cox; an hibernicized form of the English surname Cox.²

Mac Conchoille, Mac Conchoilleadh: *M'Andcoyllew, M'Inchelly, M'Enkelly*, and now by translation, 'Woods and Cox'; 'son of *Cú-choille(adh)*' (hound of the wood); a scattered surname, chiefly in use in Derry and Tyrone, Wicklow and Wexford, Cork and Limerick, but now everywhere distinguished under the anglicized forms of Woods and Cox, the latter form being due to its similarity to '*coileach*' a cock.³

(Cox), Mac Quilly, Mac an Choiligh (presumably from *coileach*, cock). This Co. Roscommon name, and its variants MacGilly and Magilly (*Mag Coiligh*) which are in use in Co. Monaghan, have been extensively changed to the English name Cox. Fr. Livingstone states that Cox in Fermanagh is *Mac Giolla*. The MacQuillys of Co. Roscommon were an erenagh family. Sometimes the Irish form *Ó Coiligh* is found.⁴

Of the 75 Cox births – including variants – in Ireland in 1890, 27 occurred in Leinster, 11 occurred in Munster, 15 occurred in Ulster, and 22 occurred in Connacht. This surname was principally found in Counties Roscommon and Dublin.

¹ Extract taken from "Irish Names and Surnames" by Reverend Patrick Woulfe, (p.333) ² Ibid, (p.236) ³ Ibid, (p.338)

⁴ Extract taken from "The Surnames of Ireland" by Edward MacLysaght, (p.251)