

Irish precedent for ban on mining at a sacred site

Do Christian beliefs outweigh Aboriginal ones? Max Wallace raises the question.

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The recent decision by the Prime Minister not to reconsider mining at Coronation Hill was the correct ethical decision for reasons he may not be aware of.

The fact of the matter is that there is a precedent where mining has been refused because Christians, in a manner comparable to Australian Aborigines, would not have a bar of it. It is likely that elements of the Australian mining lobby were aware of this case and have kept absolutely quiet about it.

In May 1990, the Irish Government refused approval for mining what may be the first sacred site in the Christian world.

The site was Crough Patrick, the very mountain where St Patrick is said to have fasted for 40 days and 40 nights and from where he went on to convert Ireland to Christianity around the year 440AD.

There is no doubt that it is an Irish sacred site. On the last Sunday in July each year thousands of pilgrims climb the 760m to the chapel on the summit. The first Mass of the day on the summit in the 1970s was held at 4am. It was normal then for the majority of the 60-70,000 who turn up annually to begin the rocky climb at midnight, many in bare feet. The soft option now is to make any of the hourly Masses from 9am to 3pm. As many as 12 priests will be on hand to hear confessions.

Many pilgrims perform exercises of penance as they climb. At the statue of St Patrick, a few hundred metres up the mountain, dedicated pilgrims

circle the statue several times in prayer, and circle the chapel at the summit as well. It is not an easy climb taking 1 to 3 hours, depending on fitness and route. Many are injured in falls and have to be down the mountain on stretchers by members of the Red Cross and the Knights of Malta there in anticipation.

It became the focus of controversy when Glencar Explorations and Andaman Resources discovered gold in the Doo Lough Valley, County Mayo, where Crough Patrick is, in 1987.

The gold strike was announced in 1988 by Burmin Exploration. Burmin is partnered by Tara Prospecting, which is owned by the Finnish mining company Outokumpu. Exploration revealed 11 gold veins with the presence of 500,000 tonnes of ore-bearing reserves with an average grade of 0.5oz a tonne, with some sample grades up to 6.7oz a tonne (Irish Times, August 16, 1989, May 14, 1990). The value is estimated at £200 million (\$A480million) at Crough Patrick with an estimate of £400 million (\$A960 million) for the Doo Lough Valley.

Environmentalists headed by the Mayo Environment Group were quick to protest at the likely scale of the mining that would be involved to extract the ore. They argued that it would devastate the valley, ruining the lucrative tourist trade. Dr David Bellamy attended a meeting in March 1989, which was followed by a protest there by 3000 people.

It was said to be the largest crowd to have gathered in the area since anti-British protests in colonial days. Nuns holding "No mining" banners heard environmentalists talk of the dangers posed by mining (Irish Times August 16, 1989).

Writing in the Irish Times on May 6, 1989, the Archbishop of Tuam, Dr Joseph Cassidy, said, "Although it soars into the sky, the biggest part of Crough Patrick is never seen. It is buried, centuries deep, in the hearts and spiritual traditions of our people. It is different from most other mountains in that it can be said to have roots. Its roots go back in Christian terms to the fifth century. It represents over a period of 1500 years an incomparable accumulation of spiritual wealth. It belongs in spirit not just to this area but to the whole Christian world.

"There is more wealth on the surface of that mountain that could ever be taken from the inside. To be passionately protective about Patrick's mountain is not an exercise in pious obscurantism. It is an instinctive and enlightened response by a thinking people."

The Government dithered until May 13, 1990, when the Minister for Energy, Bobby Molloy, a Progressive Democrat, a smaller party in coalition with the Fianna Fail Government, used his powers under the 1940 Mineral Development Act to ban mining on Crough Patrick.

To Summarise the similarities:

Gold and platinum were rediscovered at Coronation Hill in 1984. Miners estimated its value at \$A500 million.

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Environmentalists wanted to ban mining at Coronation Hill as it is part of the conservation zone of the third stage of the Kakadu National Park as well as being a site of religious significance to the Jawoyn people.

Environmentalists wanted to ban mining at Crough Patrick and make the Don Lough Valley a national park to protect the beauty of the region, its tourism, and its obvious religious significance.

Miners were incensed at the Australian Government's decision to ban mining at Coronation Hill and are now taking the case to the High Court. Miners were outraged and fought Mr Molloy's ban on mining at Crough Patrick in the Irish Courts (Irish Independent, August 9,1990).

The reasons given for the banning of mining at both sites was principally their religious significance.

Now all of this makes the venomous comments made against Jawoyn religious beliefs last year by supporters of mining at Coronation Hill look even worse.

If Christian religion is resisted by Australian miners and their advocates - it is a double standard to argue that Aboriginal religion is not worthy of the same respect when Christian mythology concerning St

Patrick's activities in Ireland, the ritualistic practices of believers and

their fierce defence of their sacred site is structurally comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Aboriginal experience. But in Ireland the mining companies reserved their invective for the government not the Church. Many advocates of mining

Coronation Hill showed no such restraint.

These extremist mining advocates can no longer argue that "paganism" or Aboriginal "superstition" by itself stands in the way of mineral exploration. Crough Patrick has set a precedent and it may merely be one of the first in the Christian world as the search for ever scarcer resources continues.

The only way the proponents of mining in these situations can be consistent is to argue that all religion is a hindrance to mining. In that respect, Hugh

Morgan has burned his bridges in that infamous speech to an Australian Mining Industry Council seminar in May 1984, where he said miners had a Christian obligation "to find the best ore bodies wherever they may be" (The Age, May 3,1984).

That preposterous reading of the scriptures was howled down then. It has now been demonstrated in practice, in one of the world's most Christian countries, that no such obligation exists.

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