

# Masculinity Studies on Two Continents and in Two Eras: Thomas A. Hickey in Victorian Dublin and Progressive Era America, 1868-1925

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### Introduction

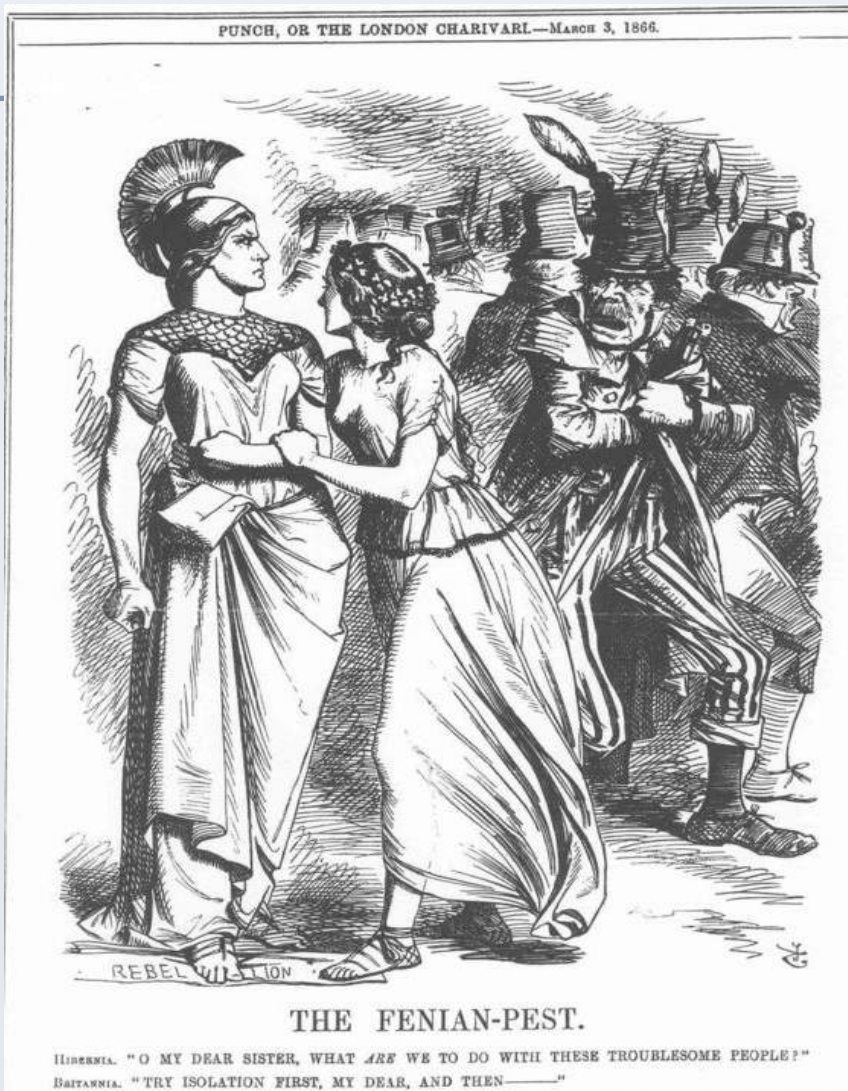
#### New Biography

We are historians, who tell stories through the medium of “the new biography”; that is, examining the lives of people who have been left out of most history texts, to discover what they can tell us about particular periods and places. we have found the application of masculinity studies to our subject, Thomas A. Hickey, to be very helpful in examining his life and times.

#### What is Masculinity Studies?

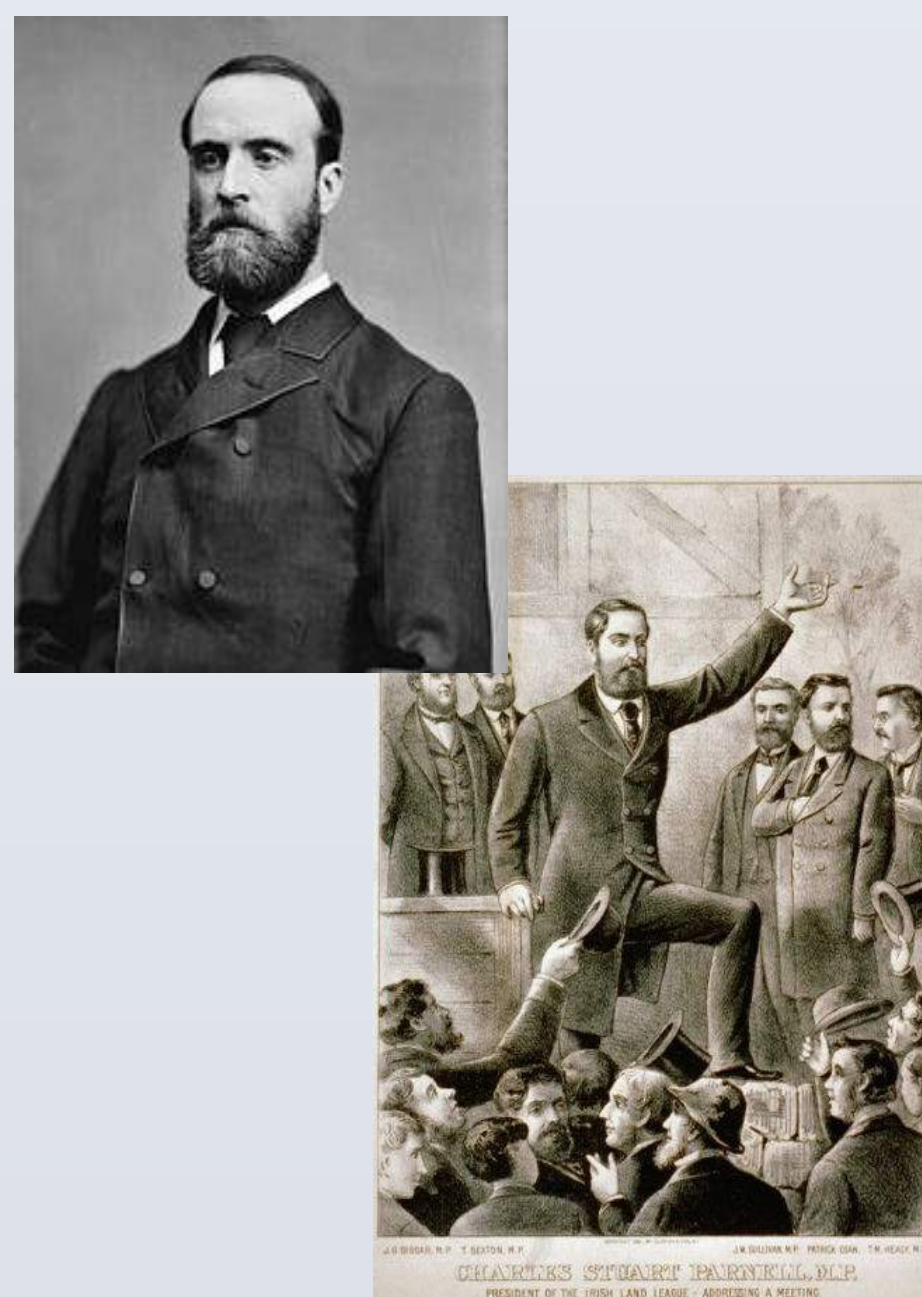
Masculinity studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the social and gendered construction of what it means “to be a man”. “Masculinity” refers to the social roles, behaviors and relationships of men within a particular society and the meanings accredited to them.

### Ireland



In the relationship between England and Ireland, Ireland was feminized and under the control of masculine England. Those who objected to this arrangement, especially the Fenians, were subject to the withering scorn of simianization. The Irish Republican Brotherhood tried to assert Irish masculinity through militarism, but failed more often than not. The British concluded that the Irish had never proved to be sufficiently masculine because they had not freed themselves

In the middle 1870's, Protestant land holder Charles Stewart Parnell joined the growing Irish movement for Home Rule, quickly developing a following among Fenians with his extreme nationalism that forced the British to pay closer attention to the Home Rule cause. Fenian Michael Davitt, who collaborated with Parnell in the Land League, called him “the very picture of manly strength.” Parnell would also use boycotting and obstruction of Parliament as effective political tools, controlled and potent means to express Irish anger in disciplined ways that conveyed masculine restraint, always with a hint of IRB violence as last resort. A combination of politics, illness and a divorce scandal brought Parnell down, with the final indignity coming when his enemies feminized him for good measure, although to a younger generation, including Tom Hickey, Parnell continued to embody masculinity.



Tom Hickey grew up without wealth, but living in a small academy with two professors in the family guaranteed him an excellent education. His mother wanted him to be a priest; the dutiful son abided by her wish before dropping out of divinity school to take on a machinist's apprenticeship. In late 1885, he lost a brother and sister to fevers, soon to be followed by his mother. Another brother died a ghastly death, impaled on a wrought iron fence after falling off the academy roof. His grandfather passed away, then his father, leaving him as the sole support of two surviving sisters.

### Coming To America

With machinists' work scarce in Dublin and Ireland in a state of political discouragement over a future without Parnell, Hickey bought a ticket in steerage for America. The transition proved to be an easy considering that he had relatives in New York among the hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants in “Little Dublin” and he found a job quickly in the world's largest machine shop.



Hickey also learned quickly that many White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans thought as little of Irish as they did of African-Americans. Unfortunately, wages plummeted as the promised land plunged into the worst depression in its history

Hickey joined the once powerful Knights of Labor industrial union and found fast company with some highly intelligent leaders of the Socialist Labor Party. He would soon attempt to further prove his manhood by becoming a member of the Socialist Labor Party.



In 1899, Hickey learned that Jean Keep, the sister of his friend and comrade had been knocked out, raped, forced to abort a fetus and then ordered to continue seeing her abuser, J. Malone Barnes, by a powerful political figure. Acting the part of a gentleman, Hickey proposed to the woman shortly after meeting her to save her from social disgrace. They married in Scranton, Pennsylvania. After leaving her with friends while on speaking engagements in Chicago, she disappeared, finally turning up back with Barnes. While the marriage was annulled, Hickey felt stripped of his masculinity. He also began behaving badly, drinking to excess and brawling with anyone who crossed him, including the party boss, which led to his being purged.



Being a part of Parnell's cult of personality may have made Hickey vulnerable to the charms of Daniel DeLeon, who ran the party from his editor's chair at the party newspaper, *The People*, urging his followers to stand up for themselves as men. Hickey volunteered to give soapbox speeches on the mean streets of Brooklyn, hawking newspapers and books on the side. He handled himself so well that DeLeon offered him a full-time job as an agitator and organizer. Hickey became part of the bachelor culture of New York, preferring the company of men in saloons, where he learned to drink and brawl in daily struggles to prove his masculinity.



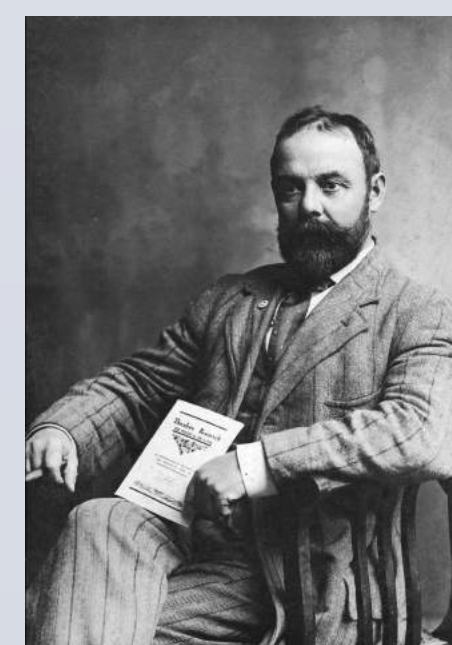
“The Progressive Era” began in the United States about 1900, drawing in many young men and women Hickey's age. Many of these “Progressive” men exhibited what has been called a “virility impulse,” a hyperbolic unease with feminized culture, often manifested in obsessions with power and activity. The poster boy for this behavior was Theodore Roosevelt, small, asthmatic and determined to become a model of masculinity through sheer force of will, always straining toward what he called “the strenuous life.” He took up boxing, shooting, hunting, and cowboying in the Old West. He raised his own regiment during the Spanish American war, parlaying all of these masculine heroics into a governorship of New York, Vice President of the U.S. and then President.

Tom Hickey, meanwhile, worked to restore his sense of Irish masculinity, lumberjacking in the Pacific Northwest and copper mining in “Butte, America” a Montana town with a very high proportion of Irish immigrants.



Always the political animal, Hickey joined a new Socialist Party of America, led by Eugene Debs, a Parnell-like figure in his own right. In addition, Hickey became a charter member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), one big union welcoming all working people.

Hickey and the American Left despised Roosevelt for stealing their thunder, turning their revolutionary demands into reforms that left capitalism all but untouched. Hickey dared to take on Teddy in a pamphlet that sold hundreds of thousands of copies entitled “Theodore Roosevelt: The Political Dr. Cook,” the doctor being Frederick Cook, whose claim of being the first man to reach the North Pole had proven fraudulent. The pamphlet established Hickey as an admired man among the working class, a bona fide Socialist capable of running his own newspaper.



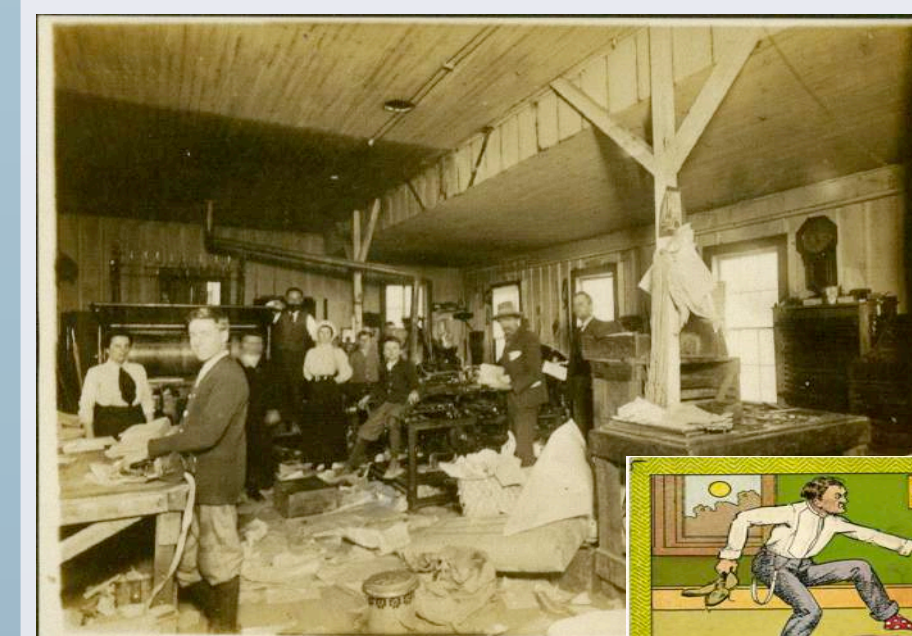
### Texas Socialism



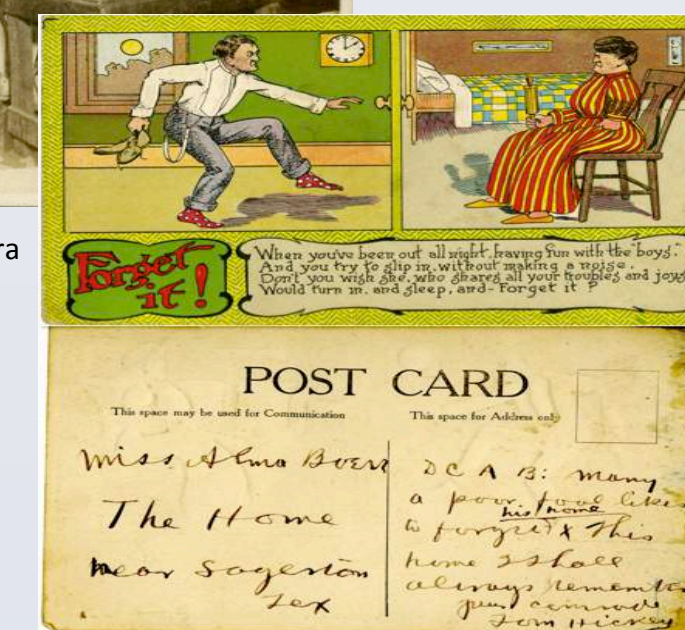
Many Texans rich and poor had always thought of Mexicans as inferiors. Hickey defended them and the Zapatistas fervently, writing “The Rebel should opine that the Mexican people, called ‘greasers’ by their mental and moral inferiors, have thus far shown more manhood, more red blood, more love for their families than have the 75,000,000 peons on this side of the line.” Like his fallen idol Parnell, Hickey liked to urge his followers to act peaceably, but always with a hint that violence might follow.



In early 1911, Hickey invited Clara to come wed him in Hallettsville, where he was to publish his newspaper. Neither of them wanted to alter their lives for the sake of the marriage. She said her family needed her labor on the farm while he had a newspaper, a land league and a calendar full of speaking engagements to keep.



Postcard sent from Hickey to Clara



Just as he had taken on Teddy Roosevelt six years earlier, Hickey attacked the Democratic President, Woodrow Wilson, in very bold terms. *The Rebel* became the only paper in the entire country to dare report that the pious Wilson had had a mistress for years. Hickey implied that such hypocrisy meant that the president had lost control of his masculinity, just like his father's fallen hero. But unlike Parnell, Wilson was not ruined by the scandal owing to the growing war emergency.



Hickey never got his paper back or found another way to make a living.

Hickey settled in Texas and unified the small, dysfunctional Socialist Party of Texas and attracted tens of thousands to his movement through his paper *The Rebel*. He made countless speeches and brought together socialism and Christianity in week-long camp meetings that proved very popular. He also founded the Texas Land League, where he urged his followers to be “manly men” and take “manly action.” He understood that Texas farmers and ranch hands defined masculinity as the capacity to perform their work well, to manage their own lives, provide for their families and respect others doing the same.



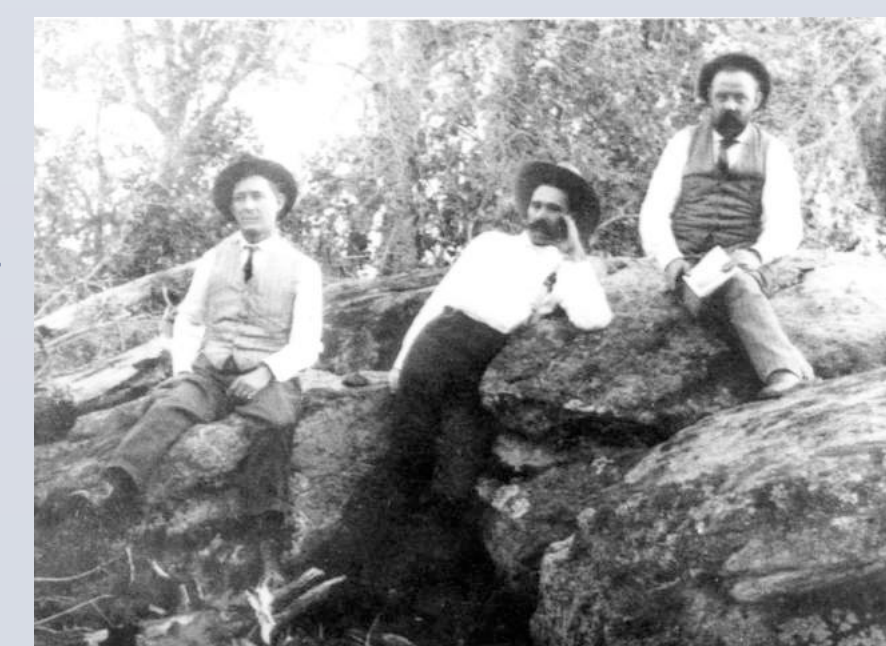
In Texas, Hickey met Clara Boer, the daughter of a learned Marxist and an admirer of Hickey's work. A native Texan, but of German descent, Clara only spoke broken English. In 1910, Hickey proposed marriage but Clara was hesitant, repeatedly asking how he planned to support her. Hickey admitted to be unable to do so at the time so they agreed that without money there could be no marriage; anything less would have been an affront to his masculinity in Texas, just as it would have in Ireland. Hickey continued his bachelor's ways, spending what little money he made on cigars and strong drink, and participating in frequent saloon and street brawling.



They finally married in 1912, but nothing changed. He rented a house, but this arrangement did not seem permanent enough, so she stayed on the farm (400 miles from his newspaper), joining him for a few weeks at a time on his speaking tours or journeying to the rented house for short stays in Hallettsville. Hickey would also come to the farm every few months, but refused to do any physical labor, claiming that he had articles to write for the paper. It became a ritual in his letters to Clara that someday they would settle down in their own little bungalow



Once war was declared, Wilson asked Congress for laws that would suppress disloyalty in the name of higher liberty. Of the hundreds of newspapers and magazines that were shut down, *The Rebel* was the very first to go. Hickey was arrested for treason for supporting draft resistance. Wilson's regime had been so eager to shut him up that his marshals arrested him before the new repressive law came into effect officially.



### Conclusion

His masculinity had become entwined completely in giving his all for the socialist cause smashed by the government. There would be no getting his life or his masculinity back. He spent the last few years of his life between 1920 and 1925 battling throat cancer. In the 1970's a friend of mine interviewed Clara Hickey, who still regarded herself as a kind of war widow. Her last words to my friend were “Tom Hickey died for socialism.” In his own way, the “Uncrowned King of Texas Socialism” was as masculine as his father's hero Charles Stewart Parnell.



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