FREE TOM MOONEY!
AN EXHIBITION of the Yale Law Library’s Tom Mooney Collection, on the centennial of Mooney’s frame-up
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INTRODUCTION

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a bomb explosion was the pretext that San Francisco authorities needed to prosecute the militant left-wing labor organizer Tom Mooney on trumped-up murder charges. Mooney’s false conviction and death sentence set off a 22-year campaign that proved Mooney had been framed, made him one of the world’s most famous Americans, and eventually resulted in his exoneration.

The campaign also created an enormous number of print and visual materials, including legal briefs, books, pamphlets, movies, flyers, stamps, poetry, and music. The examples in this exhibition are only a few of the over 150 items in Yale Law Library’s collection on the Mooney case, housed in the Rare Book Collection. They form a rich resource for studying the Mooney case, the American Left in the interwar years, and the emergence of modern media campaigns.

Unless otherwise noted, all items are from the Rare Book Collection, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School.

Theodore Dreiser, Tom Mooney (San Francisco: Local no. 17, Amalgamated Lithographers of America, undated).
As early as the 1880s, San Francisco had become a hotbed of radical labor unrest, as exemplified in this recruiting broadside for the International Workmen’s Association, a Marxist-Anarchist labor union founded by utopian socialist and professional agitator Burnett G. Haskell. Issued thirty-five years prior to the Preparedness Day Bombing, the broadside offers a veiled endorsement of terror as an organizational technique, promising members “a scientific and comprehensive course on chemistry”* — terminology which, in agitational circles, would have translated to training in the use of high explosives.


Reproduction of original, courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

The San Francisco Preparedness Day Bombing took place on the afternoon of July 22, 1916, killing ten spectators and wounding another forty. Tom Mooney, a militant labor organizer and official of the local Iron Molder’s Union, was (along with his assistant, Warren K. Billings) charged with the bombing a few days later. Among Mooney’s earliest and most ardent supporters was the militant anarchist and partner of Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman (who had himself spent 14 years in prison for the attempted murder of industrialist Henry Clay Frick). Berkman’s anarchist biweekly *The Blast* contains some of the first contemporary accounts of the bombing and its aftermath.
C.M. Fickert, the state’s prosecutor in the Mooney case, was a hard-drinking former football star who was reputedly not shy about resorting to “extra-legal” methods to secure prosecutions. Though Fickert was investigated for witness tampering on a number of occasions, allegations were never proved— but his questionable judicial techniques in the Mooney trial would prove a key factor in Mooney’s pardon 22 years later.
The “forgotten defendant,” Warren K. Billings, was convicted along with Mooney but received only a fraction of the publicity and funds that were poured into Mooney’s defense. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Billings’s defense team did not file its first application for pardon until almost 15 years after his conviction. Billings was released in 1939, a year after Mooney, finally receiving a pardon in 1961.
Fundraising appeal, signed in facsimile by Mooney, dated September 12, 1917.

Mooney, seeking funds for his defense but also scoring points for his cause, here criticizes the establishment press for ignoring allegations of perjury against prosecutor Fickert. Meanwhile, he lauds the labor press for its enlightened coverage, drawing special attention to Robert Minor’s pamphlet *Justice Raped in California*. 

Communist Party leader Robert Minor’s *Justice Raped in California* was one of the most-reprinted left-wing accounts of the Mooney trial, distributed — as this early prospectus shows — in enormous quantities by various left-wing groups.
Pamphlets issued by the Tom Mooney Molders’ Defense Committee, 1930s.

The Molders’ Defense Committee, a left-wing clearing house formed in 1917 to raise defense funds and advocate for Mooney’s release, produced a prodigious amount of propaganda over the course of Mooney’s 22-year incarceration, expanding with every year that Mooney languished in prison. A favorite publicity trope, here exemplified in pamphlets released over a twenty-year period, was to offer “Before and After” images of Mooney, in which the chubby-cheeked labor leader has become, after years in prison, a grizzled and hollow old man. By the mid-Twenties, interest in Mooney’s co-defendant Billings appears to have more or less disappeared.
Pamphlets issued by the Tom Mooney Molders' Defense Committee, 1930s.

Mooney’s appeal extended internationally. In this pamphlet, reprinted from an article in the popular American monthly *Harper’s*, parallels are drawn with not only the Dreyfus Affair in France, but also with the rise of Fascism in Italy and Germany. Letters appealing for commutation or pardon came from overseas intellectuals as varied as George Bernard Shaw and Karl Liebknecht, and in a 1935 survey Mooney ranked as one of the four best known Americans in Europe (along with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles A. Lindbergh, and Henry Ford).

The Mooney case entered popular culture through a variety of channels, including charity balls, traveling lectures, a documentary film, and even such sentimental parlor-room ballads as this, written in 1932 by an Oregon housewife.
Mooney proved himself a gifted propagandist of word as well as of deed, and it has even been suggested that he secretly worked to extend the process of his pardon in order to draw greater attention to his case and to the radical cause. In this fundraising appeal, Mooney pleads for sufficient funds to publish a pamphlet that promises “...to expose the whole amazing inside story of the corrupt conspiracy which railroaded me to jail.”
Handbill, *Mother Mooney in Life and Death*. [San Francisco?, 1934].

Probably the single most active campaigner for Tom Mooney’s release was his mother, Mary Heffernan Mooney, who in addition to frequent meetings and rallies in the United States traveled throughout Europe and the Soviet Union pleading her son’s cause. This handbill, issued upon her death in 1934, was clearly intended to exploit Depression-era America’s infatuation with “mother and apple pie” for propagandistic purposes.
Promotional poster for Bryan Foy’s documentary *The Strange Case of Tom Mooney* (1933).

Foy’s documentary on the Mooney case featured a written foreword by Theodore Dreiser and incorporated avant-garde techniques learned from Soviet cinema, including a lip-synchronized soundtrack of Mooney’s own voice — an innovative technique in early-1930s filmmaking.
Promotional poster for Bryan Foy’s documentary *The Strange Case of Tom Mooney* (1933).
Mooney finally received a full pardon, from California Governor Culbert Olson, on January 7, 1939. In granting the pardon, Olson cited the perjured testimony of Frank Oxman, the prosecution’s star witness 22 years earlier. Mooney quickly hit the publicity trail, working hard to gain freedom for his co-defendant Warren Billings (who would be released later in 1939). But years of incarceration had left Mooney severely debilitated; he was unable to complete his first lecture tour and spent the last two years before his death in hospitals, largely forgotten now that his case was no longer a cause célèbre.
Another casualty of Mooney’s long imprisonment, beside his health, was his marriage to Rena Mooney, who had been acquitted in the 1917 murder trial. Rena Mooney had worked long and hard to win a pardon for her husband. Soon after his release, Tom asked Rena for a divorce. The public saw his request as a betrayal. In the Look article, the San Quentin warden said “Rena Mooney has broken the all-time record for a faithful wife.” Rena declared, “He’ll never have to divorce me. I’ll jump off a bridge.” As it turned out, she outlived him by ten years.