

## Cork's Lord Mayor

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Tomás MacCurtain was born on the March 20, 1884 in a family of twelve – 6 boys and 6 girls – from a family conscious of the Fenian tradition and of Gaelic Ireland. The strange thing about his life is that March 20 was his birthday and, on that day, one hundred years ago this month, he would die. When he was seventeen years old Tomás MacCurtain joined the Gaelic League in Cork City. He began to move deeper into the understanding of the nation's history, language and its dreams of an independent Ireland. The love he had for the Irish language was a steady feature of his makeup. And, for him, this was to identify with the ideal Ireland which justified his vision for the people of Ireland. He played the violin for the Gaelic League as Irish music was a strong love of his. And he collected many Irish songs which he copied as the monks of old would do

with care and clear script.

Tomás MacCurtain spent his time as organizer and teacher with the Gaelic League and it was here, he met Elizabeth Walsh, his future wife. He was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Cork (which is the predecessor to the Irish Republican Army), so he was in and



out of jail much of the time. Fortunately, he married a woman who felt about Ireland as he did where there was that definable bond that he didn't have to explain his nationalism to her. In the letters he wrote to his wife, while he was in jail, he explained the one thing that was a great consolation and comfort to him spending all this time in and out of jail was that he always knew he could depend on her loyalty. (When he was Officer in Command (OC) of prisoners in jail, he had a lot of trouble with men getting abusive letters from their wives saying they should be home instead of jail, that your family is your first allegiance, not Ireland. Tomás MacCurtain and his wife were on the same page when it concerned Ireland's future.)

*Lord Mayor of Cork, Tomás MacCurtain and family pictured in early 1920.*

Just two years after Sinn Féin was formed in Cork, Tomás MacCurtain joined in 1907. Within little time he was in an area of influence in Sinn Féin supporting the theory of Irish economic and industrial independence. He believed that you could combine a country with Irish as the national language coupled with an economic structure that would give social justice for all without any English interference. That the people of Ireland could live in their own country, develop their own trade, their own character without being absorbed. Throughout all of this he ran a small clothing and rainwear business and was still busy teaching Irish while Cork was the center of a nationalist movement.

In 1913 brought the birth of the volunteers in Cork and he was on the first committee as organizer and leader of men. The year after there was WW1 he advocated for outright independence and separation from England. Then in 1916, a failure to rise against British

occupation in Cork during the Easter Rising was due to the lack of communication from Dublin. MacCurtain and his men awaited orders from the volunteer leadership in Dublin, but conflicting instructions and confusion prevailed and as a result the Cork volunteers never entered the fray. Nonetheless he was still imprisoned due to his leadership position in the IRB soon to become the IRA. The volunteers continued after 1916 with MacCurtain in command of the #1 Cork brigade. His duties in the brigade increased leading up to 1920 and dedication was his energy. The local elections of 1920 brought forty members of Sinn Féin onto the city Cork council and when the time came to elect a Lord Mayor, Tomás MacCurtain was their man. He quickly moved a resolution which said “that this council of the county borough of Cork, at its first meeting after election of 1920, hereby record its recognition of the Dáil Éireann, the lawful, legal and constitutional parliament of the Irish nation and recognizes the executive of the Dáil as the lawful government of this country.”

If we gather different phases of a man’s life and character, from those who met him as an administrator, as an Irish language enthusiast, as a musician, and those who met him as a soldier, it was his character as a soldier, that his friends and comrades in the field reflect upon. That the shadow of death was over him as soon as he was elected Lord Mayor and the man speaking, to many, was a walking dead man. The MacCurtain in real life was a small lively merry man with a fierce drive and determination and clearly visible to the men who soldiered with him.



He was also a man of great business capacity, honest with a kindness of heart and determination to do good for those around him. Consequently, much his efforts went to raise the standard of living for the citizens of Cork. (This photo was taken on March 17, 1920. Tomás MacCurtain is seen smiling and surrounded by well-wishers as he tries out the Fordson tractor assembled by the Ford Motor Company in Cork.)

On March 20, 1920 on his thirty-sixth birthday the Lord Mayor of Cork was shot dead by disguised men who forced their way into his house after the door had been opened by his wife. His Lordship received two wounds in the chest and died in a short time. The report in the newspaper at the time stated Mrs. MacCurtain opened the door when she was rudely brushed aside by two men carrying revolvers, wool caps and blacked faces. These men were followed by two more men who carried rifles and had their faces similarly disguised. Another four more men entered the shop and prevented Mrs. MacCurtain from going up the stairs and leaving the shop. The two men with revolvers described as tall and young proceeded upstairs followed by the two men who carried rifles. The men with revolvers knocked on the door of Mr. MacCurtain’s bedroom and inquired if he was inside. The Lord Mayor replied he was about dressing himself and would see them in a moment. They said, “come out here!” Lord Mayor MacCurtain walked out of his bedroom in pants and night shirt was confronted by his assailants and without question or warning fired two revolver shots at him. The Lord Mayor was seen to fall backwards on the landing. So, in the spring of 1920 Tomás MacCurtain was gone.

The inquest verdict found that all those engaged were members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. The circumstances of the murder were subject of a historic inquest, conducted by Coroner James McCabe, in which ninety-seven witnesses were examined, sixty-four of them being police, thirty-one civilians, and two military. The inquest was opened on March 20 and concluded on April 17 with the following unanimous verdict:

*“We find that the late Alderman MacCurtain, Lord Mayor of Cork, died from shock and hemorrhage caused by bullet wounds, and was willfully murdered under the circumstances of the most callous brutality, and that the murder was organized and carried out by the Royal Irish Constabulary, officially directed by the British Government, and we return a verdict of willful murder against David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of England; Lord French, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland; Ian Mcpherson, late Chief Secretary of Ireland; Acting Inspector General Smith, of the Royal Irish Constabulary; Divisional Inspector Clayton of the Royal Irish Constabulary; District Inspector Swanzy and some unknown members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. We strongly condemn the system at present in vogue of carrying out raids at unreasonable hours. We tender to Mrs. MacCurtain and family our sincerest sympathy. We extend to the citizens of Cork our sympathy in the loss they have sustained by the death of one so eminently capable of directing their civic administration.”*



(Left: Shocked citizens reading the death notice on the door of the MacCurtain home on the morning of the murder.)

The shocking murder outraged public opinion and brought near universal condemnation. Cork went into mourning for its murdered first citizen. One of the named inspectors, Oswald Swanzy, who ordered the attack on MacCurtain was shot dead while leaving church in Lisburn, County Antrim on August 22, 1920. Michael Collins gave the order for this attack.