

Cork's Two Lord Mayor's

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

"If I die, I know the fruit will exceed the cost a thousand-fold. The thought of it makes me happy. I thank God for it. Ah, Cathal, the pain of Easter week is properly dead at last."

Terence MacSwiney wrote these words in a letter to Cathal Brugha on September 30, 1920, the 39th day of his hunger strike. The pain he refers to is that caused by his failure to partake in the 1916 Easter Rising. Contradictory orders from Dublin and the failure of the arms ship, the Aud, to land arms in Tralee left the Volunteers in Cork unprepared for insurrection. Instead, they heeded Eoin MacNeill's countermand and called off Easter manoeuvres.



Terence MacSwiney was 5th of a family of 7. He was born in Cork City. His destiny brought him stride for stride with Tomás MacCurtain, eventually taking up the task of Lord Mayor in Late March when MacCurtain was murdered by the Royal Irish Constabulary. "And I come here, more as a soldier, stepping into the breach than an administrator to fill the first post of the municipality" he said to members who elected him Lord Mayor. This was part of his first speech as Lord Mayor and eventually be one of the four charges against him when he was arrested and tried in August 1920. His studies earned him a B.A. in Mental and Moral Science at University of Cork in 1907. In December 1918, he is elected MP for Mid-Cork. Like other Sinn Féin members, he refuses to take his seat at Westminster, determined to serve in the Dáil Éireann instead. He was a self-imposed disciplined person, immersed himself in reading, writing and debating, searching for self-reason shaping his principles on his nationalism which he would chain himself to...working always towards a free Ireland. As with Tomás MacCurtain, Terence MacSwiney was a staunch member

of the Irish Volunteers. And when Tomás MacCurtain was shot and murdered, MacSwiney became Vice Commandant of the Cork #1 Brigade. He was imprisoned for various terms in 1916, 1917, and 1918 and married while in confinement in 1917.

Terence MacSwiney was a reserved person, tireless worker, preacher of separatism and a man who possessed an acute social conscience, which is a fact revealed in his writings. We meet a man of discipline, self-trained will and with a strange destiny.

He was a striking success as Lord Mayor from the moment he took office in March of 1920. He and ten others were arrested on the evening of August 12, 1920 at Cork City Hall. All were imprisoned and immediately went on a hunger strike on August 15 and three days later all were released except for Terence MacSwiney. The following morning Terence MacSwiney was court marshaled on four charges:

1. Without lawful authority being in possession of a cipher – originally issued to the RIC.
2. Having this Cipher under his control.
3. In possession of documents and containing statements likely to cause dissatisfaction for His Majesty the King. This document was a resolution passed by the previous Lord Mayor, that pledged allegiance to the Dáil Éireann.
4. Copy of the speech of his predecessor, Tomás MacCurtain gave when he was elected Lord Mayor.

MacSwiney was found guilty on charge 2, 3 and 4. When the president of the court announced their findings, the Lord Mayor said "I wish to state that I will put a limit of any term of imprisonment that you may impose as a result of the actions I will take. I have taken no food since Thursday; therefore, I will be free in a month" to which the president replied, "on sentence to imprisonment you will take no food?" The Lord Mayor said, "I simply say I have decided the terms of my detention whatever your government may do. I shall be free alive or dead within one month." For spite, the president then sentenced him to two years in prison and of this he served 73 days without food. He died on October 25, 1920.

During his fast in Brixton prison, England, notes were made from his chaplain, Father Dominic. Father Dominic administered communion to the Lord Mayor twice a day. These are from his notes: *During all the time he was confined in Brixton Jail, Lord Mayor MacSwiney remained in bed and kept as still as possible. This he did with a view to preserve his life and conserve strength as long as he could. Although prepared to die and quite willing to offer his life for his country and his principles and yet he was not anxious to die. He was anxious to live and see our flag saluted by the nations of the earth. But with his life was necessary to hasten the day of accomplishment, he was quite willing to offer his life...the amount of anguish he endured for his suffering no pen could write.*

His last words to Fr. Dominic were "I want you to bear witness that I die as a soldier of the Irish Republic."

It is often asked how one could muster the bravery to make a decision that Terrence MacSwiney made. The young people throughout the years have asked it, and some ask it rather cynically. This saddened the people who knew MacSwiney and a close friend of the family answered it this way. *You don't ask any soldier how he can leave his wife and family. We were fighting a war; it wasn't a war with guns and big explosives and all the rest of it. It had to be on a smaller scale, and it had to be fought on several levels. Terrence MacSwiney had said if he were arrested illegally, he would go on a hunger strike, this was known to everybody. As for the accusation that it was futile, that's utter nonsense because at the time I was with him and his wife all through the hunger strike. I suppose every newspaper in the world had a representative in London and there wasn't a country in the world that didn't have their eyes fixed on Ireland and the case of Ireland was before the world to be judged at that time. I don't see how people can ask this cynical question. He was a soldier and he fought in the only way he could. He couldn't come off the hunger strike once he made his mind up.*

No other event generated more international media coverage than the death of Lord Mayor of Cork, Terrence MacSwiney after 74 days on hunger strike. The principled and articulate, MacSwiney was an excellent representative of the republican movement, as he embodied its military, political, and cultural dimensions. Although he commanded the IRA's Cork No. 1 Brigade, he was perceived outside of Ireland as primarily a political figure.

Eamon de Valera, President of the Irish Republic, eulogizing Terrence MacSwiney said, "England has killed another son for Ireland to mourn."

North Vietnam's future president, Ho Chi Minh, who worked in a London kitchen at the time, professed to have been greatly moved by MacSwiney. Upon hearing the news of MacSwiney's death, said, "a country with a citizen like this will never surrender."

India's nationalist Mahatma Gandhi cited Terrence MacSwiney as a catalyst for his efforts in India's independence. And South Africa's Nelson Mandela and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said he took inspiration from MacSwiney's life, work and writings.

The Italian Government expressed sympathy for Ireland and dismay with England on how two mayors of the same city, just months apart, could die such horrible deaths.

The Herald in Melbourne, Australia stated "the responsible Government which treats men in this way is just as malignant as Oliver Cromwell."

Ultimately, Prime Minister Lloyd George was persuaded by the dire warnings of Jan Smuts, the South Africa Premier and future Prime Minister, that the Irish situation would undermine the developing concept of the British Commonwealth of Nations unless Britain tried to negotiate a settlement with the Irish republicans.

Terrence MacSwiney's death provided an important catalyst for the English Government to settle for the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1921.