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Terence Mac Swiney, Lord Mayor of Cork (1920)

A Catalyst for Political Magnanimity

by

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Fig 1: Terence Mac Swiney, March 28th 1879 – October 25th 1920, Lord Mayor of Cork

Terence Mac Swiney or *Traolach Mac Suibhne* (1879-1920)is famous for his hunger strike which rocked the British Empire, and influenced world-famous leaders such as Gandhi, Mandela, Ho Chi Minh and Nehru (among others).He died at Brixton Prison on 25th October 1920at 5.40am on his 74th day without food, so that he could influence world opinion in favour of Ireland`s freedom from imperialist Britain. He was Lord Mayor of Cork when he was captured by British authorities at the City Hallfor alleged sedition through his activities with the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin. Handwritten notes of his inaugural speech which he had delivered eight days after his predecessor and friend, Tomás Mac Curtin, had been shot by British police were used as evidence against him, its most quoted line being;

"This contest of ours is not on our side a rivalry of vengeance, but one of endurance-it is not those who can inflict the most but those who can endure the most who will triumph"[1]

Political and Religious Philosophy

Mac Swiney was a poet and published playwright, an Irish language scholar, and a teacher. He was born in 23 North Main Street in Cork City, the fifth of nine children, into a comfortable middle-class family. Legend has it that the Mac Swiney`s had come from an ancient warrior clan in Donegal. His father John had been born near Ballymichael, Kilmurry[2]and his mother Mary Wilkinson was English born. Every week the children had a new Irish poem to memorise for their parents for the following Sunday afternoon.[3] They

also read of the Celtic heroes such as Cuchulainn and Brian Boru. Terence was only six when his bankrupt father emigrated to Australia for employment and when Terence`s father died nine years later Terence left the Christian Brothers School at North Monastery, where his love of Irishliterature and intellectual formation had been reinforced and rewarded: *"Although financially poor, the family possessed spiritual and intellectual wealth".*[4]He went to work as a clerk at Dwyer & Co for the next sixteen years, which he did not enjoy, so he studied every morning from 2am until his time to go to work to gain a degree: *"For several years he continued this spartan process which earned for him in 1907 his B.A. in Mental and Moral Science".*[5]

In the years prior to the War of Independence he joined The Gaelic League, The Fenian Body, Cork Dramatic Society and The Celtic Literary Society.He kept up strong family connections with Ballingeary where he spent weekends learning Irish as a first language, which he loved. He also loved Music, Literature, Art, the Seaside, and favoured more independence for women. He was an opponent of religious sectarianism and hated large crowds (Costello, p.93 45, 21). He published *The Music of Freedom* in 1906, which was a long and detailed political and poetic manifesto.In a series of essays he had published in 1911/12 paper *Irish Freedom*(Later collected into his Book; *Principles of Freedom* first published in January 1921), Mac Swiney evokes pride and perseverance to keep Ireland`s cause for freedom alive; *"In stirring language he calls on his countrymen to make Ireland great again as she was in ages past, when she led Europe".*[6]He used religious imagery and analogies in his writings to parallel the struggles of dead heroes, and of his own, in religious terms to Christ`s blood sacrifice. He quotes St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Balmez and Suarez in explaining an unjust ruler, and the need for people to resist oppression so that truth and liberty is reached for both; *"The freedom of a nation carries with it that it be no menace to the freedom of another nation. The freedom of all makes for the security of all...our freedom serves to benefit the enemy instead of injuring him".*[7] His magnanimous attitude of forgiveness and understanding towards his oppressors elevate him to the stature of an inspirational role model.

His five-act drama *The Revolutionist* (1914) with Hugh O`Neill as the central hero, together with his memorial pamphlet commemorating O`Donovan Rossa`s death (1915) justified the use of violence against suppression when all other avenues had been tried but failed: *"He was unconsciously projecting his own character in that of Hugh O`Neill, who wears himself out in the cause of Ireland`s freedom, and whose last passionate speech ends with the words, "What`s the use in being alive if we give in?."*As an active member of the Gaelic League he helped to mobilise local volunteers for the 1916 Rising: *"He would push his bicycle twenty, thirty, forty miles against a windy rain to speak brave words to some little hamlet or other hidden in the hills. Then there were frequent journeys to and from Dublin. And all the time he was writing the noblest propaganda that perhaps ever was written".*[9] The Rising was cancelled nationwide at the last minute on Easter Saturday April 23rdby Eóin Mac Neill, leaving Mac Swiney feeling great sorrow and guilt at the execution of his Dublin comrades who had fought on Easter Monday.

On 3rd May 1916 he was first arrested at the house of Robert Hales Knocknacurra, Ballinadee and brought to Bandon Military Barracks, then escorted to Cork City Gaol the following day. Five days later he was transported to Richmond Barracks, Dublin. On June 1st he was sent to Frongoch Internment Camp in Wales and transferred to Reading Gaol on July 11th until his release at 5pm on Christmas Day. Soon after his release rumours of his engagement to Murial Murphy, of Murphy`s Brewery, began to circulate. He was rearrested in February 1917 and sent to Bromyard Gaol, near Worchester but could marry Murial on 8th June; officiated by a Franciscan priest- Fr. Augustine. He was imprisoned six times in total.



Fig 2: The wedding of Terence Mac Swiney and Muriel Murphy June 8th 1917.

Terence`s Arrest

In 1918 Terence was elected as the Sinn Féin MP for Mid-Cork but refused to take his seat at Westminster Parliament. Instead, he and eight other Cork men helped to establish Dáil Éireann in Dublin. When Terence was released in the Spring of 1919, he took his seat and served on the Foreign Affairs Committee as well as being active in areas of Education, Forestry and Commerce. He worked with great figures such as Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy, Eamonn De Valera and Harry Boland to raise several million pounds in support of the Irish Republic. Mac Swiney`s many Republican involvements together with his elevated position as Lord Mayor *"contributed greatly to the breakdown of the king`s writ in Cork and in the country at large, which was now a hotbed of rebellion."*[10] He was sentenced to two years in prison after a court-martial at Victoria Barracks. Mayor Mac Swiney told the court that; *"I would like to say something about your proceedings here. The position is that I am Lord Mayor of Cork and Chief Magistrate of this city, and I declare this court illegal, and that those who take part in it are liable to arrest under the laws of the Irish Republic."* [11] He also added:*"I have decided the terms of my detention whatever your government may do. I shall be free, alive or dead within a month."*[12] He had been fasting for four days between his

arrest and trial, and had resolved to resist their treatment of him and Ireland through the weapon of fast.

The Lord Mayor`s Fast

Poetry, and literature such as *The Imitation of Christ*,helped to sustain his self-sacrificetogether with the fact that his family and Fr. Dominic were at his side constantly. Fr. Dominic recounted later; *"Before I left him at night, I had to bless him and having dipped my fingers in the Holy Water, I had to sign him on the forehead, heart and shoulders. This he desired me to do, that God by the power of his cross might give fortitude to his mind, strength to his heart and power to his shoulders to bear his cross for the liberty of Ireland."*[13]Back home in Cork the GAA abandoned all fixtures in support of his fast and rumour had it that Michael Collins was considering an escape route from prison for him, but Mac Swiney was determined to keep going and to stay alive for as long as possible to draw international attention to Ireland`s cause: *"By modelling and then reworking the long tradition of heroic martyrdom across cultures and religions, he offered his own emaciated body to the mass public as a means of displaying the moral superiority of the Irish to the English."*[14]

Newspapers across British colonies, across France and as far away as the United States sympathised with his plight. The *Neue Frie Presse* wrote that *"If Mac Swiney dies, if this modern Winkelried diverts all arrows of racial hatred at his own heart, the Lord Mayor of Cork will, perhaps, be more powerful in his death than the powerful Prime Minister or the King of England."*[15]While serving his final prison sentence many efforts were made to entice Terry to take food but he held fast to his principles. *"At one stage he candidly admitted to Fr. Dominic (his chaplain) that he would give a £1,000 pounds for a cup of tea!"*[16]



Fig 3: An example of the growing sympathetic international publicity surrounding the hunger strike of Terence Mac Swiney from the French newspaper 'Le Petit Journal', September 19th 1920. This type of global negative publicity put pressure on the British Government to moderate their actions in Ireland.

When news of his death broke in Brixton there was a riot outside the prison. In Belfast mobs attacked each other: *"In the immediate aftermath of Mac Swiney`s death, emotions in London, Ireland and the United States ran high."*[17]He was laid out at St. George`s Cathedral in Southwark where 30,000 people filed passed to pay their respects. He was dressed in his IRA uniform under which he wore a Franciscan habit. Fr. Dominic OFM (Chaplain) recalled, *"When he heard that Eoghan Ruadh and St. Joan of Arc were buried in the rough brown habit of the Third Order, he asked that if it were possible, this should be put on him beneath his Commandant`s uniform, and we fulfilled his request."*[18]



Fig.4: Terence MacSwiney *is laid out in St. George's Cathedral, Southwark.*

A guard of honour of Volunteers accompanied his remains through the streets of London, with thousands of Irish exiles looking on in support, and British police officers saluting in black gloves.

Another funeral procession was organised for Mac Swiney`s remains upon his arrival in Dublin, but the British authoritiesfearing mass demonstrationsordered his remains to be carried by train to Hollyhead and then by boatdirectly to Cork under army escort, to arrive at Cork Custom House Quay on October 31st. *"The battle over the corpse in Holyhead, which was photographed and reported in detail by the international press, suggests that at this moment Mac Swiney`s body provided the public with a super-charged sign."*[19] Over a hundred thousand mourners lined out in his native Cork as his cortage was taken first for Requiem Mass at St. Mary & Anne`s Cathedral (The North Cathedral) and then onto St. Finbarr`s Cemetery, Glasheen where he was laid to restin the Republican Plot beside his dear friend and comrade, Tomás Mac Curtain.Arthur Griffith gave the oration,there reinforcing parts of Terence`s endurance speech at his inauguration as Lord Mayor; *it is not those who can inflict the most but those who can endure the most who will triumph."*[20]



Fig.5: The funeral cortege of Terence Mac Swiney on its way to St Finbarr's Cemetery, Cork City October 31st 1920. Huge crowds lined the streets to pay their last respects to their second Lord Mayor to be lost that year.

Mac Swiney`s Legacy

Requiem Masses were said throughout Ireland, England and in various Catholic centres in Europe such as Rome, Madrid and Paris in the weeks that followed Terence`s death. In Boston, Philadelphia and New York Irish demonstrations showed their distain for Britain`s treatment of an Irish patriot:*"A protest outside the White House, threatening to last seventy-four days particularly caught the public imagination."*[21]Many world leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru cited Mac Swiney`s protest as an inspiration, as did Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Ho Chi Minh of North Vietnam,[22] among others.

Many books and poems have been penned in his honour. Monuments have also been created, such asthe bust of him that stands at the entrance to Cork City Hall,and a makeshift blue plaque on one of the outside walls of Brixton Prison.The riverside quay at City Hall is named Terence Mac Swiney Quay and Knocknaheeny Community College is named after him. Mac Swiney Quay in Bandon, Mac Swiney Villasoff Blarney Street, and TheIndependence Museum in Kilmurry are all living memorials to this great Irish hero. Kilmurry Historical and Archaeological Association recently held a weekend long tribute to Terence Mac Swiney where the opening address was given by Terence`s grandson Dr. Cathal Mac Swiney Brugha-son of Terence`s only child Máire (who was two years old when he died). She became subject to a custody battle subsequently,between her mother Muriel and Aunt Máire. The young Máire taught at Scoil Íte before going onto Dublin for further studies and marrying Ruairí Brugha, the son of the prominent Republican Cathal Brugha, in 1945.

A well-known Cork Song also commemorates Terence Mac Swiney`s love for his country:

Shall my Soul Pass through Old Ireland

In a dreary British prison where an Irish rebel lay
by his side a priest was standing where his soul should pass away
as he gently murmurs father, the priest takes him by the hand
Tell me this before I die, shall my soul pass through Ireland

Chorus
Shall my soul pass through old Ireland, pass through Cork's city so grand
Shall I see that old cathedral where Saint Patrick took his stand
Shall I see that little chapel where I placed my heart in hand
Tell me this before I die here, shall my soul pass through Ireland?

Was for loving dear old Ireland in this prison cell I lie
Was for loving dear old Ireland in this foreign land I die
When you see my little daughter, won't you make her understand
Tell me this before I die here, shall my soul pass through Ireland?

Chorus

With his soul pure as a lily and his body sanctified
In that dreary Brixton prison our brave Irish rebel died
Prayed the priest his wish was granted as his blessing he did give
Father grant this brave man's wish, may his soul pass through Ireland

Chorus



Fig 5: Terence Mac Swiney in happier times c. 1917.

Conclusion

The War of Independence escalated after Terence`s death, which was compounded by the hanging of eighteen-year-old Kevin Barry the following week. Nine months later in July 1921 a truce was agreed, and in December the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed. Terence Mac Swiney`s life drama, supported by an international audience, had at last forced the British to listen to Ireland`s call for justice and for freedom. The Treaty terms were not what the Republicans had dreamt of, but it meant that the Black and Tans left the Island of Ireland and that the Irish were given control of twenty-six counties- The Irish Free State. Unfortunately, the Civil War followed led by De Valera`s anti-Treaty stance. I would like to think that level-headed Terence Mac Swiney might have persuaded him to take his place at the London negotiations to lead a peaceful way forward for Ireland, but we will never know!

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