

History



Terence MacSwiney

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March 20, 2009 marks the 130th anniversary of a great, and sadly often overlooked Irish Patriot. He fought the British Empire not with the gun, but with the weapon of his own life, and in doing so drew worldwide attention to the cause of Irish Independence. His name is Terence MacSwiney.

MacSwiney was one of eight children born in Cork City to an Irish father and an English Catholic mother. His father John MacSwiney had been the owner of a tobacco factory in Cork, but when the business failed he emigrated to Australia leaving his wife and children behind. Young Terence left school at the age of 15 to take a job as an accountancy clerk to help support his family, but continued his studies part time, eventually earning a degree in Mental and Moral Science (Philosophy) in 1907. In 1901 he helped found the Celtic Literary Society and in 1908 the Cork Dramatic Society. He was a prolific writer of poetry, pamphlets and Irish history. One of his plays, "The Revolutionist", had as its theme the political stand made by a single man. The theme would prove prophetic.

Politically, MacSwiney was a founder of the Cork Brigade of the Irish Volunteers. He published the patriotic newspaper *Fianna Fáil*, but it was shut down by British Authorities after only 11 issues. He was to be the second in command for the Cork and Kerry phase of the Easter Rising, but stood down his forces on the orders of Chief-of-staff Eoin MacNeill. He was arrested following the rising under the Defense of the Realm Act and imprisoned until June 1917. In November 1917 he was arrested once again for wearing an Irish Volunteer Uniform, and inspired by earlier hunger striker Thomas Ashe, went on a hunger strike eventually winning his release.

In 1918 MacSwiney was elected to the first Dáil Éireann as the representative of Mid Cork. In January 1920, MacSwiney's friend Tomás MacCurtain was elected Lord Mayor of Cork. After only three months in office, Tomás MacCurtain was murdered in his home by disguised members of the Royal Irish Constabulary Auxiliaries. MacSwiney succeeded MacCurtain as Lord Mayor of Cork while still maintaining his leadership of the Cork brigade.

On 12 August 1920, MacSwiney was arrested for possession of "seditious material", including a Royal Irish Constabulary cipher key (code book). So intent were the authorities on suppressing MacSwiney, that they failed to recognize and released several other prominent nationalists with MacSwiney. MacSwiney was tried by a military court and sentenced to two years in Brixton Prison. MacSwiney refused to recognize the authority of the Military Court, claiming that the court had no authority in Ireland and he was being denied due judicial process. His final statement to the court was to show the determination of MacSwiney to retain possession of his life and soul and his dedication to his country: "I will put a limit to any term of imprisonment you may impose as a result of the action I will take. I have taken no food since Thursday, therefore I will be free within a month....I have decided the terms of my detention whatever your government may do. I shall be free, alive or dead, within a month." With that, Terence MacSwiney went on a hunger strike.

This simple act of defiance sent shock waves around the world: in New York Longshoremen refused to unload British Ships, French and German papers hailed MacSwiney's courage, four South American countries appealed for Papal Intervention. Despite the fact that several members of the British Government realized that MacSwiney was single handedly isolating Britain in the court of world opinion, Prime Minister Lloyd George stated that any intervention on MacSwiney's behalf would be "detrimental to the morale" of the Crown Forces in Ireland.

MacSwiney underestimated his strength when he estimated he would be dead or free in a month. His hunger strike would last for 74 days. MacSwiney's last words to the priest ministering to him in his final hours were "I want you to bear witness that I die as a soldier of the Irish Republic."

Over 30,000 people would pass by MacSwiney's coffin when it lay in state in London. MacSwiney's selfless act of sacrifice marked a turning point in the world's perception of the

Did you Know that....

Within a few days of Terence MacSwiney's death on Oct. 25, 1920, two other Irish nationalists were executed by the British Government, further outraging world opinion:

- Kevin Barry, an eighteen year old medical student and Irish Volunteer, was executed by hanging on 1 November 1920 after being apprehended in an attempt to capture arms. Barry was tortured before his death in an attempt to gain information, but refused to give in to his interrogators.

- On November 2nd 1920, Private James Daly of the Connaught Rangers was executed by firing squad in Dagshai, India. The Connaught Rangers, recruited in Ireland, was one of the most distinguished and respected regiments in the British Army. Upon hearing news of atrocities committed by the Black and Tans in Ireland, Daly and others had refused to continue to serve till the British forces left Ireland.

Even in death, the British Government feared MacSwiney. When his body arrived in Dublin, members of the Black and Tans seized the coffin and put it back on a ship bound for Cork. The plan was to hurriedly bury MacSwiney, even before his family could arrive. This plan was thwarted when harbor pilots, ferrymen and train conductors refused to transport the body while soldiers accompanied it and the family was missing.

Though the disguised members of the Auxiliaries who murdered MacCurtain were not identified, the coroner's inquest passed a verdict of willful murder against British Prime Minister Lloyd George.

Sadly, Terence MacSwiney would not be the last person to die on hunger strike for his beliefs. Similar to MacSwiney, Bobby Sands would die in 1981 at the age of 27 after a 66 day hunger strike to regain the political prisoner status traditionally accorded nationalist prisoners that had been stripped by the Thatcher government. Nine other men would similarly follow Sands' lead and also die on hunger strike.

Irish struggle for independence. MacSwiney's suffering became a symbol for the suffering of the Irish nation. Tributes to MacSwiney's courage and devotion would come from around the world. However, perhaps the greatest tribute came ironically from the usually unsympathetic British press; the London Daily Telegraph wrote "The Lord Mayor of Cork condemned himself to death for the sake of a cause in which he passionately believed, and it is impossible for men of decent instinct to think of such an act unmoved."