

MacSwiney, Terence James

by Patrick Maume

MacSwiney, Terence James (1879–1920), republican, was born at 23 North Main Street, Cork, on 28 March 1879, son of John MacSwiney and his wife, Mary (née Wilkinson), an English catholic. John MacSwiney, a native Irish-speaker from Ballingearry, Co. Cork, had been a schoolteacher in London before starting a tobacco factory in Cork, which failed shortly before Terence's birth. In 1885 John MacSwiney emigrated alone to Australia, where he died about 1895. His wife raised their eight surviving children, helped by her eldest daughter, Mary MacSwiney (qv). Terence was educated at the Christian Brothers' North Monastery School in Cork; he won three intermediate exhibitions, but at fifteen had to leave to become a clerk with a local firm. MacSwiney hated the restrictions of his job and hoped to attain professional status, in pursuit of which, from 1898, he began intensive study, restricting himself to six hours' sleep a night. He matriculated at the RUI in 1899 and attended QCC, graduating BA (RUI) in mental and moral science in 1907. He subsequently became a part-time lecturer in business methods at Cork Municipal School of Commerce, and in 1912 full-time travelling commercial instructor for Cork technical instruction committee.

In 1899 he co-founded the separatist Celtic Literary Society (CLS). He concealed stresses and fears under a good-humoured exterior, and was respected for his commitment to everything he undertook, though some saw him as self-righteous. His political role model was William Rooney (qv), who worked himself to death at the age of twenty-nine. MacSwiney's literary ambitions echoed his dreams of political and personal liberation; his artistic hero was Shelley, who taught that poetic idealism could transform the world, while he detested John Millington Synge (qv). MacSwiney's writing is an exercise in self-fashioning, presenting the heroic self-images to which he aspired. In 1907 he published a book-length verse manifesto, *The music of freedom*. MacSwiney refused to join the IRB, believing secrecy to be demoralising, and resigned from the CLS after it affiliated with Sinn Féin, whose 'Hungarian policy', in his view, compromised republican principles. MacSwiney disagreed with anti-clerical separatists. He thought religious and political idealism inseparable. Articles expounding his political beliefs, originally published 1912–14, were collected as *The principles of freedom* (1921).

MacSwiney was a Gaelic Leaguer, cycling through Co. Cork with friends and visiting the Gaeltacht around Ballingearry. Through the league he befriended Daniel Corkery (qv) and together they became the leading writers in the Cork Dramatic Society (CDS), established in 1908. MacSwiney wrote four plays for the society, the most effective of which, 'The holocaust' (1910), dramatises the suffering of strikers' families during a recent lockout. However, his ambitions outgrew the CDS's capabilities; in 1914 he published 'The revolutionist', a play about a self-sacrificing

separatist. It wistfully recalls his love for a female acquaintance whose parents thought him politically and financially unacceptable; MacSwiney yearned for love and marriage but feared that these were precluded by his dedication to the republican cause.

MacSwiney took a leading role in the Cork division of the Irish Volunteers (founded December 1913). Between 19 September and 5 December 1914, when it was suppressed by the authorities, he published a separatist weekly, *Fianna Fáil*; he and his sisters sold their books to pay the printer. After the Volunteers split in September 1914 MacSwiney became deputy leader of the Cork Volunteers and in August 1915 he resigned his teaching position to become a full-time Volunteer organiser.

In January 1916 MacSwiney was arrested for sedition and imprisoned. At his trial in March nationalist magistrates acquitted him on all charges but one and fined him 1s., which outcome represented a victory for republicanism and enhanced MacSwiney's standing. After Eoin MacNeill (qv) countermanded Volunteer mobilisation orders to prevent an insurrection on Easter Sunday 1916, MacSwiney and Tomás MacCurtain (qv) travelled the county to disperse the rural Volunteers; they did not receive Patrick Pearse's (qv) orders until after the rising broke out in Dublin. Confused, they barricaded the Volunteer Hall in Cork city rather than trying to rouse the countryside; their subsequent order to the Volunteers to surrender their arms to the authorities, so as to avoid further bloodshed, was widely criticised. Although they were cleared by a Volunteer enquiry, MacCurtain and MacSwiney were depressed by their failure to lead the rising in Co. Cork; MacSwiney recalled it on his deathbed.

MacSwiney was arrested on 3 May 1916; on 22 May he was sent to Frongoch internment camp in Wales. On 11 July he was moved to Reading gaol with other leading Volunteers. He was released on Christmas eve and became engaged to Muriel Murphy (qv), the daughter of a wealthy Cork brewing family, whose commitment during Easter week had attracted MacSwiney's attention. In February 1917 MacSwiney was rearrested and deported to Bromyard, Worcestershire, where on 8 June 1917 he and Muriel were married. Their only child, Máire, was born on 23 June 1918. On 17 November 1917, after MacSwiney was convicted of drilling Volunteers and wearing military uniform, he instigated a mass hunger-strike, which led to the release of prisoners on 21 November. He was arrested again in March 1918 and transferred between prisons in Dublin, Belfast, and Dundalk. In September he was deported to Lincoln gaol with other Sinn Féin leaders. In December MacSwiney was returned as Sinn Féin MP for Mid-Cork. He was released in March 1919, when (with others who had refused to take up their seats in the Westminster parliament) he became a member of the first dáil. He spent the rest of his life under the constant threat of arrest.

MacSwiney used his commercial skills on dáil committees and fundraising for the dáil loan. He was elected to Cork corporation in January 1920 and became lord mayor on 30 March after the assassination of MacCurtain. He defended the shooting

of policemen, but was ill at ease with guerrilla warfare, which did not accord with his romanticised image of insurrection. He was arrested on 12 August 1920 while chairing a Sinn Féin court at Cork City Hall, and went on hunger strike. On 16 August he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and sent to Brixton prison in London. Little was known about prolonged hunger strikes; death was expected within a month. MacSwiney attributed his survival for more than two months to divine intervention, while many government supporters assumed that he was being fed secretly. The world's media rapidly gave his case a high level of attention in expectation of his imminent death and maintained this coverage until the end. There were widespread expressions of support for him on the continent, in America, and in Britain. Marcus Garvey and Ho Chi Minh were among those who demonstrated in his favour. Some moderate unionists petitioned for his release; even George V privately favoured mercy. However, the government decided that his release would undermine morale in the security forces.

Terence MacSwiney died in Brixton prison on 25 October on the seventy-fourth day of his hunger strike. Crowds visited his body in the catholic Southwark cathedral. (When the cathedral was rebuilt after the second world war, the Irish government paid for a chapel in his memory.) His coffin was commandeered by crown forces at Holyhead and taken directly to Cork (instead of travelling, as had been intended, via Dublin). Thousands attended his burial in the republican plot at St Finbarr's cemetery. His death gained worldwide sympathy for Sinn Féin, and was a pivotal moment in the war of independence. He was commemorated by numerous writers, from the balladeer who produced 'Will my soul pass through old Ireland' to W. B. Yeats (qv), who was inspired by MacSwiney's death to rewrite his play of 1904 *The king's threshold* (about a poet who goes on hunger strike against a king). MacSwiney became a symbol of Cork civic pride; in 1964 bronze statues of MacSwiney and MacCurtain by Seamus Murphy (qv) were erected on either side of the entrance to Cork City Hall, and a marble representing his death mask by Albert Power (qv) is in Cork Public Museum.

MacSwiney's political legacy has aroused controversy; three of his siblings were prominent opponents of the treaty, while Muriel became an outspoken communist. The hunger-strikers in the Maze prison in 1981 invoked his declaration: 'Victory is won not by those who can inflict the most, but by those who can endure the most' (Costello, 14). Many Indian nationalists (including Gandhi) called him an exemplar. Some see him as brave and idealistic but remote from reality (a view brutally expressed in the novel *The martyr* (1933) by Liam O'Flaherty (qv), whose idealistic Commandant Crosbie is based on MacSwiney). But this is to ignore the strength he showed in the long and difficult process of his self-creation; he was shaped by the circumstances with which he wrestled, and cannot be understood apart from them.

His papers are in the Terence and Mary MacSwiney collection in UCD Archives Department, section P48b; section P48c contains material gathered by his

biographers Étienne Beuque and Moirin Chavasse. MacSwiney material is also held in the NLI (MSS 35029–35035), Cork Public Museum, and Cork Archives Institute.

'Cuireadoir' [Terence MacSwiney], *The music of freedom* (1907); Terence MacSwiney, *The revolutionist* (1914); Terence MacSwiney, *Principles of freedom* (1921); P. S. O'Hegarty, *A short memoir of Terence MacSwiney* (1922); *Despite fools' laughter: poems by Terence MacSwiney*, ed. B. G. McCarthy (1944); Moirin Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney* (1962); Tom Garvin, *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (1987); Patrick Maume, *'Life that is exile': Daniel Corkery and the search for Irish Ireland* (1993); Francis J. Costello, *Enduring the most: a life of Terence MacSwiney* (1995); <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/mgpp/intro01.htm>

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