

TERENCE MacSWINEY

Triumph of blood sacrifice

Cathal Billings on how the Cork republican's martyrdom inspired revolutionaries around the world

"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 Brughá 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. Only later on Easter Monday did MacSwiney learn of the Rising in Dublin and was haunted by guilt, resolving to make his own blood sacrifice for Ireland.

His poem A Prayer, written while in prison in July 1916, reveals this determination:

*Because I have endured the pain
Of waiting when my comrades die
Let me be swept in war's red rain
And friends and foes be justified.*

Terence MacSwiney was born into a staunchly nationalist, Cork Catholic family. His father emigrated to Australia in 1885 leaving behind eight children with their mother. To help support his family, Terence, or Terry, left school at 15 and found employment as an accountancy clerk.

He continued to study in his free time, matriculating in 1899 and gaining a degree in mental and moral sciences from the Royal University, Cork in 1907.

In 1899 he joined the Gaelic League and remained an active supporter of the Irish language throughout his life.

In 1901, he co-founded the Cork Celtic Literary

SNAPSHOT

TERENCE MacSWINEY

Born: Cork, March 28, 1879

Educated: North Mon, Royal University (UCC)

Affiliation: IRB, Irish Volunteers

Career: TD, Lord Mayor

Died: Brixton Prison, London, October 25, 1920

Society which adopted a broad nationalist programme. In 1908, with his friend Daniel Corkery, he co-founded the Cork Dramatic Society for which he wrote five plays. They were not written for art's sake but, as Corkery put it, "for the sake of Ireland".

MacSwiney was opposed to Home Rule, describing it as a "half-measure" and instead pursued the republican ideal. He did not join the Irish Republican Brotherhood until just prior to the Rising but wrote a series of articles for *Irish Freedom* between 1911 and 1912. He believed that secret societies such as the IRB were divisive, preferring to keep the fight for independence "straight and consistent".

He explored this theme in his play, *The Revolutionist*, written in 1914 but not produced until after his death; also evident is MacSwiney's fascination with martyrdom, even prior to Easter 1916. Set in a fictional Ireland after the enactment of Home Rule, the protagonist, Hugh O'Neill, is an idealistic separatist who pursues a more radical form of nationalism, stating the need for "soldiers, not conspirators."

“MacSwiney's determination to martyr himself was apparent from the outset, declaring during his hearing: *"I shall be free, alive or dead, within the month"***”**

Attempting to unite his revolutionary colleagues, he works himself to death. Hugh's last words are prophetic: "What's the good of being alive if we give in?"

MacSwiney was among the founders of the Cork Brigade of the Volunteers



Above: the graduation photograph of Terence MacSwiney.

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Inset above: Cathal Billings of UCD.

Left: Irish priests outside Brixton Prison during the inquest into Terence MacSwiney's death

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in late 1913. His own publication *Fianna Fáil*, 'A Journal for Militant Ireland,' was suppressed in December 1914 after only 11 issues due to its extreme republican and anti-British content. Throughout this time he worked tirelessly recruiting and organising Volunteer companies all over the county in preparation for the Rising in which he would take no active part.

He was interned in its aftermath, in May 1916, and would spend the remaining four years of his life in and out of jail. He was imprisoned in Wakefield, moved to Frongoch, known as 'The University of Revolution,' and finally to Reading, remaining there until December 1916.

On his return to Ireland he again became active with the Volunteers and was interned from February to June 1917, during which time he married Muriel Murphy, of the famous Cork brewing family. He was arrested in November 1917 for wearing an IRA uniform in public and

immediately began his first hunger strike. He was released four days later. This action was inspired by Thomas Ashe who became the first republican prisoner to die while on hunger strike that September in Mountjoy, after being forcibly fed by prison officials.

MacSwiney's internment in March 1918 caused him to miss two major life events – the birth of his daughter, Máire, in June, and his election to the first Dáil as TD for Mid Cork, in December. Released in Spring 1919, he took his seat. He served on the Foreign Affairs committee and was active in areas of education, forestry and commerce. He also played a significant role in organising the Dáil loan, a key source of finance for the republican government.

MacSwiney's friend and comrade Tomás Mac Curtain was elected as Lord-Mayor of Cork in January 1920 after Sinn Féin's success in local elections, but three



LE MARTYR IRLANDAIS
M. Terence Mac-Swiney, lord-maire de Cork, accusé d'intelligences avec les Sinn-Feiners, refuse, dans sa prison, toute nourriture, et se laisse mourir de faim pour servir la cause de l'indépendance de l'Irlande

Above: The front page of French newspaper *Le Petit Journal* from September 1920 showing MacSwiney on hunger strike. Below: MacSwiney's funeral procession through London drew huge crowds. GETTY IMAGES
Right: Typed extracts from *The Principles of Freedom* written by Terence MacSwiney, printed in 1912. UCD ARCHIVES



months later was murdered by disguised Royal Irish Constabulary men in his home. MacSwiney succeeded him as mayor and also assumed command of the 1st Cork Brigade of the IRA. He was arrested after a meeting in Cork City Hall on August 12 along with 10 others, on charges of sedition and for allegedly possessing an RIC cipher.

MacSwiney immediately began his fateful hunger strike, protesting the authority of the British court in the Republic.

Four days later he was sentenced by court martial to two years in prison. The 1913 Prisoners Act, or 'the Cat-and-Mouse Act', set a precedent for the release of gravely ill prisoners, but the British government was determined to stand their ground with MacSwiney, fearing mutiny in Ireland. This despite requests by King George V for his release.

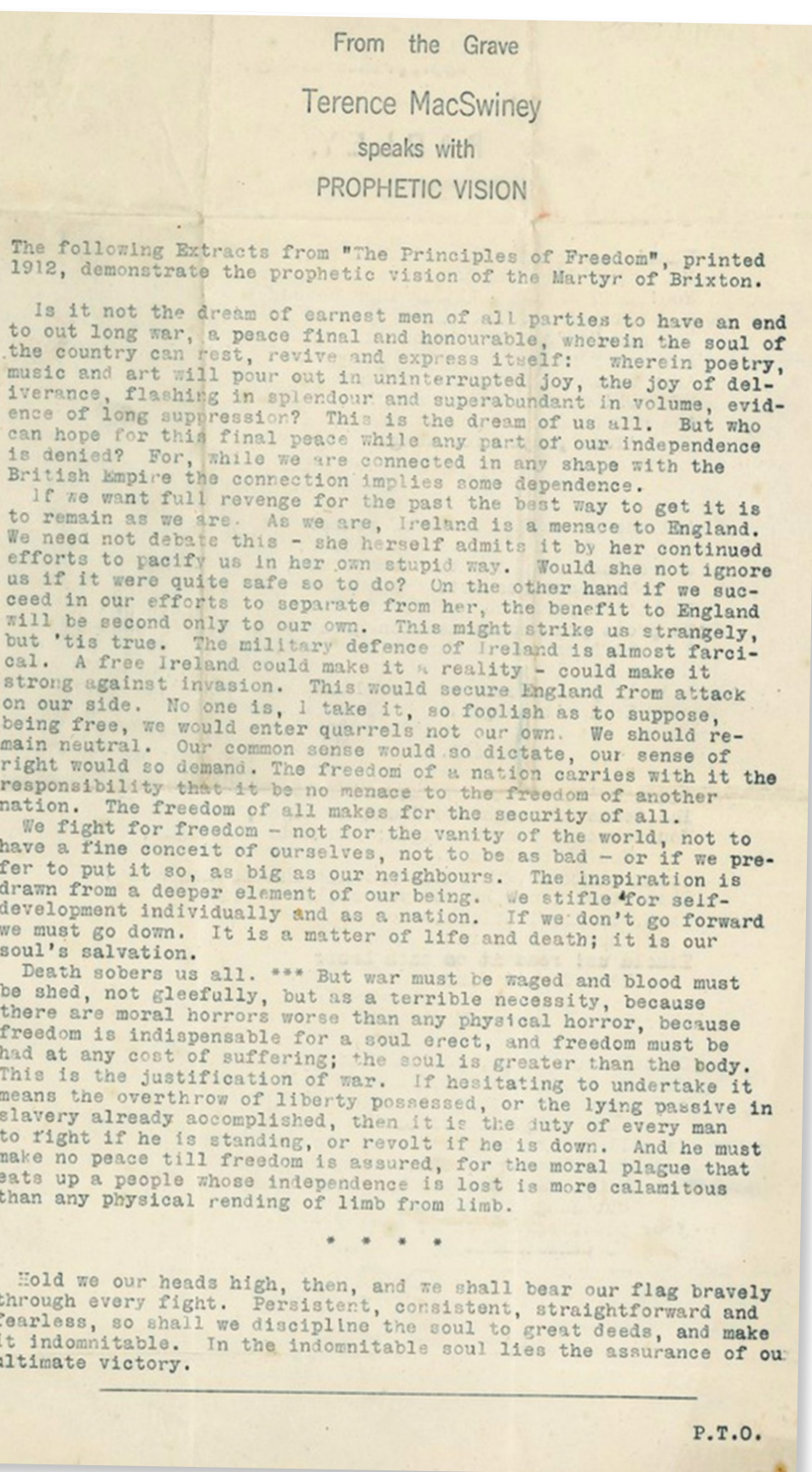
MacSwiney's determination to martyr

himself was apparent from the outset, declaring during his hearing: "I shall be free, alive or dead, within the month." He died 74 days later, on October 25, 1920.

MacSwiney's status as an elected official and as Lord-Mayor ensured his hunger strike reverberated in international press, playing out like a poignant drama; the *New York Times* described it as "a gesture of deep tragedy on a stage where all mankind looks on".

His ordeal fixed international attention on the fight for Irish independence and cast "a stain on the name of England". Demonstrations were held in Boston and Buenos Aires, demanding his release. Longshoremen in New York downed tools. Trade unions and youth groups rioted in Catalonia. British parliament was divided and public opinion quickly turned against their government's Irish policy.

MacSwiney's martyrdom took on religious connotations. Described as



"deeply religious", he received daily communion and a papal blessing before his death; it was even suggested that supernatural forces sustained him through his ordeal when death seemed imminent. Though the nature of his death raised moral issues for the Church, he was granted a full Catholic funeral and burial - his death was not perceived as a suicide, but a tragedy caused by the cruelty of the English oppressor.

As many as 30,000 passed his coffin on October 27 in Southwark before his body was brought home to his native Cork. The hanging of 18-year-old Kevin Barry one week later added fuel to the fire. The period immediately after their deaths saw violence throughout Ireland reach its climax, finally culminating in a truce in July 1921.

When *The Revolutionist* was shown for the first time on stage, at the Abbey in February 1921, it was a smash-hit.

Terence MacSwiney was by no means the only republican hunger striker of his time to die, yet it was his 'triumph' that brought hunger striking to the forefront of public consciousness and proved an exemplar for others.

In 1923, approximately 8,000 anti-treaty prisoners began a hunger strike lasting, in the longest case, more than 40 days, resulting in two deaths. Indian anti-colonialist Bhagat Singh quoted MacSwiney when faced with his own execution in 1931: "I am confident that my death will do more to smash the British Empire than my release."

MacSwiney's symbolic personal stand against the empire was also cited as inspirational by Mahatma Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh and Nelson Mandela.

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