



# MacSwiney's hunger strike eclipsed his achievements

Global sympathy for plight of Corkman has earned him place in history but reduces him to circumstances of his death, writes **Gabriel Doherty**

**T**erence MacSwiney has gone down in Irish popular memory as the hunger striker par excellence, whose defiant, ultimately fatal protest in Brixton prison in London from August to October 1920 stirred consciences across the globe, and generated widespread sympathy for the Irish republican cause.

There is much truth in this summation, but it must be qualified in at least two ways. Firstly, as he himself acknowledged, MacSwiney was not the first, nor the last, republican prisoner to hunger strike, nor to die while doing so, during the independence struggle. Scores had resorted to the tactic since 1917, almost all of whom had been released by the authorities for fear they would suffer the same fate as Thomas Ashe, whose death as a result of a botched force-feeding in September of that year had been a huge boost to republican fortunes at a critical time. Furthermore, simultaneously with his own fast in Brixton, another strike involving 11 prisoners was taking place in Cork men's prison. This had already produced one death before MacSwiney's (that of Michael Fitzgerald), and was to produce another (Joseph Murphy) later the same day.

The second consideration is equally important, for the summary excludes all reference to the life, ideals and achievements of the man before his strike. It reduces him to the circumstances of his death — and this is wrong. Not

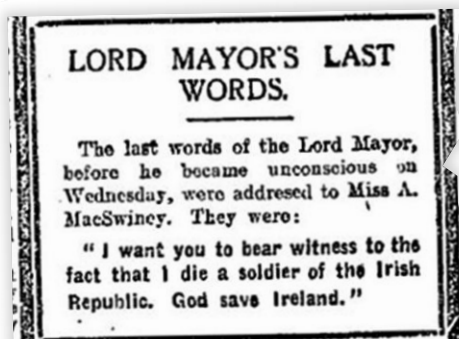
only had this life been rich and meaningful long before the autumn of 1920; it was precisely the manner in which it had been lived, and the values that had underpinned it, that ensured MacSwiney could endure the most when the defining crisis of his 41 years suddenly presented itself.

He was a native-born son of the northside of Cork city, and his youth left indelible traces on his character. His father emigrated, alone, to Australia while Terence was still a child. He was, as a result, under the sway of his mother and older sisters during his early years. From the former he derived his passionate yet reflective brand of Catholicism, while from the latter he acquired his equally fervent, equally thoughtful, republicanism. Both were further nurtured during his years in the city's famed 'North Mon' Christian Brothers School. The need to earn a living wage for his family meant he was denied at this stage in his life the further education appropriate to his intelligence. For a number of years he settled into the role of commercial clerk. He never abandoned his educational aspirations, however, and he returned to academia as a mature student when he successfully pursued a degree course in the Royal University.

His demanding but less than satisfying day job encouraged him to seek outlets for his energies in other directions. Initially these were largely cultural — writing poetry and plays, assisting in the development of the artistic



Left: The front page of French newspaper *Le Petit Journal* on September 19, 1920 featured an illustration of Terence MacSwiney on hunger strike



**LORD MAYOR'S LAST WORDS.**

The last words of the Lord Mayor, before he became unconscious on Wednesday, were addressed to Miss A. MacSwiney. They were:

"I want you to bear witness to the fact that I die a soldier of the Irish Republic. God save Ireland."

**Lord Mayor makes the ultimate sacrifice**

Extract from *Irish Independent*, October 26, 1920

The Lord Mayor of Cork made the supreme sacrifice for his country in Brixton Jail, at 5.40am, yesterday, without having regained consciousness.

Father Dominic, OSFC, and Mr Sean MacSwiney were present when the death occurred, and the former states that the end, which came while he was reading the Prayers for the Dead, was very calm.

Despite the promise of the prison authorities that when

death was approaching his relatives and friends would be summoned, neither Father Dominic nor Mr Sean MacSwiney were allowed to leave the prison until 6.30am, and Mr Sean MacSwiney was not allowed to telephone from the prison to acquaint the Lady Mayoress or the other anguished relatives that the end was coming or had come...

Throughout the country there is general mourning. Public

bodies yesterday adjourned their meetings as a mark of respect, and hundreds of telegrams of sympathy were sent to the bereaved relatives.

The Home Secretary, in the House of Commons, made the extraordinary assertion that the sole reason for the exclusion of the Lord Mayor's sisters from the prison was on medical grounds...

Father Dominic said: "The prayers for the dying and rosary

were completed before the death took place. The doctor gave him an injection of strychnine or morphia, and told me he had done all he possibly could for him and that he was now beyond his powers...

"Just as I had finished the *Antiphon* the Lord Mayor breathed his last. The end was very calm; there as not the slightest struggle, and he looked quite peaceful, though his face appeared very old and drawn."



Vigil: Father Dominic, Father O'Connor and Father McCormack outside Brixton Prison during the inquest into MacSwiney's death  
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



**'It is in all of us to become a MacSwiney'**  
 Irish Independent, Oct 28, 1920

*After his death, the 'Irish Independent' published the following article under a byline of 'By a member of the Dáil'*

What can be said of him that he himself has not already told? In all he wrote, in everything he did, and, most of all, in the manner of his passing there shines sincerity and truthfulness; and these were the keynotes of his character. His, I think, was a simple character; simple because of his own uncompromising rectitude.

He had but one criterion, the national good, to which to refer all things; and in his judgments of them his vision was swift, unclouded and untrammelled by one thought of self. In the record of his agony in Brixton, all his life might be epitomised. The same unceasing, uncompromising, patient struggle continued through years against tremendous odds; the same quiet perseverance, the same steadfast resolution, aye, and for the end of it all, the same ultimate victory.

**Voice in the wilderness**

When first he began in politics his was a voice, perhaps even only the echo of a voice, in the wilderness. He lived to see his creed the accepted creed of his people; and came himself to be his nation's chief protagonist in its struggle for justice.

Service and self-sacrifice; in these he best expresses himself, not in his poems, nor in his plays, nor his speeches; and it is by what he has given of these that he shall be immortalised. Beyond that splendid aphorism, "Not the nation that can inflict the greatest wrong, but the nation that can suffer and endure most will be the victor." I doubt if much of what he has written will endure, but his death "shall be remembered for ever".

**Patriot of plain men**

Of more than ordinary ability, he was yet no genius. Standing a little above most of his colleagues in ability and capacity, yet stood he not so high as to be remote from their emulation. He could set the standard for the generality of men.

For, though but one man in a generation — and it seems even as if he must be foreordained for it — may aspire to be a Pearse, it is in all of us to become a MacSwiney; dare we but put away as he did all self-seeking and insincerity.

Pre-eminently he was the patriot of the plain men; the men without pretension, without display, who do their duty, as they see it; simply and without affectation. He will rest in peace.



Keeping watch: MacSwiney lying in state in Cork City Hall

PHOTO REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

family, with their daughter Máire being born during a subsequent term of imprisonment.

Having been wary of Sinn Féin during its initial incarnation, when the party endorsed the idea of dual monarchy, its adoption of a frankly republican position in 1917 paved the way for MacSwiney's entry. Given his profile, it was little surprise when he was nominated as its candidate for the mid-Cork constituency in the general election of December 1918. He won without a contest.

Much of 1919 was devoted to improving the machinery of both the Volunteers and Sinn Féin in Cork. The party performed very well in the municipal elections of January 1920, with Tomás Mac Curtáin assuming the office of lord mayor. His murder at the hands of the Royal Irish Constabulary the following March led to MacSwiney's accession to the position. He discharged his duties with gusto during the short time he was at liberty. Likewise, he succeeded his friend to the position of commandant of Cork No 1 Brigade, and under his direction this had proved itself to be one of the most active units in the country before he and a fair proportion of its officer cadre were arrested — and in his case swiftly convicted — during a raid on City Hall in Cork on August 12, 1920.

**Theological debate**

What followed was an epic 73-day stand-off between prisoner and the government, he refusing all food and demanding his release, they determined to keep him locked-up. It was accompanied by impressive displays of public support, intense theological debate — was he attempting suicide by so fasting? — and a striking display of solidarity from American dock workers (many of them non-Irish), who for a time obstructed the use of American ports by British ships in protest at his treatment.

His death was not even the end of the matter. The British government reneged on a deal to allow his body to be taken from London to Cork via Dublin, creating huge additional anger. In effect, Crown forces acted as body snatchers, violently separating the accompanying party of family members from the remains at Holyhead, and putting the coffin in the less than tender hands of a party of Auxiliaries who sailed with it on an admiralty ship direct to Cobh.

As a protest against the family's maltreatment, nobody in Cork could be found to handle the casket, which, in a most unedifying development, was effectively dumped by the British for a time on a quayside in the city, before being rescued when the family arrived in Dublin. The funeral was itself obstructed by Crown forces, who placed strict limits on the numbers of sympathisers in the cortege, and banned overt republican displays.

An implacable enemy of British rule in Ireland from first to last, MacSwiney inspired republicans in Cork to ensure their county had a place of honour in the struggle for independence.

● *Gabriel Doherty is a lecturer in the school of history at University College Cork*



A man of beliefs: MacSwiney (above) flanked by two friars; his funeral cortege in London (left) ahead of the repatriation of his remains to Cork

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

*The funeral was obstructed by Crown forces who placed strict limits on the number of attendees*