

MARY MACSWINEY

"Not that they despised life or lightly threw it away; for none better than they knew its grandeur, none more than they gloried in its beauty, none were so happily full as they of its music; but they knew, too, the value of this deep truth, with the final loss of which Earth must perish; the man who is afraid to die is not fit to live."

—TERENCE MACSWINEY (*Principles of Freedom*).

Not long after the "Cease Fire" Order, which marked the end of the Civil War, I was present at an open air meeting in O'Connell Street, in Dublin, and heard Mr. Cosgrave denounce Mary MacSwiney.

"If Mary MacSwiney wants to live in Ireland," he cried, "she will have to obey the laws of the country."

A little way down the street was a Sinn Fein demonstration, and Mary MacSwiney rose to address it.

"I want to tell Mr. Cosgrave," she began, "that I am going to live in Ireland, and that I am not going to obey the laws of his Government."

She went on to say that as a citizen of the Irish Republic she owed allegiance to that, and that alone. It was not, however, the definite, unequivocal words she used so much as the serene, unfurried way in which she explained her intentions. She issued no flamboyant challenge: she spoke rather as if explaining something that should be obvious except to a tiresome child. She had that same iron resolution as marked the life—and death—of her brother Terence. They were cast from the same metal.

I thought of that meeting as I went down some years later to see Mary MacSwiney in her native city of Cork. I talked with her in a room adjoining her school—St. Ita's. A table was piled high with papers, well-filled bookshelves spoke of literary interests, but the photographs on the walls were most revealing. There were several pictures of Terence MacSwiney—a frank, winning personality, with proud, sensitive features. One could trace the resemblance to Mary Mac-

Swiney. Cathal Brugha—in uniform—sturdy and defiant, faced me from the wall, together with a picture of Daithi Ceannt—a T.D. in the Second Dail—being led off under arrest, by British soldiers with fixed bayonets. The four who were executed were there. Liam Mellows—with his eagle eyes—Dick Barrett, Joe McKelvey, Rory O'Connor. I noticed, too, the scholarly face of Erskine Childers. Irish history was represented by the pictures on those walls. And on a copper plate, in fine etched writing, were the noble words of Terence MacSwiney: "The victory is not to those who can inflict most, but to those who can endure most," while, at the bottom, in smaller letters, I read: "Presented to Miss Mary MacSwiney on March 17, 1921, by the women of Butte, Montana."

Among the names which stand out on an heroic page of Ireland's history Mary MacSwiney has an assured place. More than any other individual she represents the idea of a sovereign independent republic. She regarded herself as a citizen of that republic, and would never dream of putting any earthly loyalty in front of this. She was an irreconcilable, and all Ireland knows it. Yet, there was nothing harsh or aggressive in her personality. Flintlike in her public utterances, she remained, off the platform, the least arrogant and assertive of women.

Terence MacSwiney wrote: "Shall we honour the flag we bear by a mean, apologetic front? No! Whenever it is down, lift it; wherever it is challenged, wave it; wherever it is high, salute it; wherever it is victorious, glorify and exult in it." Mary MacSwiney lived in the spirit of these words. Even if they had never been written, this spirit is so much a part of her being that it would have made no difference. She was the embodied conscience of the Republican movement. A conscience is not always a comfortable thing. It does not choose its moments with discretion. Neither did Mary MacSwiney. Yet every one who counts in Ireland must admire her qualities of honesty and fearlessness. It has been her part to emphasise in her generation the idea of National freedom.

If we look at the background, we can see the conditions under which Mary MacSwiney arrived at her Republican convictions—conditions which, in many ways, seemed unpromising enough. The atmosphere of political jobbery surrounding the Parnell split was not calculated to bring her into National politics. She never attended political meetings in those early days. One meeting, however, she does remember—a Centenary Celebration addressed by Mr. John Redmond in Waterford in 1898. It was, she told me, a very "rebelly" speech, and she read every line of it. But a few days afterwards she read another speech

by Redmond, delivered somewhere in Yorkshire, where he assured England that they would not dream of asking for control of excise, customs or taxation in Ireland. The glaring contrast between the two speeches disgusted Mary MacSwiney. Her attitude to the Home Rule party was fixed by such speeches—of which John Redmond's was typical. From then on she had no use for the parliamentary orators—an attitude of mind which she kept.

Her training as a teacher and—later—her teaching activities took most of her time, but she made time to join in the Suffrage movement in Cork, and became one of the Committee responsible for suffrage work in the city. Friends remonstrated with her for joining in with Unionists to agitate for the vote while she had not joined Arthur Griffith's Sinn Fein. Her answer was that she would not join Sinn Fein and accept the "King, Lords and Commons of Ireland."

"I will never accept the King of England as the King of Ireland," she told her critics. Sinn Fein was not then Republican. "If you have a Wolfe Tone Club out for an Irish Republic, I will join that." She did not join Sinn Fein until after the Ard Feis of 1917, when it became definitely Republican.

All this time she was fully occupied with teaching. She was able to attend the Suffrage meetings because they were often held on Saturday afternoons. But at this time nothing was further from Mary MacSwiney's mind than a political career.

Carson's Volunteers in the North came as a bombshell to arouse sleeping National forces. The Irish Volunteers were started in Dublin, and a meeting was held in Cork towards the end of 1913, at which Sir Roger Casement and others spoke, for the purpose of organising an Irish Volunteer movement there. One of the speakers called for "Three cheers for Carson!" because Carson had shown them the way to organise volunteers. There were wild scenes at this meeting, and it was broken up.

Then came the launching of Cumann na mBan. In the *Irish Citizen*—Sheehy-Skeffington's paper—Mary MacSwiney read an attack on the new body as "slave women" because they had not demanded a place in the councils of the Volunteers. She wrote to the *Citizen* defending the Cumann na mBan. About Easter, 1914, she called together a small committee of women at her home in Blackrock to form the Cork branch of Cumann na mBan. A public meeting was held in the City Hall in June, and the organisation was started. The meeting also served the purpose of recruiting for the Volunteers.

Redmond and his followers made demands on the Volunteers, and

—later, after the European War broke out—his section split away. Cumann na mBan held a Convention in Dublin, in the autumn of 1914, to decide its attitude. Some advocated remaining neutral, but Mary MacSwiney urged a declaration in favour of the complete independence of the country. The Convention came down on her side. After the Civil War period, she became Vice-President of Cumann na mBan—a position she held for many years. In Cork, from the earliest days, she was the President of this body.

As the movement for Independence developed, both Mary and Terence MacSwiney took an ever greater part. They worked together. Until Terence died on hunger strike in Brixton Gaol it is impossible to separate their activities. Terence was soon a trusted officer in the Irish Volunteers, second in command in the local unit. Mary MacSwiney remembers vividly the early morning when the message was brought to Terence that Tomas MacCurtain had been murdered by police from the local barracks—afterwards re-named the MacCurtain barracks. He came upstairs and brought the news to the rest of the household.

“My brother Terence,” said Miss MacSwiney, “was never a man to care about honours or position. But, in the circumstances, it never occurred to him to refuse to step into MacCurtain’s shoes as Lord Mayor and to take his place as head of the Brigade. He took it as a matter of course. We realised,” she continued, “that there was not much possibility of his coming through the struggle alive. He never slept at home after he became Mayor. He slept at different places in the city, but he came in to dinner every day, and often to tea, one or two volunteers accompanying him. Of course, he carried on his duties openly at the City Hall each day.”

Such a matter-of-fact recital of the precautions taken reveals the terrorism which prevailed in the years immediately preceding the Treaty. During the period when Terence was Lord Mayor, Mary was on the Governing Body of Cork University as a Graduates’ candidate, occupying the position from 1919 to 1922 or ’23. She was known as a particularly able teacher, but complaints had been made to the head of her school that her history teaching inclined the girls to be Sinn Féiners. With her customary directness, Mary MacSwiney informed the head that she could not teach Irish History from an English standpoint any more than she could teach the Reformation from a Protestant standpoint. Her differences with the school came to an abrupt conclusion in 1916, when, after the Rising, she was kept under

arrest for a day. Next day she returned and was informed that not on any account was she to be allowed in the school again.

“Why, have I committed murder, forgery, or any crime?” asked Mary.

“You must discuss that with the head!” she was told. But that she would not do. She had, she declared, no apologies and no promises to make.

Dismissed from the school, she, with Annie MacSwiney, her sister, also a teacher, opened a school of their own—St. Ita’s—which they conducted since. In September, 1916, they started with 30 pupils. Before the end of the month they had 60. In 1921 there were 120 on the roll. This dropped to 25 after the Treaty. In 1933 it was 110. The school, which has a high reputation for efficiency, is a purely private venture, and remains independent of State recognition or grant.

On August 12, 1920, Terence MacSwiney was arrested at the City Hall. He had been ordered by the I.R.A. headquarters to take a month’s leave from the following Saturday. But his arrest prevented this. He was charged with presiding over a Republican Court—a charge which—Mary MacSwiney remarked—was untrue, because he was actually presiding over a Brigade Council of the I.R.A. at the time of his arrest. Others taken at the same time were released under the impression that they were unimportant witnesses. Some of them were men with prices on their heads. Later on, no mention was made of the Republican Court, which met in the City Hall at the same time, for the British authorities discovered than an important British insurance company was plaintiff in the case.

Terence was tried by Court Martial on August 16 at Cork Military Barracks. The principal charge against him was that he possessed a copy of the police code—which, as Lord Mayor of the city, he claimed he had more right to possess than anyone else. He was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, but informed the Court that he would be free, alive or dead, within a month.

He had been on hunger strike since his arrest, and he was deported to Brixton Gaol that night. Mary MacSwiney crossed to London and saw him every day during the long-drawn agony of his fast, as did other members of his family. He was placed in the hospital wing where Roger Casement had been before his execution.

He received considerable treatment. He was in a large airy room, with a nurse in attendance. But he was continually urged to take food. Not only so, but the doctor tried his best to get Mary and other relatives to break down his resolution.

One morning the doctor talked for over an hour with her, pointing out what a valuable life was being lost and what good he might still do for Ireland. Speaking of Terence, he said:—

"He gave me to understand that he would take food, but he was afraid he would be regarded by you and by Ireland as a coward."

"I know he would never say anything like that!" said Mary. "And I know that, even if I did urge him to do anything he thought wrong, it would have no effect!"

Under the terrible strain she broke down, and was not able to see her brother until later than usual.

Terence looked at her keenly when she came in.

"Has the doctor been annoying you?" he asked. "They told me you were anxious for me to give in! What does it matter what they say!"—he dismissed them contemptuously—"We understand each other. Nothing they say can upset us!"

Every day, Mary recalls, he was eager for news from Ireland. He wanted to live, but all thought of compromise was foreign to his mind. People urged that he should be ordered to give up the hunger strike. But he said that this was an individual struggle, and it should be left to the individual.

The Governor tried hard to get Mary to persuade him to take nourishment. "Only a spoonful of brandy," he pleaded, "that is all I ask. We would let him go free, then!" In just such a way the pagans urged the early Christians to burn incense—only a pinch—before strange gods.

The weeks dragged on until he drew near the end of his two months' martyrdom. He was incredibly shrunken, but his spirit held to life. The last four days he was delirious.

"He recognised his sisters several times during his delirium," Miss MacSwiney told me. Once he was troubled. "I think they have tricked me," he said. "Mind, there is to be no compromise. Remember, I am dying a soldier of the Irish Republic."

During this lucid interval the nurse told Mary MacSwiney she must go away.

For the last two days Mary was refused permission to see him. On Saturday, October 23, she went into the ante-room at the prison gate and announced her intention of staying there and taking no food until she was allowed to see her brother. "You will have to put me out forcibly," she said. After some hours they placed her under arrest and put her outside the prison gate. On Sunday morning, and up till midnight, she and her sister remained outside the prison, fasting. At

6.45 a.m. on Monday, October 25, news was brought that his long martyrdom was over.

An inquest was held in the prison, and on Wednesday night the body was handed back to his relatives. Perhaps the authorities were alarmed at the funeral procession in London. Whether it was conscience or cowardice that dictated this action I do not know, but Mary MacSwiney tells how police came on the train at Chester and told them they could not take the body to Dublin. It must be sent direct to Cork by water.

"At Holyhead," said Mary, "we were faced with the most evil-looking collection of Black and Tans I have ever seen."

Here the relatives formed a ring round the coffin, but they were thrown out of the van, and—by police orders—the coffin was taken. "I remember seeing it swinging in the air," she said. "It was a nightmare experience."

She and the others went on to Dublin, where, for the first time, they were able to feel they had left hostility behind, and that the Irish people understood.

The coffin was taken to Cork, where it was placed in the Customs House. A letter came for Miss MacSwiney when she reached home from the British officer commanding the district stating that she could have her brother's remains on application, and limiting the length of the funeral procession allowed to a quarter of a mile. Two officers brought this, and waited for an answer.

She wrote to the Commanding Officer informing him that it was her intention to take the remains from the Customs House to the City Hall, that it was now 9.15 and that Curfew was at 10 o'clock, therefore curfew could not be observed.

That night will live always in Mary MacSwiney's memory. She spoke of the sea of white faces in the darkness. How, over the bridges festooning the girders, she saw thousands of people, occupying every possible vantage-ground. An I.R.A. Guard of Honour was posted at the City Hall. The whole city was out. But immediately after 10.30 there was the noise of tanks and armoured cars from the barracks, rumbling down Summerhill. Not even the dead were allowed to rest in peace.

On Sunday, October 31st, the city rose again. The funeral procession of all ranks and classes marched eight abreast. In its ranks, Mary MacSwiney recalls, marched three archbishops and five bishops. All gathered to do honour to Ireland's noble dead. It was an experience of pride and grief such as few women have ever been called upon to

go through, and it left its mark upon the resolute personality of Mary MacSwiney.

Later she visited America to give evidence before an American Council sitting in Washington to inquire into the activities of the Black and Tans. Here she met Eamonn de Valera, who—when he was called back hurriedly to Ireland—asked her to stay to fulfil his lecturing engagements.

"I laughed at the idea," she said. "I could not see myself as a public lecturer."

But de Valera insisted. "You have the facts at your finger tips," he said. "You are a teacher. There is no one else here to do it!" So she stayed.

Miss MacSwiney lectured all over America. About this time, too, she was elected a member of the Second Dail.

She arrived in Dublin on the eve of the Treaty negotiations. Here, she recalls, she found a vague spirit of compromise in the air which made her uneasy. She was told she was either foolish or wilfully blind if she did not see that a compromise was intended. At the last discussion prior to the Treaty, on September 14, 1921, she remembers Mr. de Valera reading his letter to Lloyd George, in which he made it clear that the Irish delegates would treat on behalf of a sovereign nation. This, it was said, might break off the negotiations, for England would not accept this position. Miss MacSwiney supported sending the letter. She called on anyone who thought there was a chance of compromise to speak now, before it was too late. One after another, they rose and protested their loyalty to the Republic.

Despite all this the Treaty was signed and ratified. Mary MacSwiney made one of the most notable speeches in the Dail debate on the Treaty, and was immediately recognised as a leader of the uncompromising side. She made personal appeals to her old colleagues. To Richard Mulcahy she said: "I will fight against compromise to the death. Are you, as His Majesty's Minister, going to send soldiers to arrest me and those who think as I do? If ever you do, I shall do the same as Terence did to Lloyd George!"

This conversation stayed in Miss MacSwiney's memory, because exactly eleven months from that day she was on her first hunger strike in prison against the Free State authorities. This hunger strike took place at Mountjoy and lasted for 24 days. After 13 days her sister came from Cork to see her, but was refused admittance. So, for the following eleven days, Annie MacSwiney was on hunger strike at the prison gates, remaining there day and night. Mary MacSwiney said that her

sister had by far the harder part—a part not rendered easier by the chivalrous attentions of the Mountjoy guards who hosed her from the prison gate. In the Mater Hospital, after Mary MacSwiney's release, the sisters met.

In Kilmainham, Mary MacSwiney underwent another ordeal. She was on hunger strike here for 21 days.

"And were you released then?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "If I had not been released, I would not have taken food."

The climax of her struggle came on the night when the girls and women of the Cumann na mBan—her fellow-prisoners—refused to be transferred to the North Dublin Union and leave her there on hunger strike alone.

Force was employed to get the women out. Soldiers were brought in, and, till the early hours of the morning, the place was like an inferno with screams and kicks, oaths and struggles. After twenty days on hunger strike, it is not surprising that Mary MacSwiney was on the verge of collapse. The knowledge that the other prisoners were enduring this for her did not make it easier. In the morning, when the doctor looked at her, he recommended her release immediately.

During her first hunger strike in Mountjoy the nurse obtained her promise to take food as soon as she was released. When she was carried out of the prison, she saw four Free State soldiers in the ambulance. The nurse offered her a spoonful of brandy, but she refused it.

"You promised that when you were released you would take food," said the nurse reproachfully.

"Do you call this release?" asked Mary MacSwiney, indicating her guards.

She spoke enthusiastically of the kindness she received at Miss O'Donel's Nursing Home in Eccles Street. "I had never met the O'Donel family before, and I did not know them," she said. "But no one could have exceeded their kindness and their attention to me."

These are high lights of the struggle in which Mary MacSwiney has constantly engaged. For her there has been, and there could be, no compromise where the question of the Irish Republic is concerned. Yet she denies vehemently that she has ever been a rebel. "A rebel is one who opposes lawfully constituted authority," she declared, "and that I have never done."

Only the subjugation of Ireland and the resentment which this has aroused in the minds of men and women can explain the stand of Mary MacSwiney. These unnatural conditions, too, explain a man

like Pearse, who, in his play "*The Singer*," indicated the road he would travel, and also Terence MacSwiney, who, in his magnificent "*Principles of Freedom*"—dedicated, by the way, "To Soldiers of Freedom in Every Land"—appears uncannily to foreshadow his own lonely stand. Given injustice, it is inevitable that noble natures will rise up in revolt.

When I went up the narrow, crooked streets towards the steeple of Shandon, I saw, lying among the cabbages and bundles of wood, in a little huxter's shop, a vivid green song sheet. It was spread open, and I could see the names of the ballads known to the "common people" — "Kevin Barry, Ireland's Boy Hero," "A Nation Once Again," "Manchester Martyrs, or the Smashing of the Van," "O'Donnell Abu!" There they were, in all their flamboyant appeal. But in the church itself I saw only a wreath of poppies and a Union Jack, hanging in folds. I looked in vain for any flag or symbol denoting connection with the country or even the city in which it stood—that city, the centre of which the British forces had burned down one wild night in 1920. Mary MacSwiney told me how, from the top of their house, her sister and the maid saw the flames rising in the night. They could hear the rumble of lorries, the curses, shouts and laughter of the soldiers. Mary was in Washington at this time. The clock in the City Hall continued to strike until six in the morning, when the burning tower fell. Much else has fallen in Ireland since that tower crashed.

Photo: J. Cashman.
Mary MacSwiney



Eva Gore-Booth

