

# Terence MacSwiney, Cork Men's Gaol, and the Political Hunger Strike, 1920-2020

University College Cork Online Conference

*Thursday, 8 October – Saturday 10 October*

## Paper Abstracts

### Thursday, Session 1, Panel A, Force feeding and hunger strike precedents

*Heidrun Mühlbradt, University of Goettingen, Germany*

#### **The Global Laboratory Ireland: Going on Hunger Strike**

When three members of the militant women's suffrage organisation Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) went on hunger strike in Mountjoy prison in Dublin on 14 August 1912, they imported a political weapon into Ireland that should have a long-lasting impact on this country. The hunger strike embodied by Thomas Ashe, Terence MacSwiney and Bobby Sands became Ireland's most spectacular form of national resistance in the 20th century. The proposed paper reads Ireland shortly before and during the Irish War of Independence as a global laboratory in which the political weapon of hunger striking was translated from a particular female form of suffering into a form of national resistance. Drawing on a wide range of source materials, it traces back how over the English suffragettes hunger striking and forcible feeding were implemented into Ireland's inventory of social practices, only to be translated into heroic male martyrdom. In contrast to the existing research according to which the early Irish hunger strikes were the result of an appropriation and execution of an idea rather than performances, it shall show how meaning was constantly regenerated by performing the act of translation. It argues that the Irish hunger strike epitomised the Irish triad of hegemonic masculinity, Christianity and nationalism. With Hegel's concept of sublation, it highlights how the Irish hunger strikers as well as their Irish nationalist contemporaries comprehended, experienced and interpreted the Irish hunger strike.

***Meadhbh Murphy, University College Dublin***

### **The Force in Force Feeding**

During the War of Independence, those Irish political prisoners who chose to go on hunger strike knew they may have to pay the highest price for their beliefs; their life. But with the death of Thomas Ashe in 1917 as a result of force feeding, they also knew their death could be one inflicted by those sworn to save lives; doctors. How did these doctors carry out the procedure of force feeding a prisoner on hunger strike? What methods did they use and what instruments were available for them to do so? This talk will take a clinical look at the methods and tools that were used by the medical profession in the early 1900s to force feed prisoners on hunger strike.

**Niall Murray, PhD Student, University College Cork**

### **The revolutionary careers of the Cork participants in the 1920 Wormwood Scrubbs Hunger Strike**

The use of hunger strike as a political weapon in Irish revolutionary movements has long received deserved scholarly treatment. In the Irish War of Independence, hunger strikes had a considerable dual impact: damaging British authority and administration in Ireland; and securing public and international attention and sympathy for the republican cause. But less academic study has been accorded the after-effects for those who took part in hunger strikes of this period. This paper will consider the revolutionary roles played by a small group of republican prisoners who returned to Mid Cork and West Cork after their participation in hunger strikes at London's Wormwood Scrubs prison in April and May 1920. The possible impact of that experience on their ability and willingness to take part in other forms of revolutionary activity will be scrutinised. While many resumed their parts in the IRA's evolving guerilla warfare campaign, some were elected or appointed to republican administration roles following their release, and some pursued both paths. These released hunger-strikers also played varying roles in the Civil War that began in the summer of 1922. Through archival and other evidence, this paper seeks to establish if their experiences of hunger strike deepened or weakened these men's republican convictions, by investigating their actions up to and following the end of the Irish War of Independence. It will also look at

lives of the men after these conflicts to consider the longer-lasting personal effects of hunger strikes during the Irish Revolution.

***Dr. Tomás Mac Conmara, UCC***

**'Now began the days of Hunger' The Mountjoy Hunger Strike of 1917 and its effect on later hunger strikes**

The presentation explores the Mountjoy Hunger Strike of September 1917 and the martyrdom of Tomás Ashe, in relation to its impact on contemporary republican politics and the experience of the Mac Swiney and subsequent hunger strikes in modern Irish history. It will examine the dynamics at play in 1917 and show how the escalation of political protest carried very real risks for the republican movement. It will demonstrate how the impact of Ashe's death and its consolidation of republican sentiment, cemented the tactic of hunger striking, particularly the commitment to see protests through, which was manifest in 1920 and beyond. The presentation will chronicle the conscious strategy of escalation on the part of the republican movement in 1917 and will outline the relevant political, legal, medical and ethical considerations and how these were played out in the political landscape. A distinction will be drawn between the hunger strike as form of protest and martyrdom as an outcome. With the latter, the ability to present the victim as a Christ like figure (particularly with Ashe and Mac Swiney) will be shown to have taken the form of protest and its effect, to a level not possible with any other method of revolutionary war. The Mountjoy Hunger Strike and the martyrdom of Ashe will be shown to be critical for the approach and commitment of Terence Mac Swiney, the Cork Men's Gaol hunger strikers and for the broader republican movement, nationally and internationally. Ultimately, it will argue that without an examination of the Mountjoy experience in 1917, the entire strategy and efficacy of the Mac Swiney episode cannot be fully understood.

**Friday, Session 1, Panel C, Interdisciplinary perspectives on hunger striking**

***Prof Gautam Gulati, University of Limerick***

**Hunger Strikes in Prison – What is the role of Psychiatry?**

It is not uncommon for prison psychiatrists to be asked to assess an individual on hunger strike. These scenarios are complex from a clinical, legal and ethical perspective. This paper discusses international literature and the ethical position as set out by the World Medical Association. Further, the paper discusses the role of a psychiatrist in these situations i.e. what a psychiatrist can and cannot do. Results of an Irish study setting out this position are discussed.

***Dr Darius Whelan, University College Cork***

### **Hunger Strikes in Prison – The Legal Issues**

This paper will review the current Irish law on food refusals in prison. Case-law on food refusals involves consideration of prisoners' rights to health, life, self-determination and autonomy. Criminal law concerning aiding and abetting suicide has relevance. In some situations, mental health legislation and capacity legislation, including the Mental Health Act 2001, the Criminal Law (Insanity) Act 2006 and the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (which is not yet fully commenced), will apply. Different considerations may apply depending on whether the food refusal is regarded as motivated by a hunger strike as a form of protest, a deliberate act of self-harm, a mental illness or an attempt to 'frustrate' a prison sentence.

### **Friday, Session 2, Panel D, 1920 and The Cork Men's Gaol Hunger Strike**

***Dr John Borgonovo, University College Cork***

#### **The Cork Men's Gaol Hunger Strike of 1920**

Terence MacSwiney's hunger strike in Brixton Prison has in many ways overshadowed events in Cork Men's Gaol from August to November 1920. This paper will provide an overview to the hunger strike in Cork, from its start to its conclusion. It will argue that events in Cork were not well planned by either the republican prisoners or the British prison and government authorities. Yet, once the strike escalated, both positions hardened, leading to the inevitable conclusion. It will take a Cork focus to the strike, from the IRA's intimidation of prison doctors to the innovative mass protests that rocked Cork city. In doing so, the paper will show that

the Cork Men's Gaol strike was a critical backdrop to the great drama played out by Terence MacSwiney in London.

***Gerard Shannon, Independent Scholar***

**'Tell my people I want to be buried with Fitzgerald of Fermoy': The impact of Michael Fitzgerald's martyrdom on Liam Lynch**

Both Liam Lynch and Michael Fitzgerald were close in life, and remain so in death. Accounts from contemporaries noted their close friendship. This was rooted in striking commonalities: Both from rural backgrounds, Lynch from Limerick, worked in Fermoy; and met Fitzgerald in the town in 1914. Both joined the Irish Volunteers after the Rising and rose through the ranks. Ultimately, Lynch became head of the North Cork Brigade, while Fitzgerald commanded the Fermoy Battalion within the Brigade. Both led crucial actions at the outset of conflict in 1919, Fitzgerald with the Araglin Barracks attack in April, Lynch with the Fermoy ambush in September (with Fitzgerald taking part). Fitzgerald was arrested in the aftermath of the ambush. He was reunited with Lynch in Cork Jail eleven months later when the latter was briefly imprisoned following his arrest with others at Cork City Hall. Fitzgerald died on his hunger strike in October 1920, and arrangements were made for Lynch to view his remains while on the run. Lynch's correspondence from 1921 - 22 revealed the influence of the memory of the martyred dead over his decisions as he rose in rank to command the anti-Treaty IRA by the Civil War. National Army lieutenant Laurence Clancy gave an account of his interactions with Lynch during his final hours in April 1923, and recalled Lynch's dying request to Clancy was to be buried with his late comrade, Michael Fitzgerald; Clancy mentioned the importance of this request in correspondence.

***Professor Colum Kenny, Dublin City University***

**To 'live for Ireland': Arthur Griffith, Acting President of Dáil Éireann 1919-1920, and the End of the Cork/Brixton Hunger-Strike.**

In November 1920 a voluntary hunger strike by prisoners that had resulted in the lord mayor of Cork Terence MacSwiney and two other men, Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy (aged

17) dying, was called off following an intervention by the acting president of Dáil Éireann Arthur Griffith. Griffith had expressed both his opinion that 'the sacrifices already made have achieved their object' and 'my earnest wish that they [the surviving hunger strikers] will rebuild their strength and live for Ireland.' Griffith's extended term as acting president, in the absence of de Valera in America for most of 1919 and 1920, was significant. But both his role and the working of the Dáil itself at this time have sometimes been overshadowed by the activities of armed men. This paper will ask questions about the significance of the revolutionary parliament in 1920 and in particular about the role that Griffith played both in it and in the ending of the Cork/Brixton hunger strike in 1920.

### **Friday, Session 3, Panel E: The Hunger Strike and Literary Imagination**

***Síobhra Aiken, NUI Galway***

#### **Reclaiming the 'The Women's Weapon' in the Testimonial Fiction of Female Revolutionaries**

This paper will consider the testimonial fiction of three female revolutionaries – all of whom were imprisoned for their activities – that address the ethically contentious practice of hunger striking, namely Dorothy Macardle's short story 'The Prisoner' (1924), Máiréad Ní Ghráda's play *Stailc Ocras* [Hunger Strike] (1966) and Máirín Cregan's play *Hunger-strike: A Play in Two Acts* (1933). While all the texts depict male hunger strikers, this paper will consider how these authors employed fiction in order to covertly reclaim the feminist roots of the hunger strike, re-gender the embodied experience of hungerstriking, and even challenge the heroic interpretation of Irish martyrdom. Given the limited discursive authority afforded to female authors in the socially conservative post-revolutionary Free State, I will outline how addressing such a taboo topic demanded the careful and strategic management of narrative strategies; these included the use of male or co-author narrative masks, the resource to unsuspecting literary genres, the exploitation of the protection offered by the Irish language, and the delicate balancing of subversive and dominant rhetorical practises. Nevertheless, such enabling narrative practices did not guarantee literary success – as evident from the array of challenges faced by these authors in publishing their texts and the mixed reception their work received.

***Prof Luke Gibbons, Maynooth University***

**Terence MacSwiney, The Hunger Strike and Literary Modernism**

The hunger strike of Terence MacSwiney deeply affected many Irish artists of the period. Amongst those who ruminated on the events of 1920 was James Joyce. In 1903, Joyce wrote the play, 'The King's Threshold', which featured a hunger strike by the poet Seanchan. However, Joyce altered its ending in 1922, citing the influence of MacSwiney's death. This paper will consider how the Cork/Brixton strike affected James Joyce, and position those events in the broader context of Irish modernism.

**Friday, Session 4, Panel F: Republican hunger strikes post 1920**

***Dr Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin, University of Limerick***

**Time, Memory and Contested Narratives: The Case of Séan McCaughey (1946)**

In 1946, as President O'Kelly made his way to the 1916 memorial ceremonies in Arbour Hill, his progress was halted by a group of 300 turf-workers, engaging in a brief strike in 'protest against the detention of Seán McCaughey' (Irish Independent 10/5/1946: 7). This paper explores this anomalous demonstration in support of the hunger-striking McCaughey, arguing that these subaltern activists were intervening against the performance of state culture. All nation states have metaphorical capabilities, producing and reproducing social formations and cultural practices through diverse infrastructures; in Ireland, the state sought to establish its authority through its authorship of the official national narrative and its control of historical time. This paper asks in what way a nation state becomes its own form of ontology. And how does the practice of an anti-state hunger strike unsettle that project? More generally, what happens to those individuals who refuse the state's project of citizen formation and who remain in excess of its logic? This paper suggests that McCaughey's hunger strike speeded up political time, forcing the government, diverse political groups and the wider public to consider the competing systems of political authority and citizenship which persisted after the end of the Civil War.

***Dr Stephen Hopkins, University of Leicester***

**The Hunger Strike as an 'Obsolete Weapon'? The Internal Debate within Irish**

## **Republicanism after 1920**

The quotation above comes from IRA leader and hunger striker, Ernie O'Malley who recorded that in the aftermath of the Civil War, anti-Treaty IRA prisoners debated the utility of hunger striking for their immediate release by the Free State authorities. O'Malley recounted that he disliked the idea of hunger striking, partly because he was, 'afraid of it, and also to me it was an unsoldierly way to die, or to face death.' He recognised that some officers opposed it as a tactic 'because we had since the death of Terence MacSwiney regarded it as an obsolete weapon. In the jail phraseology, "it had died of wounds".' Nonetheless, O'Malley participated for 41 days in the 1923 hunger strike, and was very near death when it was called off, without the strikers' demands being met. This paper will analyse the Civil War era, but also subsequent debates within the Irish republican 'family' regarding the efficacy of hunger striking, and the ambivalence of IRA and Sinn Féin leaderships concerning this high-stakes tactic. In recent years, there has been considerable internal dispute within the Provisional republican movement about the conduct and legacies of the 1980/1981 hunger strikes, but paradoxically two of the main antagonists, Gerry Adams (SF vice-President in 1981) and Richard O'Rawe (public relations officer for the IRA prisoners during the 1981 strike) were opposed to the use of this tactic, initially at least (Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 1996: 285; O'Rawe, *Blanketmen*, 2005: 101). The paper will be based upon published memoirs by leading republicans, as well as articles and letters in the republican press. It will be argued that there has never been a settled position within the movement regarding hunger striking, and that judgments concerning its results have varied since MacSwiney's death.

### **Saturday, Session 1, Panel H: The hunger strike in India and China**

***Prof Jerusha McCormack Trinity College, Dublin/Beijing Foreign Studies University***

#### **Staging the Revolution: Terence MacSwiney and Guo Moruo**

On August 20, 1920, the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, was arrested by British Crown police for being a member of the Irish Republican Army: a charge he did not deny. Protesting his arrest by what he saw as the occupying forces in Ireland, he went on hunger strike – dying in Bristol prison 74 days later. A world away, in Fukuoka, Japan, a young Chinese journalist, translator, and poet, Guo Moruo, followed MacSwiney's protest through the local telegraph office. Within a year of MacSwiney's death he had published his first book of poetry,

The Goddesses (女神 - nǚ shén, 1921). There, in a poem titled “Victorious Death,” cobbled together from the various telegrams he had read as a journalist, Moruo honoured MacSwiney as an “Irish patriot” and “fighter for freedom”. How did such a vivid connection come to be made over such distances, both actual and cultural? How can these two events be said to be in any way cognate? By examining them through the perspective of various forms of drama – from self-dramatization to actual theatre, from public spectacle to media publicity – one can understand more about how the two revolutions, one in Ireland and the other in China, seized the attention of the world’s stage.

***Professor Brian Girvin, University of Glasgow***

**Confronting empire: Mohandas Gandhi’s use of the hunger strike as a non-violent revolutionary strategy**

At the same time the world was watching Terence MacSwiney’s hunger strike, the British Empire was confronted with fasts and non-violent political mobilisation in India which also challenged its authority and legitimacy. Mohandas Gandhi had originally developed his non-violent political strategy to confront the imperial authorities in South Africa. This is described as satyagraha: a strategy of non-cooperation and non-violence. Though he was still an Empire loyalist when he returned to India in 1915, Gandhi’s mobilisation transformed Indian politics by 1920. Gandhi now pursued a more radical confrontation as a consequence of his struggle against the Rowlatt’s Acts in 1919 and the non-cooperation movement then ongoing (1920-22). In India, Gandhi brought the hunger strike to the heart of the nationalist movement using it as an ethical and political device to mobilise Indians (especially those in the countryside). It was also his chosen method to confront the Empire itself. This paper will explore Gandhi’s strategy and examine how and in what way the hunger strike was part of a non-violent but revolutionary strategy on his part. Moreover, it will analyse the coercive aspects of this strategy, as Gandhi sought to bend others to his will but without exercising violence to achieve this end. In this context the paper will examine in detail the debate over non-violence between Tagore and Gandhi to illuminate some of the tensions within the strategy. It will also examine Gandhi’s response to those Hindu nationalists who advocated physical force to win independence. Additionally, the paper will provide three case studies to illuminate the various aspects of his thinking and the political strategy that underpinned them. These are Rowlatt

and non-cooperation campaign 1919-22; the Civil disobedience Movement of 1930-31 and the Quit India movement in 1942. It will conclude with Gandhi's campaign after independence to end violence in Calcutta and protect the rights of Muslims in the new state.

**Saturday, Session 2, Panel I: Spirituality, ethics, and the fast as protest**

***Dr Jesse Harrington, Cambridge University***

**"Indo-European, Pagan, or Christian? The pre-modern origins of fasting as a form of protest"**

Fasting as a form of protest has a long history in Ireland, recorded as far back as the early Middle Ages and enshrined in native Brehon law as the "troscad". Cultural nationalists of the twentieth century were familiar with this tradition through contemporary reimaginings such as W.B. Yeats' "The King's Threshold" (1903), which describes: "An old and foolish custom, that if a man / Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve / Upon another's threshold till he die, / The common people, for all time to come, / Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold." Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship took this practice to be a pre-Christian survival of either 'Celtic' or older 'Indo-European' origin, seemingly confined in its survival to Ireland and India. Nonetheless, other examples abound from cultures as disparate as medieval Christian England, the ancient Hebrew scriptures, and Roman and Islamic Egypt, which show that the practice was neither unique to Ireland nor to a presumed 'Indo-European' inheritance. Moreover, the tone of the practice in Ireland owed as much to the Christian tradition as it did to pre-Christian survivals. This paper will feature case studies including the Cairo Genizah, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, late antique hagiography, and the medieval Christian saga and hagiographical traditions from both Ireland and England. In doing so, it aims to situate the pre-modern practice of hunger strike in Ireland in both its universal and Christian contexts, in order to account both for the vitality of the tradition and its endurance into the modern world

***Dr Darragh Gannon, Queen's University Belfast***

**'Inside the "British" Cult of Terence MacSwiney**

'The candles of God are already burning, row on row'. So wrote the poet, writer, and mystic George Russell ('AE') of Terence MacSwiney's hunger-strike in 'Brixton Prison, August 31,

1920'. Russell's poem first reached print in *The Times* newspaper on 2 September 1920, imbuing MacSwiney's hunger-strike with spiritual overtones and religious significance. Russell's response to the prospect of Terence MacSwiney's death has been enshrined in the artistic narration of the Irish revolutionary period, much like Yeats' 'Easter 1916', because it vividly captured the religiosity of contemporary responses to MacSwiney's hunger-strike. As John Wolfe has observed more broadly, 'reactions to the deaths of the famous can give revealing insights into the attitudes of a society and culture as a whole'. This paper will explore the spiritual zeitgeist of MacSwiney's hunger-strike in Great Britain. Adopting the 'new' political history as analytical approach, this study interrogates cultural 'representations' of MacSwiney's hunger-strike to alternate 'British' political constituencies. Taking the Catholic Church in Great Britain as case study, this research compares the competing discourses of Cardinal Bourne (Westminster) and Bishop Amigo (Southwark) on the ethics of MacSwiney's hunger-strike. Examining the Irish republican movement in Great Britain, this research profiles the political construction of Irish nationalist responses to MacSwiney's protracted hunger-strike from London to Glasgow. Surveying MacSwiney's funeral cortège, finally, this research assesses the impact of Irish religiosity on the British 'metropole', through civic representations of ritual, spectacle, and ceremony.

#### **Saturday, Session 4, Panel K, MacSwiney on Stage**

***Dr Patrick Maume, Royal Irish Academy***

#### **Terence MacSwiney, Daniel Corkery and the Cork Dramatic Society: civic drama and social transformation**

This paper examines the literary legacy of Terence MacSwiney, with particular reference to his literary relations with Daniel Corkery and the Cork Dramatic Society (1908-13). Corkery and MacSwiney shared deep dissatisfaction with Cork provincial life and belief that the Irish Revival offered them a chance not only to achieve self-expression but to transform the society around them. Corkery, as the moving spirit of the Cork Dramatic Society, wished not only to imitate Yeats's work with the Abbey but to reconcile his attraction to the aesthetic power and freedom of Yeats and Synge with his sense that they disregarded the artist's moral responsibility. Corkery, as a cultural nationalist of the school of DP Moran, saw cultural regeneration as a necessary prelude to political transformation; MacSwiney, as a republican separatist, believed the two must go together. MacSwiney's political hero was William

Rooney, Arthur Griffith's early collaborator whose death in 1901 was widely attributed to overwork in the surface of his political beliefs. (Rooney is, with MacSwiney himself, one of the models for the hero of *The Revolutionist*.) MacSwiney's aesthetic combined an operatic belief that the representation of heroism could transform the everyday into the heroic, with a distrust of artifice as a distraction from heroic self-fashioning. Corkery's dissection of provincial anomie in his 1916 novel *The Threshold of Quiet* can be seen as a response to the demise of the CDS, whereas *The Revolutionist*, modelled on French neo-classical drama in its minute dissection of political honour and its hero's rise above the everyday to achieve love and martyrdom, sums up his aesthetic. Many of MacSwiney's admirers saw his hunger-strike as embodying his literary aspirations to heroism, and Corkery's later career was dominated by the belief that MacSwiney's achievement could be replicated despite what he saw as its betrayal by the Treaty.

***Dr Fiona Brennan, Independent Scholar***

### **A Hunger for Literary Fame: Terence MacSwiney's Dramatic Legacy**

Terence MacSwiney was a passionate theatregoer. He was enthralled by debates regarding the authentic nature of Irish drama, the development of the Irish Literary Theatre and, subsequently, the founding of the Abbey Theatre, in 1904. In 1908, MacSwiney became inextricably linked to Cork's dramatic movement when the Cork Dramatic Society was founded. Its high principles and commitment to creating original drama suited MacSwiney's dramatic ideals, as he sought desperately to establish his own foothold in the literary world. MacSwiney eventually wrote nine plays, (and miscellaneous drafts regarding other ideas), four of which were produced during his lifetime. In March 1910, he writes that he would never send work to the Abbey, detesting its preoccupation with peasant drama. He was worried that a similar dramatic fate might befall the C.D.S. In response, he wrote the one-act tragedy, *The Holocaust*. He had great hopes for the play's opening in December that year; that it might assist in progressing the Society's objectives by creating a "momentous production". Based on a re-interpretation of archival materials, including extant drafts of the play, this paper will discuss MacSwiney's *raison d'être* in writing *The Holocaust* and revising it for publication. Subsequently, it advances the theory regarding its importance in the development of urban/realist Irish drama and the resultant, purposeful change in MacSwiney's attitude towards the Abbey.

