

Dominic Carrea

The City of Cork in 1920

During the Irish War of Independence, the city of Cork was a stronghold of support for the Irish Republican Army and the foundation of an independent Irish Republic. As the war raged on, the usage of martial law was brought down harshly upon the people of Ireland. Many suspected members and sympathizers of the IRA were arrested and tried unjustly, with the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence Macswiney, being no exception.

To many, Terence Macswiney was known as a very intelligent and scholarly individual who passionately supported the idea of an independent Irish Republic. Terence Macswiney was also known for joining and founding several Arts/Language organizations that reflected greatly upon both his tremendous intellectual capacities and nationalist fervor. One organization he joined was the Gaelic League, which promoted the preservation of the Irish Language and still exists to this day, while one organization he co-founded was the Cork Dramatic Society, which produced many plays that helped inspire a sense of Irish heritage and culture amongst the citizens of Cork.

Eventually, though, on August 12th, 1920, Macswiney was arrested during a meeting with a Brigade Council on charges of sedition by Royal Irish Constabulary officers. Macswiney had only recently ascended to the position of Lord Mayor when he was arrested as his close friend and predecessor, Tomás Mac Curtain, was assassinated by RIC members on March 20th, 1920. Mac Curtain's innocence and brutal murder at the hands of RIC members had made him a martyr amongst the supporters of Irish independence both in the City of Cork and all throughout Ireland. After his arrest, Macswiney was sentenced to two years at Brixton prison in London.

But just because he was incarcerated, didn't mean Macswiney had given up his resolve to protest and combat British authority. Back when he was arrested in August, Macswiney and 10 other men had resolved to hunger strike in protest of the British. Macswiney soon attracted worldwide attention and respect while in prison for his unwavering commitment to the Irish cause and for his protestation of the British injustices during the war. Macswiney managed to endure for a staggering 74 days on hunger strike until eventually on October 25th, 1920 an emaciated and weak Macswiney died from starvation. Macswiney had joined his comrade Tomás Mac Curtain in martyrdom in the Irish War for Independence and had effectively turned international opinion away from the British for their cruelty. Macswiney's selflessness, commitment, and ultimate sacrifice to the dignity of his culture and his people in the face of adversity truly embodies the fighting spirit of what it means to be Irish and what it meant to support Irish Independence during the war. On that fateful day, Cork, as well as all of Ireland, had lost one of its most influential figures.

But the woes for the city of Cork had only just begun. On the night of December 11th, 1920, only six weeks after Macswiney had passed, RIC Auxiliary members had set fire to large portions of the city in an act of retribution for a raid by the IRA earlier that morning. As the local fire brigades rushed to extinguish the raging inferno in Cork they were continuously harassed by RIC members who would cut their hoses, shut down hydrants, and shoot at them in an attempt to scare them off. RIC members were reported to have also looted various homes and businesses while the fires caused great chaos. The harshness of the reprisal came to be one of the most horrific atrocities committed during the war with minimal casualties and extensive property damage. Overall an estimated five acres of the city was believed to have been destroyed by the blaze. Amongst the buildings that were destroyed were the City Hall and Carnegie Library as

well as 340 homes and businesses. After the fire, many people in Cork became unemployed and homeless as they had lost almost everything they owned. Overall it is believed that approximately 2,000 people in Cork lost their jobs as a result of the fire.

But as the roaring flames eventually turned to embers, it became more apparent that the suffering of the people of Cork along with the rest of Ireland had not been in vain. Only 11 days after the fires had finally died out in Cork, the Government of Ireland Act was passed in London on December 23rd, 1920. The act allowed for Ireland to form its own parliaments with its own representatives with one in Belfast and one in Dublin. This act didn't meet up completely with many Irish people's expectations as it did not include the true independence that many supporters of the IRA and Sinn Fein wanted. However, it still demonstrated that the British were growing tired of the fighting and that some much-needed headway was finally being made by the Irish in this long and bloody war.

Today, just outside of Cork City Hall, there are two statues that commemorate the martyrdom of Macswiney and Mac Curtain for their perseverance against injustice and government oppression; a theme universal to all peoples. Many of history's most famous resistance leaders like Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru have even acknowledged Macswiney as a source of inspiration at one point or another in their own respective struggles with the British Empire.

To this day Cork is one of the most iconic cities within Irish culture. It is a densely populated thriving urban center; the third largest in all of Ireland only behind the Northern and Southern capitals of Belfast and Dublin. Today many people walk down St. Patrick's Street and Bridge Street in Cork, one of the most beautiful and state-of-the-art urban areas in the city, listening to the beautiful songs of the kingfishers, where some 100 years ago the town lay in ruin.

Many native Irish still can even recall the heroic tales of Cork's noble citizens who stood strong together in the pursuit of their own nation with a steadfast commitment to their people and culture that earned Ireland its notorious fighting spirit.