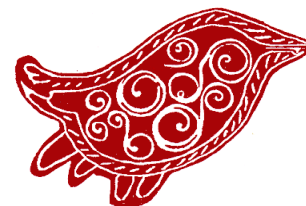


**Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society**



www.corkhist.ie

---

Title: The death of Terence MacSwiney: a French perspective

Author: Neville, Grace

*Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 2001, Vol. 106, page(s) 143-166

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: June 29, 2017

---

Your use of the JCHAS digital archive indicates that you accept the Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://corkhist.ie/terms-and-conditions/>

The Cork Historical and Archaeological Society (IE-148166, incorporated 1989) was founded in 1891, for the collection, preservation and diffusion of all available information regarding the past of the City and County of Cork, and South of Ireland generally. This archive of content of JCHAS (from 1892 up to ten years preceding current publication) continues the original aims of the founders in 1891. For more information visit [www.corkhist.ie](http://www.corkhist.ie).

# The Death of Terence MacSwiney: A French Perspective

By GRACE NEVILLE  
(Dept of French, UCC)

About twenty-five years ago, when a post-graduate student at the Université de Caen in Normandy, I was invited by friends to spend the weekend in the neighbouring region of la Mayenne. While out walking, we encountered an elderly man who happened to be the local priest. My friends introduced us, saying that I came from a place in Ireland called Cork. Immediately, the priest said 'Yes, Cork: Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, died on hunger strike in 1920'. This was remarkable. I should explain that, whatever about Ireland's almost cult status in present-day France (with its inescapable Irish pubs, music, agricultural produce and Bord Fáilte advertisements), twenty-five years ago, the situation was very different. Indeed, Ireland, Iceland and Holland ('Irlande', 'Islande' and 'Hollande') were then widely confused. Hence, that an elderly person living in a typically rural corner of *la France profonde* not only accepted that the country existed but was well informed on one of the more dramatic episodes in the twentieth-century history of a provincial city there has always intrigued me.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper, therefore, completed in the year following the eightieth anniversary of MacSwiney's death, is threefold: to locate and analyse the coverage of this story in the French press of the time, to establish why it should have interested a French public and to hypothe-

size on what French interest could have meant for an Irish audience. It is clear that, for the French journals of the day, MacSwiney's hunger strike and death became a paradigm for the complexity and dynamism of this period in Irish history. The myriad voices captured in these newspapers from France – angry, dismissive, factual and elegiac – reflect the multi-layered nature of the event itself. In their unwavering focus on the drama that was being enacted in Brixton Prison, French commentators were, of course, positioning themselves in an age-old three-cornered relationship: the French, the Irish and the English observing their neighbours with the aim, for better or for worse, of enhancing their understanding of one another. The period under discussion here, 1920, is the subject of growing fascination among historians and commentators on modern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The present study is located in a more precise context, that of the investigation of Franco-Irish history and, in particular within this relationship, of French and Irish perspectives on each other's traditions and literature, perspectives that are at least as old as the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

## CONTEXT

A student of philosophy and accounting but also a dramatist and politician, Terence MacSwiney was elected to the first Dáil as a representative for West Cork in

1919. John A. Murphy sees in him 'a figure moulded to a great extent by the Gaelic League'.<sup>4</sup> He succeeded Tomás MacCurtain as Lord Mayor of Cork city in March 1920. MacCurtain had been shot dead at his home in Cork in front of his pregnant wife on 20 March. The coroner's jury reported that he had been 'wilfully murdered under circumstances of the most callous brutality; that the murder was organised and carried out by the Royal Irish Constabulary, officially directed by the British Government'. Following his arrest in August, MacSwiney was 'court-martialled on a charge of possessing seditious documents. Refusing to recognize the court, he declared that, as a protest against his arrest, he would refuse food while in jail. The progress of his hunger strike in Brixton prison was followed with intense interest at home and received wide publicity abroad. His death on 25 October, after a fast of seventy-four days, was publicly mourned throughout Ireland'.<sup>5</sup> His body was brought home for burial in Cork city amidst scenes of intense emotion, on 31 October, the eve of *Sambain*, a date that still resonates in an increasingly post-religious age.

Scholarship on MacSwiney himself is somewhat slight, with just a handful of monographs dedicated to him over the past eight decades.<sup>6</sup> Apart from these texts, published discussions of him appear to be confined to a small set of articles and sporadic references in mainstream historical analyses.<sup>7</sup> Laconic as they are, these commentaries manage to convey the complexity and contradictions of the Corkman's character as they range from hagiography, in the case of Diarmaid Ó Briain's biography, to intense condemnation from the pen of David Fitzpatrick, for whom MacSwiney was 'the blood-thirsty Cork commandant who achieved droll apotheosis as martyr and

man of peace when he died on hunger strike in October 1920'.<sup>8</sup> This relatively recent neglect contrasts with a very sizeable contemporary absorption with the MacSwiney affair.

The extensive press coverage given to the incident in the English-speaking world is perhaps unremarkable, especially in places with a high Irish population such as the United States, Canada, Australia and indeed Argentina. Along with the Irish card, the Catholic one was played in MacSwiney's favour in Australia through the imposing person of legendary Corkman, Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne. The interest the story held for outposts of the British Empire like South Africa and India is again unsurprising. What is perhaps more unexpected is the very sizable treatment afforded to the Lord Mayor's hunger strike and the overall Irish political context throughout Continental Europe, including France. Indeed, the *Irish Independent* regularly informs its readers of this concern by quoting from a range of Continental newspapers. Analyses of reaction to the MacSwiney story in Catalonia and Rome have already been published, and the present study, with its focus on France, aims to complement these.<sup>9</sup>

### *Ireland and France, 1920*

A few words at the outset about the awareness of Ireland in France in the decades leading up to 1920. France of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided a home for many Irish writers and artists. George Moore (1852–1933), W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) and J. M. Synge (1871–1909) spent significant portions of their lives in the country where they appeared very much at ease. So did artists like Nathaniel Hone (1831–1917), Walter Frederic Osborne (1859–1903) and Roderic O'Connor (1861–1940), along with designers such as

Eileen Gray (1878–1976). The Irish even had their own newspaper at the time, *L'Irlande Libre* (first published in 1897), which proclaimed itself to be 'l'organe de la colonie irlandaise à Paris'. At a political level, the 1916 Rising had been widely covered by newspapers like socialist Jean Jaurès' *L'Humanité*. Travel writings with a strong political overlay associated with these events are represented by works such as Pierre Batiffol's *Notre Visite en Irlande (7–14 Octobre 1916)* (1917).<sup>10</sup> To take advantage of the Peace Conference meeting in Paris after the Great War, TD and future President Seán T. O'Kelly was sent to the French capital where he established and staffed an information/publicity office which was to become 'the centre from which the entire Sinn Féin operation was conducted on the continent'.<sup>11</sup> The vision and energy of the Irish Delegation in Paris at the time are evident in the range and volume of its publications in French on the Irish situation. Just a few weeks before MacSwiney's death, the London *Times* reported the expulsion by the French government of O'Kelly's colleague, Gavan Duffy, whom it described as 'the so-called "Sinn Féin Ambassador" to the French republic' (*T*, 4 October 1920). French (or at any rate Parisian) awareness of the political situation in Ireland was surely heightened around the time of MacSwiney's death by 'le Comité Central de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme' in Paris. First in a series of major events ('grandes manifestations') which it planned for the winter of 1920–1 was a public meeting to be addressed by a panel of French speakers on 'le droit de l'Irlande' on 20 October 1920, the Wednesday before MacSwiney died, in 'la grande salle, 6, rue de Puteaux (*H*, 19 October 1920, p. 3). Small wonder, then, that a former French president interviewed in *Le Petit Parisien* around the

time of MacSwiney's death is declared to possess an 'amazing' grasp of recent events in Ireland (*Le Petit Parisien*, quoted in *II*, 9 November 1920).<sup>12</sup>

1920, the year of MacSwiney's hunger strike and death, saw publications like *Pour comprendre l'Irlande: l'effort anglais* by Xavier Moisant. The following year saw the appearance of Sylvain Briollay's *L'Irlande insurgée* from a major Paris publisher, Plon. Interest continued unabated into the nineteen-twenties with works such as Simone Tery's *En Irlande: de la Guerre d'indépendance à la guerre civile (1914–1923)* (1923) and *Pour l'Irlande* (1924) by Etiennette Beuque. To this should be added translations into French such as J. Gros' rendering of a book by Erskine Childers, *La Terre militaire en Irlande* (1920), along with translations of statements by public figures (*L'Episcopat d'Irlande se lève contre le Gouvernement anglais: Déclaration de l'Episcopat Irlandais* [1920], and *Commission d'Enquête américaine sur la situation de l'Irlande. Premier rapport traduit de l'anglais par Xavier Moisant* [1921]). In the opposite direction, books on Ireland by French authors clearly interested a certain Irish public: in 1922, Talbot Press published *Ireland in Rebellion: translated from the French of Sylvain Briollay*.

Cork, France and MacSwiney are further intertwined in the case of one of Ireland's most celebrated early twentieth-century expatriates. James Joyce and his family were living in Paris in 1920, having arrived there from Trieste on 20 July. There are interesting parallels between both men. Joyce was a near contemporary of MacSwiney: the latter was born in 1879, the former just three years later. Thus, Joyce was thirty-eight years old when MacSwiney lay dying. Both had recently become parents (MacSwiney's only child was just two years old at the time). Joyce

must have witnessed at first hand the extensive, often front-page, daily coverage afforded in the French press throughout autumn 1920 to the plight of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Joyce's father's native city. Just days after MacSwiney's burial, Joyce writes 'I am exhausted. An entire month of flathunting, out every morning and back at night, in taxis, buses, trams, trains, lifts, agencies, *newspaper offices*'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Joyce appears to have been remarkably *au fait* with MacSwiney's plight, as he refers directly to it in a piece of verse he sent to his brother, Stanislaus, in August 1920, when the hunger strike was just days old. The writer's biographer goes so far as to state that 'during the last two years of the Irish fight for independence, the *only* incident that had stirred his imagination was the hunger strike of Mayor Terence MacSwiney – possibly a distant relation – in Cork [*sic*] in October 1920'.<sup>14</sup> In a more general sense, the importance in Joyce's work of 'the pious and nationalistic Irish woman, exulting in the death of a male', has been ascribed to contemporary models like Mary MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor's powerful older sister.<sup>15</sup>

#### *MacSwiney in the French press*

If Joyce was reading about the MacSwiney event in French newspapers, what type of material was available to him? As a news medium, the presence of the press in the France of 1920 was extensive: figures for 1922 reveal that 294 daily papers were published in the country, and that 982 weekly papers existed in the provinces alone.<sup>16</sup> The majority of these titles no longer exist. Turning to French press coverage of MacSwiney, at least twenty-nine French newspapers reported the event: *Le Journal*, *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Journal du Peuple*, *L'Echo de Paris*, *L'Illustration*, *La Liberté*, *Le Populaire*, *L'Exelsior*, *L'Heure Nouvelle*, *L'Ere Nouvelle*, *Le Matin*,

*Le Rappel*, *Paris-Midi*, *Le Semeur*, *Le Radical*, *Le Bonsoir*, *Le Populaire*, *L'Information*, *La République France*, *La Victoire*, *La Libre Parole*, *Le Rappel*, *Le Gaulois*, *La Bataille*, *Le Figaro*, *La Croix*, *L'Oeuvre*, *Le Temps*. This article will be based, for the most part, on an analysis of the treatment of the story in the following: *Le Figaro*, *L'Heure Nouvelle*, *L'Humanité*, *L'Illustration*, *Le Journal du Peuple*, *Le Matin*, *Le Temps* and *Le Rappel* (for abbreviations see Appendix). The latter are readily accessible on microfilm (or, in the case of *L'Illustration*, in hard copy) in the British Newspaper Library, Colindale, North London. The incident was regularly presented across the whole spectrum of the French press from serious to popular, educated to less educated, conservative (like *Fg*) to liberal, sober to sensationalist (like *Pf*). Most but not all of the French papers under scrutiny were Paris-based, but the story was also reported in regional titles like *Le Sud-Est Républicain*. *Le Petit Journal*, which also carried the MacSwiney story, has been hailed as 'the Holy Scripture of the countryside'.<sup>17</sup> Additional material concerning wider French press coverage of MacSwiney will be gleaned from *The Times*, the *Irish Times*, the *Cork Examiner* and especially the *Irish Independent*. When available, page numbers are indicated. Quotations in French are used extensively in this article, as it is felt that part of the power of the language originally employed would be lost in translation. When translated into English and carried in English-language newspapers, French journals are cited in English only.

#### REPORTING THE EVENT

To assist in following French reaction to the MacSwiney affair discussed below, a summary of the incident's principal moments is now presented. Following the murder of Tomás MacCurtain, the first



Ill. 1. Terence MacSwiney's brothers in funeral *cortege* (*L'Illustration*, 6 Nov. 1920).

Republican Lord Mayor of Cork, his friend Terence MacSwiney was unanimously elected Lord Mayor on 30 March 1920. On the night of Thursday, 12 August, during a military raid on the City Hall, MacSwiney and ten others were arrested. Documents found at City Hall were confiscated and formed the basis for charges subsequently brought against him. The prisoners immediately started a hunger strike, and all but the Lord Mayor were released. On 16 August, he was court-martialled and sentenced to two years in prison. The following morning, he was transported to London through Pembroke Dock, South Wales, and arrived in Brixton Prison on Wednesday, 18 August. On 21 August, the Lord Mayor's wife and sister, accompanied by his chaplain, Fr Dominic, reached London. On 25 October, MacSwiney died, having entered

the seventy-fifth day of his fast. His body was taken to Southwark Cathedral where tens of thousands came to pay their last respects. The Home Secretary, evidently to avoid the funeral becoming a national event in Ireland, ordered the body to be sent not to Dublin but directly to Cork. Eventually, after much discussion, he allowed the remains to be released unconditionally. Although MacSwiney's family and followers intended them to be sent initially to Dublin, they were intercepted at Holyhead by a group of Black and Tans, placed aboard a British naval vessel and sent directly by sea to Cork. MacSwiney lay in state at the City Hall before being removed to the Cathedral. He was buried on Sunday, 31 October 1920, in the Republican Plot at St Finbarr's Cemetery, alongside the body of his predecessor, Tomás MacCurtain.

rique, mais sur des détails de la vie extérieure des femmes turques, de leurs mœurs et coutumes, détails qui peuvent paraître puérils, mais qui ont eu l'Orient une importance considérable et une influence décisive sur le développement de la vie sociale des musulmans.

La Société du Croissant-Rouge ottoman — qui est en Turquie ce que les sociétés de la Croix-Rouge sont dans les autres pays, et est rattachée, comme elles, au Comité international de Genève — a puissamment contribué à populariser ce mouvement, et le docteur Bessim Omer pacha, président honoraire du Croissant-Rouge, est certainement l'un des apôtres du féminisme turc, d'un féminisme scientifique et social. Il avait d'ailleurs la partie belle, car, en sa qualité de gynécologue et d'accoucheur, il pénétrait dans les palais impériaux comme dans les plus humbles maisonnettes en bois, et

## LA MORT DU LORD-MAIRE DE CORK

Le martyr volontaire de M. Terence Mac Swiney, qui jeûnait depuis 74 jours à la prison de Brixton, a pris fin le 26 octobre vers 6 heures du matin où le lord-maire de Cork a rendu le dernier soupir. Les causes de la mort ont été ainsi indiquées dans un procès-verbal d'enquête: « Le défunt a succombé à une rupture d'anévrisme, à une dilatation du cœur et à un délire aigu résultant du scorbut, en raison de l'épuisement dû à son refus prolongé de prendre des aliments. » Comme il était à prévoir, cet événement a considérablement surexcité les passions en Irlande où l'on s'apprête à faire au lord-maire de Cork d'impressionnantes funérailles.



Le lord-maire de Cork, Terence Mac Swiney, sur son lit, dans la prison de Brixton, à Londres.  
Photo Central News, titre *L'Illustration* le 30 octobre 1920.

### III. 2. Terence MacSwiney in Brixton Prison during the week before his death (*L'Illustration*, 30 Oct. 1920)

#### *Extent and prominence of coverage*

Both the extent and prominence of the coverage of MacSwiney's circumstances in the French press may come as a surprise. Almost a month before his death, the story was already commanding prime space in a lengthy article (with photographs) on the front page of newspapers like *Le Matin* (1 October 1920). A succession of

headlines and detailed reports must have meant that, however subliminally, the fate of the Lord Mayor of Cork constituted a persistent reality in the minds of many French citizens as autumn turned to winter. His case was recorded on a day-to-day and even hour-to-hour basis: 'des quatre bulletins sur l'état du lord-maire de Cork qui nous ont été transmises aujourd'hui, il

ressort que [ . . . ] (*Ma*, 3 October 1920), 'le bulletin que fournit d'heure en heure la famille du lord maire indique que [ . . . ]' (*JP*, 22 October 1920). Similarly, *Le Matin* (22 October 1920) files a report on MacSwiney's state of health the previous day at 9 a.m., 12 noon, 2.30 p.m., 4.30 p.m., 6.00 p.m. and 8.30 p.m. The layout favoured by the *Times* of London and the *Irish Times*, with their lack of photographs and of banner headlines, may unwittingly lead the modern reader to conclude that the story was less significant. The French press, on the other hand, is paradoxically more striking, with its widespread use of photographs, especially of MacSwiney and of his family. Two pages of *L'Illustration* were devoted to eight (unattributed) photographs of MacSwiney's funeral (Ill. 1), more than in any English-language paper I have been able to consult (Ill, 6 November 1920, pp. 332-3). *L'Illustration* also carried a 4" by 3" close-up shot of MacSwiney taken in the week before he died (Ill. 2), as well as a photograph of his death mask (Ill, 30 October 1920, p. 306 and 6 November 1920, p. 332). Interest is again maintained by the use of such varied materials as the reproduction of a facsimile of a letter written by MacSwiney from the City Hall, Cork, on 16 April 1920 (*Le Petit Parisien*, quoted in II, 29 October 1920) and political cartoons, a staple of French political analysis (*Hu*, 28 October 1920, p. 1). The first pages of the English-language newspapers I have consulted are devoted mainly to advertisements, unlike the French journals, the impact of which is here again consistently more dramatic, with front-page headlines such as 'L'Irlande en deuil' ('Ireland in mourning') stretching across two columns at the top of *Le Journal*, or 'DANS LA VILLE DE CORK EN DEUIL' ('in the city of Cork in mourning') in bold print spanning the top of the two centre columns on the front

page of *Le Matin* (2 November 1920). Thus, through the prominence it accords the incident, its choice of typography, its style, its more emotive vocabulary evident in headlines like 'l'Agonie du Lord-Maire de Cork' (*JP*, 23 October 1920), 'Le Drame continue', 'L'Angleterre s'acharne' (*JP*, 30 October 1920, across two columns at the top of the front page), 'L'Irlande persécutée' (*JP*, 7 November 1920), its unrestrained expressions of bitterness, anger, sarcasm and admiration, as well as its use of superlatives and of concise phraseology, the French press distances itself from the *Times* both of London and Dublin.<sup>18</sup>

### Sources

What were the sources used by French newspapers for this story? It seems to me that they were mostly their London correspondents (see II, 29 October 1920).<sup>19</sup> *Noms-de-plume* were occasionally employed (for instance, 'Pertinax' in *L'Echo de Paris*, 'D'Hourc' in *La Liberté*). Usually, however, the journalists are identified: Jacques de Marsillac in *Le Journal*, Paul Louis in *L'Humanité*, Louis Bresse in *Le Rappel*, Georges Verguiaud in *La Liberté*, Gustave Herve in *La Victoire*, Charles Saglio in *L'Oeuvre*, J. Longuet in *Le Populaire*, A. Aulard in *L'Ere Nouvelle*, Maxime Dargyil in *Le Semeur* and B. Guinaudeau in *Le Radical*. The sheer number of overseas reporters following the event in London is highlighted in the liberal *Manchester Guardian*: 'There was almost as large a muster of foreign journalists at Southwark Cathedral [to which MacSwiney's coffin was taken] as there was of English' (quoted in II, 30 October 1920). The London press was frequently the conduit for news from Ireland, for instance around the time of MacSwiney's burial: 'un télégramme de Cork, adressé ce soir à la *Pall Mall Gazette*, dit que les funérailles [ . . . ]' (*JP*, 31 October 1920).



The French public is thus informed by French journalists quoting their English counterparts: '*L'Evening Telegraph* annonce que Bottomley soulèvera à la Chambre des Communes, dès sa rentrée, la question concernant l'état du lord-maire de Cork' (*JP*, 18 October 1920). Among the wide variety of other sources used for the MacSwiney story are the Governor of Brixton Prison and official health bulletins (*Ma*, 13 October 1920), as well as professional news agencies (*Hu*, 22 and 23 October 1920, p. 3), the 'Ligue irlandaise' (*Ra*, 23 October 1920) and unofficial sources ('on annonce officieusement que . . .', *Ra*, 24 October 1920, p. 1). The newspapers themselves regularly indicate how details were communicated from London to France: 'par téléphone de notre correspondant particulier' (*Hu*, 7 October 1920).

As for links with Ireland, some French journalists were certainly reporting directly from this country. *Le Figaro's* account of MacSwiney's funeral is filed from Cork (*Fg*, 1 November 1920, p. 2). Jacques de Marsillac of *Le Journal* refers in a letter to the London *Times* (dated 9 November 1920) to the recent visits he made to Ireland, as does Henri Béraud of *Le Petit Parisien* (quoted in *II*, 9 November 1920). The extensive, detailed political and social study of contemporary Ireland published in *L'Illustration* the week following MacSwiney's death (three full pages with eight accompanying photographs) was written by Maurice Bourgeois, whom it describes as 'un universitaire français qui vient de faire dans ce pays troublé un long séjour, comme chargé de mission des Bibliothèque et Musée de la Guerre, et comme correspondant du *Temps*' (*III*, 6 November 1920, p. 332). Joseph Kessel, one of France's main writers of the period, was reporting from Ireland in autumn 1920 for *La Liberté*.<sup>20</sup> In this connection,

one should not forget Terence MacSwiney's own intriguing assertions which he allegedly made at his court-martial, regarding documents seized from him at his arrest, and which emphasise Franco-Irish interweaving in this whole area:

Another letter taken was one I received from the President of the Municipal Council, Paris, asking for information relative to the port. I supplied that information and kept a copy of my reply. It will be of interest to the French Government to know that it is an offence for the president of the Municipal Council of Paris to address letters to me, and that when found in my pockets they are seditious documents. Another matter to which I wish to refer is to the number of visiting cards found. These were cards of distinguished foreign journalists from America, France and other parts of Europe. (*CE*, 17 August 1920; *K*, Christmas issue, December 1938)

Years before public relations machines had become commonplace, one cannot but marvel at the skill and speed with which, in their bid to win over the hearts and minds of the French public, Irish sources (in Paris, London and Ireland) contacted the French press about MacSwiney and related stories: 'dans une lettre collective qu'ils envoient ce soir à la presse étrangère, les amis et les parents du lord-maire protestent contre ...' (*Ma*, 24 October 1920, p. 3). Shortly after the Corkman's death, Sinn Féin representatives (including Arthur Griffith) managed to have a lengthy, strongly worded and trenchantly argued letter published in the less than sympathetic *Le Temps*, arguing for acceptance of their legitimate status and drawing powerful comparisons with contemporary France (*T*, 27 October 1920). In particular, swift, effective use of the international media was made by MacSwiney's own family, who were among the main suppliers of detailed, daily and even hourly updates on this situation to the French outlets: 'la famille du

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie

All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions

Digital content (c) CHAS 2017

lord-maire de Cork, dans une note qu'elle nous envoie ce soir proteste contre [ . . . ]' (*JP*, 23 October 1920). Interestingly, the women in MacSwiney's family feature prominently as sources in these accounts: 'Mme MacSwiney, qui n'avait pas vu son mari depuis quelques jours, déclare ce soir qu'elle l'a trouvé beaucoup plus épuisé' (*Ma*, 2 October 1920). *Le Matin* quotes extensively from a correspondence sent by Mary MacSwiney to US presidential candidates, Harding and Cox (*Ma*, 7 October 1920, p. 3), and goes so far as to reproduce in its entirety a letter she sent to the British Home Office (*Ma*, 24 October 1920, p.3). Indeed, the close ties between the MacSwiney women and the press are acknowledged in Arthur O'Brien's statement after the Lord Mayor's death to the effect that 'l'état de faiblesse de Madame et Milles MacSwiney était tel qu'elles ne pouvaient recevoir non seulement les représentants de la presse française et américaine, mais même leurs amis les plus intimes' (*Ma*, 26 October 1920, p. 1).

In France, too, the Irish were at work. In 'un appartement du Grand-Hotel', Seán T. O'Kelly was interviewed by a *Journal du Peuple* reporter who was clearly impressed by the man he calls 'l'actuel président du Parlement irlandais': 'M. O'Kelly, maigre, petit, le profil aigu, l'oeil vif derrière les besicles cerclés d'or, me secoue la main d'un hand-shake vigoureux' (*JP*, 26 October 1920). In his 'voix vibrante, au dur accent gaélique', he gave a detailed and wide-ranging interview on the situation. In fact, O'Kelly was frequently quoted in the French papers (see, for instance, *JP*, 28 October 1920). At the same time, interviews were given by General Macready to the French journals clearly to elicit French support for the British position (see *CE*, 1 October 1920, p. 5). As for sources used by the Irish

press in their coverage of French reaction to the MacSwiney story, the *Cork Examiner* and to a lesser extent the *Irish Independent* acknowledge Reuters news agency as one of these.<sup>21</sup>

#### FRENCH PRESS PERSPECTIVES

The day after the Lord Mayor's burial, the *Irish Times* reassured its readers: 'There are many editorial references [in the French journals] to Mr. MacSwiney's death, but few justify him or censure the British authorities' (*IT*, 1 November 1920). In similar vein, the Paris correspondent of the *Westminster Gazette* reported that the French were not critical but rather surprised and astonished at the situation in Ireland (which, in any case, he saw as an internal British-Irish one and was thus hesitant to comment on, implying perhaps that others should follow his example; see *CE*, 6 October 1920, p. 6). The day after MacSwiney died, the Paris correspondent of the London *Times* had reassured readers by reporting that most of his French fellow journalists 'write with considerable appreciation of the difficulties of the British position, and scrupulously avoid any criticism that can be described as interference in a British problem' (*T*, 27 October 1920). However, these constant reassurances given in the *Times* of London and Dublin that the French were either indifferent to the story or indeed supportive of the official British standpoint bring to mind the *boutade* of the woman who, in a very different situation, once said 'well, he would say that, wouldn't he?' Even the briefest analysis of the extensive coverage given in the French press to MacSwiney flatly contradicts these journalists' confident assertions written for a public that was clearly unsympathetic to the Corkman in the first place. Far from being loathe to comment on an 'internal' British matter or from

displaying mild surprise or polite astonishment, expressions of revulsion and anger are the order of the day across the French reportage. For journalists who saw themselves as 'a real friend and admirer of Great Britain, who worked for many years to help promote a closer friendship between our two nations' (*T*, 13 November 1920), leave us in no doubt as to their regard for MacSwiney. Even the less than sympathetic *Le Temps* seems to waver in MacSwiney's favour once he is dead, saluting him in his multiplicity of titles and roles as 'membre du Parlement d'Irlande, lord-maire de Cork, général du brigade de l'armée d'Irlande et homme de lettres', pointing to the profound impression his death made not just in Ireland but also in England, asserting that most English people would have wished to see him freed, and recording the homage paid by the majority of English newspapers to his courage and determination (*Te*, 27 October 1920). One should add that, extensive though this may have been, compassion for MacSwiney was not confined to newspapers in France. Telegrams in French were received by the MacSwiney family expressing sympathy at the Lord Mayor's death from various organisations throughout the country. Among such messages was a telegram from 'Prés. Diaz, Cape de Vila, 35 bis rue Chine' which read: 'Ligue Nationale Catalane, Paris – Emotion profonde passage immortalité glorieux martyr' (quoted in *II*, 28 October 1920).

### *The human interest aspect*

Why did the MacSwiney story touch such a nerve in France? At a pragmatic level, it may have partly satisfied the craving for sensational human interest news items that were the staple diet of popular newspapers like *Le Petit Journal*, described by cultural historian Eugen Weber as 'splen-

did value for one *sou* [ . . . ] a sort of *News of the World*: birth of quadruplets, bride gives birth a few hours after wedding, American abandons his bride and goes off with dowry, sub-prefect falls off his horse'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the MacSwiney event is constantly presented as belonging to the genre of *mirabilia*, something quite out of the ordinary. The reader's astonishment is invited by use of headlines like the one stretching across two columns on the front page of *Le Matin* (2 October 1920): 'After 50 days fasting the Lord Mayor is *still alive*' (my italics). Scientific/medical data, so dear to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hearts, are enlisted to support the categorization of the story as extraordinary. Hence the lengthy interview with Professor Gley, a leading physiologist with impeccable credentials (member of the Académie de Médecine and the Collège de France), on the physiology of hunger strikes, with comparisons with earlier Italian, German and French hunger strikers (*Ma*, 2 October 1920; see also *ibid.*, 16 and 22 October 1920, and *Te*, 27 October 1920, p. 2). Even here, however, science is subordinated to politics and specifically to anti-English sentiment: Professor Gley suggests that if the British authorities had consulted some of their own eminent physiologists, they could have found a more humane solution to the situation (*Ma*, 2 October 1920, p. 1).

### *The dramatic element*

Irrespective of any political or voyeuristic dimension, the dramatic nature of the event clearly attracted many French commentators. From September to November 1920, the MacSwiney story was transformed into a visceral struggle between hope and despair acted out across the pages of France's daily newspapers, from early reports of the hunger strike to

increasingly desperate health bulletins ('Le Lord-maire de Cork ne peut plus articuler une parole', *Ma*, 9 October 1920, p. 3), dramatically if momentarily contradicted by others: 'la lucidité du lord-maire de Cork surprend ses visiteurs' (*Ma*, 16 October 1920, p. 3). The photographs chosen to illustrate what was happening function to heighten the tension of the situation: the main Dublin-Cork road blocked by barbed wire and barricades, English soldiers searching travellers on the same road (both in *Hu*, 29 October 1920, p. 1), a tank manned by four English soldiers in Dublin (*Ma*, 1 October 1920, p. 1), MacSwiney's coffin arriving in Cork harbour surrounded by Black and Tans (*Ill*, 6 November 1920, p. 334). The removal in London leads to Dickensian flourishes in descriptions of crowds turning out to mourn a hero: 'dès l'ouverture des portes de la cathédrale, des millions d'Irlandais venus de tous les quartiers de Londres et de tous les points d'Angleterre faisant de longues queues [ . . . ]' (*JP*, 29 October 1920), 'le peuple de Londres a rendu un magnifique et émouvant hommage au martyr de l'indépendance irlandaise' (*Hu*, 29 October 1920, p. 3), 'une manifestation grandiose et émouvante' (*JP*, 29 October 1920). The pathos of the scene is intensified by the focus on the ragged clothes ('en haillons') of so many of these mourners (*Ma*, 1 November 1920, p. 1). Pathetic fallacy is invoked as even the weather is in mourning: MacSwiney died 'à l'aube froide' (*JP*, 26 October 1920, p. 1); the mourners wait 'dans la bruine blanche' (*JP*, 29 October 1920). These descriptions draw readers in by appealing to the visual, the tactile (cold, drizzle) and the auditory (we learn that Chopin's '*Marche funèbre*' rings out around Southwark Cathedral; *JP*, 29 October 1920). The extraordinary *fracas* involving 'black and

tanks' (*sic*, *Hu*, 30 October 1920) surrounding MacSwiney's coffin in Holyhead is conveyed in almost surreal terms (*JP*, 29 October 1920). The funeral itself allows descriptive skills free rein: details are selected for their atmospheric impact, the arrival by water, at night, of MacSwiney's funeral cortege, the eery silence of the huge, well-behaved crowd, the sombre nature of the proceedings, the entire population of Cork wearing black armbands (see, *inter alia*, *Ma*, 31 October 1920). Fiction could hardly have dreamt up a more memorable spectacle.

At times, one feels that the entire tragedy risks veering towards some kind of serialized novel in the minds of the French readership. In this context, the constant focus on the MacSwiney women may have been seen as a route to readers' hearts: 'dans un moment de lucidité il appela par son prénom une de ses soeurs qui était à son chevet' (*JP*, 23 October p. 1). Pathos is again intensified by the deliberate highlighting of other details: the statement that MacSwiney's only child, a daughter, was born while he was in jail (*Ma*, 26 October 1920, p. 1), repeated references to Mrs MacSwiney's ill-health and to the physical ill-treatment by the English police of the MacSwiney sisters (*JP*, 30 October 1920, p. 1), along with the apparent callousness they encountered in being prevented from being with their brother though his death was imminent (*JP*, 22-25 October 1920). As in some *feuilleton*, the (alleged) characters of these women are sketched out: the determination and dramatic presence of Mary MacSwiney and the courage and beauty (evidenced in photographs) of his widow, Muriel MacSwiney (they had been married just three years earlier), especially at the post-mortem in London: 'une scène impressionnante de l'enquête fut l'apparition de Mrs MacSwiney, sous son voile de

veuve et l'énergie avec laquelle elle répondit aux questions du coroner' (*Ma*, 28 October 1920, p. 1; see also *Ra*, 28 October 1920 and *Te*, 27 October 1920). Here, as elsewhere, the enemy is clearly identified and displayed in his allegedly true colours: the English who are not only held responsible for MacSwiney's agony but who, in their pointless ill-treatment of the MacSwiney women, show the depths they have reached.

### *MacSwiney as hero*

Nevertheless, as *Le Rappel* warns, the French public would be wrong to see in the MacSwiney incident merely some kind of news story, however extraordinary ('on aurait tort en effet de voir dans la mort par la faim de Terence MacSwiney qu'un gros fait divers', *Ra*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). Indeed, in one sense, French reports of his experience read less like political analyses or news items rather than as studies of the seventeenth-century classical heroes journalists would have encountered at secondary school as part of France's great literary canon. Irrespective of his relationship with England, MacSwiney is constantly hailed as a hero, someone out of the ordinary, a living legend: 'l'héroïque maire de Cork [ . . . ] un homme légendaire' (*JP*, 26 October 1920, p. 1), 'Ireland will count one legendary hero the more' (*La Liberté*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). French commentators reach for superlatives to represent him: the ultimate sacrifice, a colossus among men, a martyr, 'beauty of character, true heroism, genius' (*JP*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920). They are clearly moved by the enormity of his decision to die: 'one cannot but bow before a man who died for his ideal' (*Le Journal*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920), 'there is no one with a heart but must bow before such a profession of patriotic faith, such a heroism of

sacrifice' (*Le Radical*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920). His defiance and determination are hailed: 'la décision du lord-maire de Cork reste inébranlable' (*Ma*, 3 October 1920), 'one remains dumbfounded before what is more than a record of physiological instance – a miracle of will' (*Le Petit Journal*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920), 'the splendid faith of these hunger-strikers leaves no room for doubt; their stoical courage and their confidence in the justice of their cause, extort universal admiration' (*La Liberté*, quoted in *II*, 12 November 1920, p. 7).

The hero whose power cannot be impeded by death is another omnipresent motif here, for 'the dead are more dangerous than the living' (*La Liberté*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Indeed, the hero will be more powerful dead rather than alive since his death 'is going to interest humanity as a whole in the independence of Ireland' (*Le Petit Parisien*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Thus, 'the grandeur and historic gravity of the tragedy at Brixton' are applauded (*L'Oeuvre*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920), 'the cause of Ireland is going to impress the whole world, and since free men know how to die for it, it becomes invincible and immortal' (*Ra*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). The old motif that consoles mourners and attempts to help them make sense of their loss by stating that their hero did not die in vain is rehearsed. His demise serves to validate his cause more than mere words ever could: 'there is an Irish nation' (*La Victoire*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920), 'when the claims of a people can induce such sacrifices as that of the Lord Mayor, and when these sacrifices keep breathless a whole nation and move the sympathy of the civilised world, it is very difficult not to listen to them' (*La Croix*, quoted in *II*, 30 October 1920). The course of Irish history may be changed as a result: 'he

hoped, re-invigorating by his example the soul of those whom he leaves behind, to hasten the liberation of Ireland' (*Le Journal*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Along with it, England may never be the same again: 'rarely has the death of emperor or king had an influence more profound on the destiny of a people than that which we expect the death of Terence MacSwiney, simple Lord Mayor of Cork, will have on the future of England' (*La Bataille*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920).

#### *MacSwiney as saint*

Indeed, the Corkman is not just a hero but 'a saint' (*L'Ere Nouvelle*, quoted in *II*, 30 October 1920). The rhetoric of classical antiquity, later inherited by Christianity, reverberates throughout. Thus, the age-old theme of the glory of dying for one's country, harnessed by Christianity with its promotion of sacrifice and martyrdom, is omnipresent: 'Ireland's great political martyr' (*L'Ere Nouvelle*, quoted in *II*, 30 October 1920). At the funeral oration he delivered at MacSwiney's grave, Arthur Griffith likened the dead Lord Mayor to the warrior saint, Joan of Arc (who had been canonized just a few months earlier in May 1920): 'Ireland has lost a noble son, as France lost a noble daughter when St. Joan of Arc perished in the English bonfire. The sequel will be the same. St. Joan of Arc has in him welcomed a comrade to Heaven'. This accolade was widely reported in the French press (see for instance *Fg*, 1 November 1920, p. 2). MacSwiney himself had, on his deathbed, according to his chaplain, stated his desire to 'form four with Tomás [MacCurtain] and Eoghan Roe [O'Neill], and the holy and noble maid of Orleans to fight against the Sasanach invader'.<sup>23</sup> References to pilgrims and pilgrimage abound in the accounts of his funeral: 'du sud de l'Irlande d'innombrables pèlerins

se rendent à Cork pour honorer MacSwiney [ . . . ] c'est le plus grand pèlerinage des temps modernes' (*Ma*, 31 October 1920, see also *ibid.*, 1 November 1920, p. 3). Biblical resonances are unmistakable in the motif of the greatest love: 'the Lord Mayor of Cork loved Ireland so well that he gave his life for her' (*Le Radical*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920). Other metaphors also abound: MacSwiney is the hero who sacrifices his life to save another in a shipwreck (*Le Semeur*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920). Allied to this is the biblical theme of David and Goliath in the *Leitmotif* of a small state unbending in the face of the greatest empire on earth. In these accounts, it is abundantly clear where the sympathies of the French press lie: 'the desperate combat of this heroic little nation against the most powerful nation in the world' (*Le Populaire*, quoted in *II*, 30 October 1920).

#### *The legitimacy of MacSwiney and his cause*

The French press (or sections thereof) went to some length to establish MacSwiney's legitimate credentials and to dispel any suggestion (made by British politicians and echoed in *Fg*) that he or his followers might have been terrorists. Indeed, journalist after journalist emphasises that MacSwiney's followers are highly disciplined even in the face of serious provocation (*JP*, 28 October 1920, p. 1; *JP*, 29 October 1920). They are representatives of the legitimate Irish government and are entitled to be treated as such: *Le Matin* hails Seán T. O'Kelly as the 'envoyé de la République d'Irlande' in Paris (*Ma*, 27 October 1920, p. 3). The authority of the Irish independence movement is accepted: 'la révolution irlandaise est faite. La République irlandaise existe. Elle est l'émanation de la volonté de tout un peuple' (*JP*, 28 October 1920, p. 1). *Le Journal*



Ill. 3. Reportage of deaths of Terence MacSwiney and of King Alexander of Greece (Le Rappel, 26 Oct. 1920).

du *Peuple* records, uncontested, O’Kelly’s description of MacSwiney as ‘un soldat tombé dans la bataille’ (*JP*, 20 October 1920, p. 1). An underlying factor in operation here may be the French mayoral system: every *commune* in France has its mayor who is just as likely to be the local butcher or baker as some high-status professional. He (and increasingly she) is the living representative of the French Republic, working in close proximity to its citizens, first among equals. The spectacle, therefore, of a first citizen choosing to die on hunger strike may have struck a particular chord with the French citizens of the day. It is perhaps not a coincidence that MacSwiney is usually referred to in the French press as ‘le lord-maire de Cork’ rather than by his personal name. Elsewhere, the Lord Mayor is portrayed as nothing less than an aristocrat, an ‘échevin’ (*Ma*, 26 October 1920, p. 1), ‘issu de vieille souche irlandaise’ (*JP*, 26 Octo-

ber 1920, p. 1). His wife is referred to as Lady MacSwiney (*Ma*, 27 October 1920, p. 3). The photographs chosen to accompany the story in French newspapers are significant in this respect, such as the striking formal portrait of the mayor and his wife, a handsome couple whose patrician airs cannot have failed to impress French readers (*Hu*, 26 October 1920, p. 1; see also *Ma*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). News of MacSwiney’s death is juxtaposed on the front page with an account of the death of King Alexander of Greece, surely no coincidence (see also *Ma*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). O’Kelly’s statement that MacSwiney was loved because he was ‘un doux poète, un fin lettré [ . . . ] sa conversation nous charmait’ (*JP*, 20 October 1920, p. 1). All in all, one sub-text throughout is clear: only a nation conspicuously blind to such goodness would allow him to die.

*The MacSwiney story as anti-English propaganda*

If, as the adage has it, my enemy's enemy is my friend, the MacSwiney event provided the French press with an irresistible opportunity to vent anti-English spleen, MacSwiney becoming a cog in the wheel of ancestral Anglo-French rivalry. Lloyd George is 'toujours partisan de la manière forte et du règne par la terreur, que ce soit aux Indes ou dans la malheureuse Erin, ne ménagera ni les hommes ni l'argent pour tenter d'anéantir le sinn-féin' (*JP*, 28 October 1920, p. 1). Strong vocabulary reflects strong emotions: even before MacSwiney had died, we read that 'never since the Middle Ages has such savage brutality been recorded. The English have abandoned themselves to a real war of extermination. It seems that they have gone back to the time of Henry VII [*sic*] who saw no other means of reducing the Irish than by massacring them and replacing them by English. It may be asked if the British authorities are still masters of the situation or if they have not lost their heads' (*Ra*, quoted in *II*, 1 October 1920, p. 5). In their handling of the MacSwiney case, France's recent allies, the English, are no better than 'the murderous Turk' (*La République France*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). 'The English Government has given us a disagreeable surprise. It has shown itself more kindly disposed towards the Germans than to the Lord Mayor of Cork' (*Le Bonsoir*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920).

England is accused of having mishandled the entire Irish situation (see *Hu*, 26 October 1920, p. 1): 'It seems that a liberal and generous policy would have been more clever than the intransigence shown by the British Government' (*Ra*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Accusations of hypocrisy abound: 'since the

insurrection of 1916 and especially since the armistice of 1918, England has had every opportunity of rectifying her Irish policy and of showing that respect for nationality which she professed to impose on others. But she has only manifested the fundamental hypocrisy of her policy' (*Hu*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Britain is ruled by 'soi-disant hommes d'Etat qui n'ont pas appliqué leurs propres principes à la situation' (*Ma*, 2 October 1920). Elsewhere, it is claimed that 'a nation that piques itself on its liberalism and which claims to erect into a system the right of peoples to dispose of themselves keeps a neighbouring race under the rudest yoke' (*Libre Parole*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). French reporters cannot resist seizing the moral high ground: they use the story to France's advantage, implying that their country, being an honourable nation, would never, of course, have acted thus. Unlike England, France, therefore, recognises itself in the noble nature of the Lord Mayor of Cork: 'Generous and chivalrous France will weep for and admire this man' (*HN*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). France's famed independence of spirit is indirectly lauded: 'in spite of all his skill and cunning, the English Premier will never succeed in making us regard MacSwiney as a criminal' (*Le Populaire*, quoted in *II*, 12 November 1920, p. 12).

*The international angle*

MacSwiney's story is quickly transformed in the French press in yet another fashion. From being an internal British matter, he now belongs to universal history, an icon magnified and glorified on the world stage: 'Alors se termine, à Brixton, le drame qui tenait en haleine le monde civilisé depuis plusieurs semaines [ . . . ] La noblesse du but qui le guidait et l'intransigence étroite du gouvernement

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie



anglais ont fait de cette lente et terrible agonie une des pages angoissantes de l'histoire moderne' (*JP*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). His demise merges into something larger than himself as it becomes a paradigm for political events worldwide: 'incidents like yesterday's [MacSwiney's death] may bring to mind the end of Cuba's struggle against Spain' (*L'Information*, quoted in *II*, 30 October 1920). British assertions that this is no-one else's business are repeatedly tossed aside by French journalists who declare that 'the sacrifice of Mr MacSwiney has had the entire world as a spectator, and it will resound through the whole universe as the heartrending appeal of a suffering nation' (*L'Echo de Paris*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920). Again refuting the contention that this is an internal British matter, voices echo from across the world in these pages as they report how the MacSwiney incident even entered the debate between Cox and Harding, candidates for the US presidency. Certain elements in the French press thus see their role as speaking for the rest of mankind in admonishing England and supporting Ireland, as they state that 'the sympathies of the entire civilised world accompanies [*sic*] the Irish hero to his last resting place' (*La Bataille*, quoted in *II*, 5 November 1920).

The fraught state of Anglo-French relations at the time may have sharpened this anti-English sentiment. In the implementation of sections of the Treaty of Versailles, the British were accused in some French quarters of leniency towards Germany, and in particular of prioritizing Anglo-German commercial interests over French national security. Throughout the weeks of MacSwiney's hunger strike, this controversy surfaced in Irish, English and French newspapers as it continued to fuel suspicion and misgivings on both sides of the English Channel. Perhaps, in addition,

guilt and even shame at France's recent helplessness during the Great War and envy at the star role played by British troops in the German defeat may have fuelled the desire to gloat now that England was compromised in international opinion over its handling of the MacSwiney affair. *Schadenfreude* or an untested conviction that France would never have tripped up so badly, a whole cluster of emotions, alongside reason and logic, may have played a role in the welcome given to the story in France.

#### *The Great War and French press coverage*

These many factors do not explain in full, however, French fascination with MacSwiney. Interest in the Lord Mayor's plight did not spring entirely or even mainly from knee-jerk anglophobia. Reading through the French press from autumn 1920, the presence of the Great War is inescapable. It may have ended two years earlier, but it is as yet raw, unfinished business. France might have been one of the victors in that conflict, but no hint of triumph can be gleaned from these pages. The war, the armistice and the remembering of the recently deceased fill article after article, photograph after photograph in these sources, like the dramatic illustration (stretching across the entire width of the top of a front page) depicting the war cemetery in Craonne, followed by a long article by former president Poincaré (*Ma*, 1 November 1920, p. 1), or, elsewhere, the full-page depiction of a proposed war memorial, the full-page photograph of the carriage in which the armistice was signed, the full-page drawing of the unknown soldier or the six full pages devoted to an article on the armistice (*III*, 6 November 1920). France is still clearly in shock, not even yet beginning to come to terms with its recent history. Even simple

pleasures are tainted by the recent conflict: under a beguiling full-page drawing of bourgeois children playing in a Paris park, which would not have looked out of place in *Vogue*, we read the following poignant passage:

Un bel Automne parisien. Cette paisible image de la vie en France, ces jeux tranquilles, cette belle santé des tout petits, prend la valeur d'un témoignage réconfortant dans les temps où nous sommes. Après les années meurtrières et destructrices qui se prolongent encore si durement en d'autres pays, chez nous, malgré de grandes difficultés, les heures douces d'autrefois renaissent, préparées par les sacrifices de la génération d'hier, pour les enfants qui jouent dans nos jardins d'aujourd'hui. (*III*, 30 October 1920, p. 317)

Irrespective of the British angle to the MacSwiney story, in a country like France, devastated by *la Grande Guerre*, barely coming to terms with the colossal loss of life, especially among young men, which left hardly a single family or a single village anywhere throughout the country unaffected, the voluntary death of a man who chose to sacrifice his young life for others seems to resonate powerfully, all the more so since MacSwiney's death coincided both with *la fête des morts* and the Armistice commemorations in early November 1920. Consequently, just as they regard the MacSwiney incident as being far more than the story of one man and his fate, French journalists see in it something of the *Zeitgeist*. Not quite two full years after the ending of the most atrocious (until then) of all wars, with nine million slaughtered, MacSwiney's death invites the public to pause and to question: he is 'this man who – in our age of egoistic realism, in the middle of the rush of appetites – has the sublime courage of dying for an ideal' (*HN*, quoted in *II*, 29 October 1920, p. 6). He is the

one who sets the high standards sorely needed by his contemporaries across the world, a man who gave his life for an ideal 'si rare à notre époque de veulerie générale' (*JP*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). No longer just one individual among millions, in death he serves to bring the world back to its senses: 'when the event [MacSwiney's death] took place, all humanity shuddered with emotion. One might say that a mysterious breath of revolt, of renovation has just passed over the world, and that the regime of egoism, of barbarism, in which the war had nearly buried us, is about to end' (*L'Ere Nouvelle*, quoted in *II*, 1 November 1920).

#### CRITICISING MACSWINEY

Despite more widespread approval, some sections of the French press, however, were less than sympathetic to MacSwiney. Less than a fortnight before his death, *Le Temps* reproduced reports from the *Evening News* proclaiming him to be in good health, thanks to the fruit juices, wine and other alcohols he was taking. Given the gravity of the hunger strike at that stage (MacSwiney had been refusing food for well over fifty days by then), these details sound deliberately flippant. No suggestion here of the force-feeding widely alleged in other newspapers and indeed in the House of Commons (*Te*, 14 October 1920). The day after MacSwiney's death, the conservative *Le Figaro* warned its readers to stay clear of what it firmly declared was an internal British matter, at the same time reminding them of British solidarity with France in the recent war and accusing Sinn Féin of pro-German sympathies. In a world so recently and intensely divided into two camps, 'them' and 'us', good and evil, *Le Figaro* appeals to its readers' sense of self-preservation, leaving them in no doubt regarding which side it believed some of the Irish

had espoused: 'if [Casement's] plot had resulted in a landing of Wilhelm II's troops in Ireland, England would have fallen as would France' (*Fg*, 26 October 1920, p. 1). Religious considerations are enlisted in order to criticise MacSwiney indirectly in *Le Temps*, as it repeatedly refers to MacSwiney's alleged involvement in various murders and pointedly raises a question widely discussed at the time: whether the Catholic Church should bestow the last rites on those dying by their own hand (*Te*, 27 October 1920, p. 2).<sup>24</sup> So deeply embedded was the Lord Mayor's story in public consciousness in France that even this angle received widespread attention. Coinciding with MacSwiney's decline and death, specialized publications such as *L'Ami du Clergé* (21 September 1920), *La Revue du Clergé Français* (1-15 October 1920) and *Semaine Religieuse* (5 November 1920) all contain articles on the ethics of hunger strikes.<sup>25</sup>

#### MACSWINEY IN THE FRENCH- AND THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRESS: SOME CONTRASTS

The *Irish Independent* appears right when it stated: '[MacSwiney's] death has made a deep impression the whole world over. In the past few weeks, especially the French and Italian and South American papers have devoted more space to his case than have the British newspapers' (*II*, 27 October 1920). Of the four English-language journals that I have been able to analyse (*The Times*, the *Irish Times*, the *Cork Examiner* and the *Irish Independent*), the least coverage of foreign (including French) reaction to the episode is found in the *Irish Times* which, in any case, took much of its treatment of events in London from the London *Times* which it often seems to emulate. Thus, its report of MacSwiney's death published on 26 October is headed: 'From the *Times* of today (by

special arrangement with the proprietors of the *Times*'). Not only is its coverage of the story second-hand, consistently unsympathetic in tone and slight in substance (the MacSwiney affair jostles for space with stories of teachers' and clergymen's pay), but, in content, the *Irish Times* minimizes the impact the event had abroad, for instance in France. On 30 October, a four-line account in it states that 'a memorial Service to the late Alderman MacSwiney held in the Irish Church of St. Joseph, Paris, yesterday morning, was attended by many Irish and Americans'. The intention is clear: though held in France, the ceremony did not interest the French, none of whom even bothered to attend (*IT*, 30 October 1920, p. 6). This reinforces the status of the MacSwiney story as an internal British (or at any rate anglophone) matter. Assuming that this is the same Mass reported in the *Irish Independent* on the same day, it is interesting to read that, according to the latter, 'numerous French, American, Spanish and Argentinean sympathisers were present at a Requiem Mass in the Avenue Hoche Church, Paris, at which Sean O'Kelly and other members of the Irish Delegation in Paris attended' (*II*, 30 October 1920). For this newspaper, the MacSwiney story is a world event. Also noteworthy is the *Irish Times*' description of MacSwiney as an alderman, a lesser grade than Lord Mayor. Paradoxically, the French press consistently refers to him as 'le Lord-Maire', a title with which it seemed to have no difficulty, despite the fact that it does not correspond to any equivalent office in France. In similar vein, the *Irish Times* downplays commemorations for MacSwiney held in Francophone Canada 'in a few Roman Catholic churches [ . . . ] The Sinn Fein 'Soldier's Song' was sung, *but* the meeting was orderly'. The conjunction 'but' here is revealing.<sup>26</sup>

In second place in terms of foreign coverage is the London *Times*, a key organ of the British establishment. It is striking that, as matters took their course just three short miles south across the Thames from the *Times*' offices in Fleet Street, the story of the lingering death by self-starvation of the elected mayor of a major city of the British Empire consistently occupied a space smaller and less prominent than arts and sports events and especially less than divorce cases, often reported verbatim and with a wealth of salacious detail. Tracking its Irish news coverage, one discovers that, just over a week before MacSwiney's death, the *Times*' report on the story was shorter than one on fog and lights along the Irish coast (*T*, 16 October 1920). A statement issued by friends of MacSwiney days before his death, detailing the mayor's decline, is summarized in an article several times shorter and considerably less prominent than stories entitled 'Women's taste for love stories' and 'Maned Wolf with stilt legs at Zoo' (subtitled 'The Crab-eating dog's relations'), featured prominently at the top of the same page (*T*, 23 October, p. 8). A later article on preparations for MacSwiney's funeral (including unwittingly poignant details of the crowds of 'poorly-dressed people' carrying green, white and yellow bouquets of flowers waiting to pay their respects outside Brixton Prison) shares a column with a story relating how the Prince of Wales' hunting was disrupted by fog (*T*, 28 October 1920, p. 12). The *Times*' single most sustained piece touching on the MacSwiney incident is a letter from Sir Hugh Cecil, consisting of over one entire column advocating the banning of cars and the curtailment of train travel in Ireland in order to inconvenience enemies of the British state there (*T*, 29 October 1920). The *Cork Examiner* carried some reports

of French coverage of MacSwiney. But the most extensive and most positive coverage of French reaction is to be found in the *Irish Independent*: 'The French press *continue* to discuss the tragedy in a *most sympathetic* manner' (my italics, *II*, 1 November 1920). The tone is set by the telegram sent from Paris to MacSwiney's chaplain by Seán T. O'Kelly. Under the sub-heading (in bold capitals) 'FRANCE HORRIFIED', we read: 'People of France horrified at England's cold brutality. Office here besieged with sympathisers wishing to honour our heroic comrade' (*II*, 26 October 1920, p. 6). Strong language and striking typography in prominently placed articles convey the depth of feeling. Headlines include: 'Paris and Lord mayor' and 'Tribute to the dead: France horrified'. Across two columns we read in bold print: 'FRENCH PRESS AND THE LORD MAYOR', followed by sub-headings indicating French reactions such as 'He died for an ideal. Grandeur of tragedy. Invigorating example. Nobility of purpose' (*II*, 29 October 1920, p. 6). The following days bring similar headlines: 'Sympathy of France', 'French papers and the funeral' (*II*, 3 November 1920), 'The late Lord Mayor Views of the French press' (*II*, 5 November 1920) and 'World's sympathy with Cork' (*II*, 4 November 1920).

The function of this press coverage in Ireland and London is self-evident: to confirm the readers of these various newspapers in their beliefs and prejudices. Thus, the establishment press, the *Times*, implies that people may sleep easy as the French are not particularly interested, worried or angry regarding the MacSwiney story. In any case, as the *Times* reported less than a week before MacSwiney died: 'Parliament meets today in circumstances the gravity of which is self-evident. Coal and Ireland are the two

most urgent problems facing Government and nation alike. Both will have to be dealt with at once, *but the more pressing of the two is coal*' (my italics, *T*, 19 October, p. 12).<sup>27</sup> The House of Commons report in the same *Times* edition records that MPs' 'cheers', 'loud cheers' and 'loud laughter' greeted the Home Secretary's hard-line statement on the dying Lord Mayor. The *Cork Examiner* and, to a far greater extent, the *Irish Independent* again took a different angle. The aim of accounts in the *Irish Independent* was clearly to support and validate MacSwiney and all he represented, and consistently to assure its readers (who may have been feeling beleaguered, pessimistic or despairing) of the unflinching solidarity with them of France and, by extension, of the rest of the world.

#### CONCLUSION

MacSwiney's fate is still noted in French guides to Ireland. Indeed, the 1993 edition of the popular Michelin guide to this country incorrectly states that *both* MacSwiney and MacCurtain died on hunger strike. Six decades after MacSwiney's death, the 1981 hunger strikes again sparked huge interest and sympathy in France in the serious press (such as *Le Monde*) as well as in popular magazines like *Elle*, to such an extent that several towns and cities there went so far as to rename streets as 'rue Bobby Sands' and 'rue des Martyrs Irlandais'. While not all of these names have been retained, recent information suggests that there is still a 'rue Bobby Sands' in Saint-Herblain, Héric, Vierzon and Paris, and that Saint-Etienne retains its 'place Bobby Sands'.

In Ireland, the MacSwiney episode has slid from being a subject capable of generating passionate interest to being relatively unfashionable. By way of contrast, the Christmas edition of the *Kerryman* in

December 1938, at a time when people might have been preoccupied by the likely outbreak of yet another world war, contained a lengthy (three-page) detailed reliving of the MacSwiney story, as if it had occurred the previous day and not almost two decades earlier. The paucity of scholarship on MacSwiney alluded to earlier is mirrored in the relative silence surrounding him in the public sphere over recent decades. One of the main thoroughfares in Cork city is named after MacCurtain, but, as far as I have been able to determine, MacSwiney's name is only found on a small terrace of houses in a residential area a mile from the city centre and on a community college in Hollyhill, both on the city's north side, as well as on a short stretch of quay (which many Cork citizens confuse with the nearby Albert Quay). I have not found any trace of the names of either MacSwiney or MacCurtain in the topography of Dublin. The fiftieth anniversary of the deaths of the two Lord Mayors of Cork was commemorated by the issuing of stamps in 1970. The seventy-fifth anniversary of MacSwiney's death was marked by the City Hall in Cork, but it appears that the municipal authorities did not have any major plans to mark the eightieth anniversary. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only reference in the Irish press to the anniversary occurred in an article by Pádraig Ó Cuanacháin published some time after the actual date in the *Irish Times* (30 October 2000). One is reminded of similar reticence in 1991 surrounding the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Another paper would be needed to analyse current reactions or lack of them to the extraordinary events under discussion.<sup>28</sup>

Even if curiously muted in official/public discourse, the MacSwiney story is

present elsewhere, however. In interviews conducted with elderly Cork people by Dr Breda Gray and her team of researchers at the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, UCC, the MacSwiney family along with the events of 1920 feature regularly.<sup>29</sup> Hunger strikes have also resurfaced in recent Irish fiction by writers born many generations after MacSwiney's death, for instance in a 104-page novella (entitled 'Hunger Strike') published in 2000 by one of Ireland's most interesting young writers, the highly acclaimed Colum McCann, as well as in a poem (titled 'Do Bhoibhy Sands an lá sular éag') in the latest collection of Irish-language poet, UCC graduate Micheal Davitt.<sup>30</sup>

What we choose to remember, how, why, and what we decide to forget are dominant themes in contemporary French historiography, for example in the work of Pierre Nora (especially in his monumental *Lieux de mémoire* project) and others.<sup>31</sup> One might conclude by hypothesizing that in the memory of an elderly Frenchman (the priest mentioned earlier in this article), just as in the second- and third-hand recollections of contemporary young Irish writers, we witness the working out of issues that transcend any one individual and cause us to reflect on wider human concerns. I believe that French reportage of the MacSwiney incident had already captured some of these issues.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude assistance received from the University College, Cork, Arts Faculty Research Fund in writing this article. I also convey my warm thanks to the following for their help: Dr Stephen Boyd, Dr Dick Collins, Prof. Richard Deutsch, Dr Breda Gray and Mr Denis MacSweeney. The article is

dedicated with love and admiration to the memory of my father, Miah Neville.

#### APPENDIX

The main newspapers consulted for the purposes of this article are abbreviated as follows:

English:

*The Times: T*

French:

*Le Figaro: Fg*

*L'Heure Nouvelle: HN*

*L'Humanité: Hu*

*L'Illustration: Ill*

*Le Journal du Peuple: JP*

*Le Matin: Ma*

*Le Rappel: Ra*

*Le Temps: Te*

Irish:

*The Cork Examiner: CE*

*The Irish Independent: II*

*The Irish Times: IT*

*The Kerryman: K*

#### NOTES

1 Interestingly in this context, the most famous Irish person in contemporary Iran – a country probably not overly familiar with Ireland – appears to be another hunger-striker, Bobby Sands, according to a recent *Irish Times* article (*IT*, 6 Jan. 2001).

2 See, *inter alia*, Charles Townsend, *The British Campaign in Ireland, 1919–1921* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975); Theo Dorgan and Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (eds), *Revising the Rising* (Derry, Field Day, 1991); Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare: the Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916–1921* (Dublin, The Academic Press, 1996); Tom Garvin, *1922: the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1996); Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy, 1917–1923* (London/Chicago, Pluto Press, 1996); Peter Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork*,

1916–1923 (Oxford/New York, Clarendon Press, 1998).

3 As examples of the growing body of scholarship in this area, see, for instance, Cornelius G. Buttimer, 'A Cork Gaelic Text on a Napoleonic Campaign', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, vol. XCV, no. 254 (1990), pp. 107–19, 'Degrés de perception de la France dans l'Irlande gaélique de la pré-famine, 1700–1840' in Catherine Laurent and Helen Davis (eds), *Irlande et Bretagne. Vingt Siècles d'Histoire* (Rennes, Terre de Brume, 1994), pp. 178–89; Catherine Lobo, 'Le Fantôme napoléonien dans les relations anglo-irlandaises 1803–1815' in Godeleine Logez-Carpentier (ed.), *L'Irlande Imaginaire et Représentation* (Lille, Presses de l'Université de Lille III, 1997), pp. 217–29; Grace Neville, 'Le regard des Irlandais sur la France et les Français dans la tradition orale en Irlande' in Alain Montandon (ed.), *Le Même et l'Autre: Regards Européens* (Clermont-Ferrand, Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université de Clermont-Ferrand, 1997), pp. 45–55, 'L'invention du mythe de Napoléon dans la mémoire irlandaise' in Martine Peletier (ed.), *Irlande: Vision(s)/Revision(s)* (Tours, Publications des Groupes de Recherches Anglo-Américaines de l'Université de Tours, 1998), pp. 181–91.

4 John A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 18.

5 *ibid.*, p. 17.

6 Moirin Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney*, (Dublin, Clonmore and Reynolds / London, Burns and Oates, 1961, with a foreword as well as an appendix by Daniel Corkery, 'Terence MacSwiney: Lord Mayor of Cork', the latter first published as an article in *Studies* [1920]); Diarmaid Ó Briain, *Traolach Mac Suibhne* (Dublin, Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teoranta, 1979); Francis J. Costello, *Enduring the Most: the Life and Death of Terence MacSwiney* (Brandon Books, Tralee, 1995); John A. Murphy, *Cuimhne Dhá Laoch: MacCurtain and MacSwiney* (Cork Public Museum/Cork

Corporation, 1995).

7 For instance, J. J. Lee's *Ireland 1912–1985* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) contains only one reference (p. 496) to MacSwiney (in the context of a discussion of Jack Lynch); he is not mentioned in Dermot Keogh's *Twentieth Century Ireland: Nation and State* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1994). In S. J. Connolly's *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 339), the biographical note on MacSwiney is half the length of that dedicated to his sister, Mary MacSwiney (6 lines and 12 lines, respectively).

8 David Fitzpatrick in Roy Foster (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 249.

9 On the coverage of the MacSwiney story in Catalonia, see Terence Folley, 'A Catalan Trade Union and the Irish War of Independence, 1919–1922', *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, vol. X (1984), pp. 60–67; on Rome, see Chavasse, *op. cit.*, ch. xix: 'The Coverage in Rome and Elsewhere', pp. 158–62; Stuart Mews, 'The Hunger Strike of the Lord Mayor of Cork, 1920: Irish, English and Vatican Attitudes' in W. J. Shiels and Diana Woods (eds), *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish* (Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 385–99.

10 Pierre Batiffol, *Notre Visite en Irlande (7–14 Octobre 1916)* (Paris, Bloud et Gay, 1917). On French travel writings on Ireland, see *inter alia* Mesdemoiselles Mespoulet and Mignon, *Irlande 1913: Clichés en Couleur pris pour Monsieur Kahn* (Paris, Collections Albert-Kahn, 1988); Grace Neville, 'A la recherche de l'Irlande perdue: Two French Photographers in Ireland in 1913', *Etudes Irlandaises*, no. xvi–2 (1991), pp. 75–89, 'Cette contrée méconnue et si souvent outragée: towards an Analysis of the Writings of J.-J. Prevost, a Traveller in mid-nineteenth Century Ireland' in Monique Gallagher (ed.), *Irlande – Exils* (Nice, Université de Nice, 1998), pp. 111–25.

11 Dermot Keogh, 'The Origins of the Irish Foreign Service in Europe (1919–1922)',

*Etudes Irlandaises*, no. 7, nouvelle série (1982), p. 150. This seminal article is of vital importance for the study of Franco-Irish relations during the period under discussion here. Of particular note is Keogh's analysis of the activities and significance of O'Kelly, a key source of information for the French on the MacSwiney story.

**12** A French consulate existed in Dublin at the time: a few days after MacSwiney's burial, the 3 November 1920 edition of the *Irish Times* announced that 'The King has been pleased to approve of Monsieur Marie Alfred Blanche as Consul of France, at Dublin, for Ireland'.

**13** Letter dated 5 November 1920, my italics; quoted in Richard Ellmann (ed.), *The Letters of James Joyce* (London, Faber, 1966), vol. iii, p. 27.

**14** Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 547, my italics.

**15** See Jeanne A. Flood, 'The Sow that Eats her Farrow: Gender and Politics' in Diana A. Ben-Merre and Maureen Murphy (eds), *James Joyce and his Contemporaries* (New York/Newport, Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 69–76, especially p. 70.

**16** Maurice Crubelier, *Histoire Culturelle de la France: XIXe – XXe Siècle* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1974), p. 179.

**17** Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernisation of Rural France 1870–1914* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 470.

**18** While the press sources of the information on MacSwiney still exist, it is more difficult to establish *how* this information was received by its intended readership. However, a glimpse of the effect the story had on the general French population is afforded by Moirin Chavasse: 'that September [1920], when he was in Paris, Professor Liam Ó Briain not only found "that Europe was ringing with MacSwiney's name", but he tells that in a Parisian theatre, between the acts, the latest news of his condition was given, and even

a singer in a *Café-concert* had a verse to sing about him' (*op. cit.*, p. 161).

**19** On use of the foreign press corps in London by Desmond FitzGerald and others from 1919 onwards, especially through the publication of the *Irish Bulletin*, see Keogh, 'The Origins of the Irish Foreign Service', pp. 148, 161, n. 11. Interestingly, some of the French newspapers and journalists cited by Keogh also played a key role in the reporting of the MacSwiney story.

**20** See Henri Béraud, *Le Flâneur Salaré* (Paris, 1927) and *Les Derniers Beaux Jours* (Paris, 1953); Joseph Kessel, *Témoin parmi les Hommes* (Paris, 1956). Both were reporting from Ireland in autumn 1920. Each describes the scenes around Cork Gaol during the hunger strikes there at that time.

**21** The impressive range of contacts established in the Francophone press throughout Europe and North Africa by the Irish Delegation in Paris can be seen in its numerous publications, for instance in *La République d'Irlande et la Presse Française* (Paris, November 1919), an 86-page compilation by Gavin Duffy of articles sympathetic to the position of the Irish Government published in *La Croix*, *La Libre Parole*, *La Gazette de Lausanne*, *L'Europe Nouvelle*, *Le Populaire*, *Le Journal des Débats*, *L'Action Française*, *Nouvelles (Algiers)*, *Le Temps*, *L'Information*, *L'Opinion*, *La Réforme Sociale*, *Lyon Républicain*, *Le Nouvelliste (Bordeaux)*, *Exelcior*, *La Justice*, *Le Télégramme (Toulouse)*, *La Revue Politique et Parlementaire*, *La Vieille France*, *Echos de l'Exportation*, *L'Épargne*, *Communiqué de l'Office National de Commerce*, *La Patrie*, *Etudes*, *Le Correspondant*.

**22** Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

**23** Lily M. O'Brennan, *1916–1921* (Dublin, Capuchin Publications, 1936), p. 174.

**24** On the widespread contemporary discussion of the ethics of suicide in the MacSwiney case, see Mews, *op. cit.*

**25** The source of this information is Chavasse, *op. cit.*, p. 157.



- 26** Coverage of reaction in the US is equally downbeat in *IT*. An account of a protest by hundreds of Irish sympathisers of MacSwiney outside the White House ends with the telling remark: 'President Wilson had no knowledge of the demonstration, as he was asleep' (*IT*, 9 November 1920, p. 5).
- 27** That the British cabinet did indeed appreciate the seriousness of the threat posed by MacSwiney is evident from Public Records Office, London, CAB 23/22.
- 28** An interesting anecdote regarding Irish opposition to a proposal by the Greater London Council Irish committee to give the name 'Terence MacSwiney Memorial Lectures' to a lecture series in 1986 is recounted in Frank Dolan, 'Why MacSwiney?', *Terence MacSwiney Memorial Lectures, 1986* (London, The Greater London Council, 1986), pp. 9–10.
- 29** See <http://migration.ucc.ie/oral archive>.
- 30** Colum McCann, *Everything in this Country Must* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), pp. 39–143, Michael Davitt, *Freacnairc Mbearcair. The Oomph of Quicksilver* (Cork, Cork University Press, 2000), pp. 16–17.
- 31** Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire* 7 vols (Paris, 1984–1992).