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## DYING, DEATH AND HUNGER STRIKE: CORK AND BRIXTON, 1920

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In *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust has reconstructed the ways in which the soldiers, their families and wider society prepared for death. She argues that it remained important, perhaps more important given the then novel, terrible and aberrant conditions of modern war, that each man's story be a story of a good death.<sup>1</sup> The hunger strike conditions of Brixton and Cork in 1920, though very different from those of the battlefields of Antietam or Gettysburg, were also aberrant. The hunger strikers faced death in novel circumstances, yet they and those around them shared the near universal desire that if it came, even or maybe especially as a consequence of hunger strike, that the story of their deaths should be told in ways that offered meaning and solace, and in ways that evoked admiration rather than condemnation. This essay will explore the prolonged and very public deaths of Terence MacSwiney, Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy, focussing on the manner in which this impulse toward a good death manifested itself in the environments of Cork and Brixton prison, Ireland and Britain, during the Irish War of Independence.

On 6 November 1920, the *Anglo-Celt* newspaper reported that an elderly nun, who lay dying at a convent at Weybridge, England, had heard the banshee on three successive nights in late October. The nun assumed that the banshee had travelled to Weybridge to herald her death, but, according to the *Anglo-Celt*, she (the nun that is) was not fully informed of the circumstances of her family. Specifically, she did not know that her nephew, Terence MacSwiney, also lay dying in

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Brixton prison and it was only upon receipt of news of his death that she realized that the banshee's cries were not for her, but him.<sup>2</sup> This elderly nun must have been one of the few people in Britain and Ireland who was unaware that Terence MacSwiney was dying. In the course of a seventy-four day hunger strike (from his arrest on the evening of the 12 August to his death at 5.40am on 25 October 1920), the fate of the Lord Mayor of Cork had attracted extraordinary public attention that was not confined to these islands.<sup>3</sup>

MacSwiney's strike ended in Brixton with a heart attack during delirium, but it began at Cork prison.<sup>4</sup> There he joined a hunger-striking group of prisoners who had embarked on their protest on the morning of 11 August, following the authorities' failure to respond to an ultimatum, demanding their 'unconditional release'.<sup>5</sup> In the initial stages, the number of men on strike at Cork varied somewhat, peaking at sixty-five on 12 August. Although the first strikers were occasionally joined by newly arrested suspects, such as MacSwiney, the general trend was downward as the authorities released some who were young or had been recently arrested, and transferred two large cohorts of convicted prisoners to English prisons, twenty-five on 12 August and eighteen more on 18 August.<sup>6</sup> In each instance the transfer prompted these groups to give up their strike. On the occasion of the second transfer, Mark Sturgis, a senior official at Dublin Castle, expressed the hope that this 'means a real break-up of the rotten hunger striking business'.<sup>7</sup> Such optimism soon receded and by the second half of August a core of eleven determined strikers — Michael Fitzgerald, Joseph Murphy, Joseph Kenny, Thomas Donovan, John Crowley, Christopher Upton, Peter Crowley, Michael O'Reilly, John Hennessy, Michael Burke and John Power — remained at Cork. Ten had been on the strike from the beginning, while Kenny had joined on 15 August. Ten of the men, including Kenny, had not yet been charged with a specific offence, but were held under the orders of the competent military authority. The exception was the generally recognized leader of the group, Michael Fitzgerald. He had been a trade union official and was officer commanding the Fermoy Battalion of the IRA when he was arrested in September 1919 in the aftermath of an attack on a group of Shropshire Light Infantry that had been on its way to Sunday service in Fermoy.<sup>8</sup> Nearly a year later Fitzgerald was still awaiting trial on charges of murdering Private William Jones who had died as a consequence of that attack.

Shortly after his imprisonment Fitzgerald had participated in a brief hunger strike at Cork prison, involving forty-six prisoners. The chief warder, Denis O'Donoghue, had described most of the untried prisoners

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involved as 'soft country young fellows' who would soon give in, but excepted Fitzgerald from this characterization.<sup>9</sup> On 10 August 1920, Fitzgerald was one of three prisoners to sign the ultimatum that signalled the beginning of the fatal hunger strike and he would be the first to die at 9.45pm on Sunday, 17 October. The next morning, the medical officers recorded the cause of death as 'gradual cessation of the vital functions due to prolonged abstention from all forms of nourishment'.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Murphy, they reported on the same day, 'can now be only described as just alive'.<sup>11</sup> Murphy had been an active, though not leading, volunteer based in Cork city and, on 15 July 1920, he was arrested on suspicion of possession of a bomb. Reports as to his age varied but he was in his early twenties and had been born in the United States.<sup>12</sup> He lasted a further gruelling week, dying at 8.35pm on 25 October, fourteen hours after MacSwiney's death at Brixton. The medical officers recorded the same cause of death as they had for Fitzgerald.<sup>13</sup> Extraordinarily, there were no further fatalities although the remaining nine men continued to strike until 12 November. They then stopped in response to a letter issued by Arthur Griffith that encouraged (though expressly did not order) them off their protest. He wrote that they had 'sufficiently demonstrated their devotion and fidelity' and had proven that 'those whom England advertises ... as criminals are Irishmen whose patriotism is proof against torture and death'.<sup>14</sup>

Griffith's intervention saved the men's lives. Ninety-four days earlier, when embarking on their hunger strike, it is unlikely that they anticipated death. The prisons and internment camps of Ireland were key sites of Irish revolution, and frequently witnessed conflict, but they were not especially dangerous places. Indeed, by the summer of 1920 some felt it was safer to be in prison than outside. In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising there had been sixteen executions, but there had been none since. Two so-called German plot internees had died of influenza while in prison: Richard Coleman at Usk in December 1918 and Pierce McCan at Gloucester in March 1919.<sup>15</sup> That was one more than had to date died on hunger strike. This was Thomas Ashe, who had not died after prolonged self-starvation; he succumbed to a heart attack that was probably a consequence of his forcible feeding at Mountjoy prison on 25 September 1917, just five days after he had embarked on his protest.<sup>16</sup>

In the aftermath of Ashe's death, the prison authorities abandoned forcible feeding in the case of Irish political prisoners to all practical purposes (there were rare exceptions). This exposed the authorities to what the press described as 'hunger-strike mania',<sup>17</sup> and cohort after cohort of Irish Volunteers achieved improved prison conditions or their release using the tactic. In late February 1918, facing the collapse of

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the Irish prison system, the then Chief Secretary for Ireland, H.E. Duke, informed the House of Commons — and prison governors all over Ireland informed individual prisoners — that those who embarked upon a hunger strike would not be forcibly fed nor released but would be allowed to starve themselves and the state would regard their action as suicide.<sup>18</sup> In the spring of 1918, this strategy, combined with the concession of an agreed privileged regime for most political prisoners, resulted in the effective stifling of the hunger strike threat.<sup>19</sup> By late 1919, however, as violence in the country escalated, Irish Volunteers inside the prisons returned to the hunger strike with a vengeance. The government failed to maintain their hard-line stance, and the most significant consequence of this failure came in April and May of 1920 when, after mass hunger strikes, they released two large groups of men, one consisting of some ninety prisoners (both convicted and awaiting trial) at Mountjoy and the other consisting of some 200 internees held at Wormwood Scrubs. Prison, as it had two years earlier, appeared to be on the verge of worthlessness as a weapon against the IRA. The hunger strikers of Cork, including Terence MacSwiney, therefore had good reason to believe that they would not be obliged to choose between abandoning their strike and death.

That is not to say that they embarked upon their action without a consciousness of danger, including the danger of death. Since the modern hunger strike's arrival in Ireland in 1912, conducted first by suffragettes, it had been accompanied by a rhetoric of death. Mary Leigh, one of the first group of suffragettes to go on hunger strike in an Irish prison, told the governor of Mountjoy in August 1912, 'if the Government will undertake to give votes to women, I will take my food, and I will gladly do my sentence of 5 years or longer, but under no other circumstances. You can kill me if you like, and I will gladly die, but I won't give in.'<sup>20</sup> In an action that MacSwiney would echo, in June 1915, Francis Sheehy Skeffington responded to a sentence of six months' hard labour under the Defence of the Realm Act by telling the court: 'I'll serve no such sentence. I'll eat no food from this moment and long before the expiration of the sentence I shall be out of prison, either alive or dead.'<sup>21</sup> In the early stages of the strike that would result in Thomas Ashe's death, Constance Markievicz told a large protest at Smithfield that the men in Mountjoy were carrying on the 'fight for love of Ireland in long drawn sighs of agony, from hour to hour, from day to day, from moment to moment, seeing that grim spectre, death, coming nearer and nearer'.<sup>22</sup> Most infamously perhaps, Laurence O'Neill, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, told the inquest into Ashe's death that when the prison doctor, Raymond G. Dowdall, warned him that

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forcible feeding might be fatal, Ashe expressed his determination to persist, stating 'even if I do die I die in a good cause'.<sup>23</sup>

Although no death had been directly attributable to hunger strike since Ashe's, each strike generated terrible anxiety among family and friends, if not always the prisoners. While participating in a strike at Dundalk in early March 1918 (one of the last during that phase of hunger strikes), Michael Brennan wrote to Madge Daly: 'A wire has just come from my mother asking if it tis true that I am dead. Well, to the best of my knowledge its [sic] not true yet anyway & I only wish I could lay my hands on the disturbing gossipers who spread such yarns ... For God's sake pay no heed to those damned rumours!'<sup>24</sup> Michael Brennan, along with his brothers, Paddy and Austin, were pioneers of the hunger strike among the Irish Volunteers, and their activities in this regard regularly elicited intuitions of death from their mother, Mary.<sup>25</sup> She sent a telegram to one prison governor, warning 'if my boys are dead by return I leave their deaths at your door'.<sup>26</sup> In nationalist propaganda and elsewhere during these years, participation in hunger strike was cited as a contributing factor to the subsequent ill-health or death of former prisoners. An example is the death of Francis Gleeson on 9 May 1920. The immediate cause of Gleeson's demise was appendicitis, but the medical evidence at his inquest prompted the jury (at the coroner's suggestion) to note that it had been 'accelerated' by the affects of hunger strike: Gleeson had been released from Mountjoy on 14 April as a consequence of the mass hunger strike of that month. Unsurprisingly, the nationalist press afforded the jury's finding extensive coverage.<sup>27</sup> This was part of a wider pattern of blaming various forms of imprisonment for the subsequent deaths of Irish nationalists. For example, four former inhabitants of Frongoch internment camp died in 1917, within a year of their release from that camp. On each occasion, and with varying degrees of credibility, the nationalist press ascribed their death to the effects of their incarceration.<sup>28</sup>

Four days after his arrest Terence MacSwiney was tried by court martial, found guilty of three charges — including possession of an RIC cipher — and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. He informed the court that he would 'be free, alive or dead, within a month'.<sup>29</sup> He did not return to Cork prison, but was transferred to London.<sup>30</sup> Unlike other convicts transferred from Cork, MacSwiney did not abandon his protest at that point. He persisted in the belief, as his comments in court suggest, that there would be a speedy resolution to the contest of wills between him and the authorities. Most likely, MacSwiney and the other strikers anticipated, based on previous experience, that they would be released.<sup>31</sup> Should the alternative scenario apply, no one believed that a hunger striker would survive more than a few weeks.

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The authorities came under enormous pressure to release MacSwiney and the other men, and not only from nationalist Ireland. As Edward Shortt, the Home Secretary, noted at cabinet, on 25 August, 'practically the whole [British] press' and moderate unionist opinion in Ireland favoured MacSwiney's release.<sup>32</sup> In late August, among those to intervene on behalf of MacSwiney alone or all the hunger-striking prisoners was a self-appointed group calling itself 'the Peace Conference' (led by Sir Nugent Everard and Sir Horace Plunkett<sup>33</sup>), King George V,<sup>34</sup> and the elderly Mrs Georgina Bowen-Colthurst. Mrs Bowen-Colthurst was the mother of Colonel John Bowen-Colthurst who had shot Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Thomas Dickson and Patrick James McIntryre in cold blood at Portobello Barracks during the 1916 Rising. In making her representations, she visited both Scotland Yard and the Home Office where an official noted:

She was a rambling old lady, but she had a perfectly clear story to tell. Her story was that when the family property suffered depredation [as a consequence of her son's actions] she appealed to the Lord Mayor of Cork, and the Lord Mayor apparently, as head of the local Sinn Fein organisation, secured her some measure of redress and protection. Mrs Colthurst felt that, although she was not a sympathiser with Sinn Fein, it was her duty to say that the Lord Mayor had behaved well to her.

The official's surprise at this intercession is indicated by his comment 'I understand that all the Bowen-Colthursts are rather eccentric, but I think this lady is quite *compos mentis*.'<sup>35</sup> Despite the wave of representations, ministers refused to change their position at meetings on 25 August and 2 September. The implication was clear; MacSwiney would either stop or starve.<sup>36</sup>

As early as 20 August the leadership of Sinn Féin began to realize that this time the government would not submit to the threat of hunger strike. Art O'Brien, the leader of the Irish Self-Determination League, based in London, informed Michael Collins that his contacts at the Home Office believed that the government had 'definitely and finally decided that if any of the Irish prisoners persisted in the hunger strike, they were to be allowed to die in prison. If this decision really is adhered to, and I am afraid, from present appearances, that it will be, the situation will be very serious.'<sup>37</sup> On the afternoon of the same day, O'Brien's report appeared to acquire substance when he and Mary MacSwiney, Terence's sister, met Sir Ernley Blackwell, Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office. Blackwell insisted that they would not

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release Terence, while Mary was adamant that she would not encourage her brother to give up 'his principles'.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, at the prison, on the orders of Edward Shortt, the governor warned MacSwiney that he would not be released and that he alone would be responsible for the consequences if he persisted in hunger striking.<sup>39</sup> MacSwiney's immediate reply was a letter to the Home Secretary in which he argued that Shortt would be responsible in the event of his death and 'knowing the revolution of opinion that will be thereby caused throughout the civilised world and the consequent accession of support to Ireland in her hour of trial, I am reconciled to a premature grave. I am prepared to die.'<sup>40</sup> Although MacSwiney and the strikers in Cork continued to hope for a change in the government's position, the realization that the government was determined to stand firm caused them to accept the likelihood by early September that they would die. On 8 September, one of the medical officers at Cork reported the prisoners' refusal to receive medical treatment, stating 'all wish to die and are prepared to die and have asked to be left alone'.<sup>41</sup> On the same day, his colleague recorded in his diary: 'I now consider that the desire for Death is strongly marked in all'.<sup>42</sup>

It is important to remember that at this stage, almost a month in, the strikers had exceeded their doctor's, their own, their families' and the press' estimations of their capacity to survive. As early as 19 August, Dr W.D. Higson, then medical officer at Brixton prison, described MacSwiney as seriously ill. On 29 August, Annie MacSwiney, Terence's other sister, sent a telegram to a friend in Cork, stating 'doctor says end may come any time'.<sup>43</sup> The *Times* reported on 30 August, and the Home Office recorded on 4 September, that he might 'die at any moment',<sup>44</sup> while the *Freeman's Journal*, on 3 September, reported that 'there are all the indications of death about the exhausted, helpless, heroic figure that lies on the prison bed'.<sup>45</sup> In Cork, D.J. Flynn, the medical officer, began describing the prisoners as in danger and recommending their release as early as 16 August; however, it should be acknowledged that Flynn's desire to relieve himself of the responsibility for these men probably influenced this judgement. C.J. MacCormack, the medical member of the General Prisons Board of Ireland, on the other hand, was certainly sincere in his assessment on 25 August when he reported that 'they are all in a decidedly critical state and have in my opinion reached the danger zone'.<sup>46</sup> The *Freeman's Journal* again reported on 31 August that four of the men — Burke, O'Reilly, Hennessy and Kenny — were 'on the point of death', and on 3 September, that for O'Reilly and Hennessy 'the end . . . is at hand'.<sup>47</sup> Art O'Brien wrote to Collins from London on 4 September, describing MacSwiney's body

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as 'practically lifeless' although his mind was 'thoroughly alive and alert'. In recording that MacSwiney believed it would all be over within a week, O'Brien commented 'it seems extraordinary that he should have hope of lasting another week'.<sup>48</sup> Sir Edward Troup, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Home Office, initiated discussions on the disposal of MacSwiney's body on 8 September.<sup>49</sup> All continued to believe that his death was imminent right through September and into October,<sup>50</sup> but he did not die nor did his colleagues in Cork, transfixing their friends, family, supporters, the authorities, and the wider public in a gruesome 'death watch'.<sup>51</sup> Annie MacSwiney wrote to a friend on 21 September that Terence had commented: 'I never thought it could drag on so long — I am just dying by inches'.<sup>52</sup>

By September then, the question had changed from whether the men would die to what would be the manner and meaning of their deaths? Or to put it another way, the prisoners and their supporters were by then deeply concerned that their protest and likely deaths should be presented as good, honourable, and heroic — and if nothing else, death by inches gave them time to make their case — while the authorities were anxious to minimize any legitimization or glorification of the prisoners' fatal protest and the consequent propaganda impact. A question which seemed to offer an immediate threat to the prospect of an honourable death, and it was a question that gained more and more currency as the strike persisted, was this: how are these men still alive? Surely some slight of hand must be involved. Especially, but not only, in the British press an element of incredulity and of the freak show crept into some of the coverage.<sup>53</sup> This was probably the result of a degree of boredom and, perhaps, some press management by the British government. In August, Dublin Castle had sought to improve its capacity to influence the press by establishing a Public Information Branch.<sup>54</sup> The *Globe's* comments on 4 October were probably the most cynical:

Mr McSwiney [*sic*], you understand, has had no food, no food at all, for fifty-two days — seven weeks and a half — and is still, if we may be allowed to use the expression, going strong. Nothing but pure cold water, or at any rate water as pure as they can get it in Brixton prison, has passed his resolute lips since the day when he fell into the hands of the base, bloody, brutal Saxon, and was clapped in gaol ... If he can go, miraculously, without food for fifty-two days there does not seem to be any good for saying he cannot go the whole two years of his sentence, and it would be a pity if the British Government were to deprive him of the glory attending to a manifestation so remarkable.<sup>55</sup>

The MacSwiney family, never a clan to shy away from inferring

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dishonourable intent on the part of the British, first complained of English papers that 'deliberately misconstrue the truth'<sup>56</sup> and later alleged that there existed a 'deliberate campaign of misrepresentation and falsehood engineered by the English Government'. They cut contact with the English press in late September (rarely a tactic that pays dividends), but continued, of course, to communicate with the Irish and international press.<sup>57</sup>

This issue had also arisen in Cork. On 13 September, the *Freeman's Journal* took a report from Hugh Martin, a correspondent for the English newspaper the *Daily News*. Martin was regarded as critical of British policy in Ireland and knowledgeable about Sinn Féin.<sup>58</sup> He had just been to Cork prison where he had interviewed Alan C. Pearson and E. A. Battiscombe, the two Home Office doctors then 'in charge'. Pearson and Battiscombe, worried by death threats from the IRA, had one key message that they wanted to communicate. Martin wrote: 'they assured me on their professional honour that no nourishment or stimulant of any sort is being administered to the prisoners' and continued, 'Four nuns of the Bon Secours are in constant attendance, and near relatives are also admitted, but close observation by the doctors has convinced them that the men are taking nothing but pure water. I emphasise this fact because of the rumours that the prisoners are being secretly fed.'<sup>59</sup> Two days later the medical officers reiterated this in a report to the General Prisons Board, stating that the Reverend Mother of the assisting nuns had expressed 'extreme annoyance' at the 'unjust innuendos', and asked that they be publicly contradicted.<sup>60</sup> When the rumours persisted, the hunger strikers and their relatives requested that an independent medical man might be allowed to examine them. Pearson and Battiscombe 'welcomed' this proposal,<sup>61</sup> but the request was refused, renewed, and refused on a number of occasions.<sup>62</sup> It was these rumours that Griffith implicitly addressed when he asserted in his letter that signalled the end of the strike that 'those whom England advertises as criminals ... are Irishmen whose patriotism is proof against torture and death'.<sup>63</sup>

If the government had denied the allegation of secret feeding when asked to do so in mid-September, then the denial would probably have been true. However, such a denial would not have been true at all times during the strikes. There is no evidence that the strikers' families or supporters, either in Brixton or in Cork, secretly fed them. In the middle of September, the day nurse at Brixton did report that MacSwiney's personal chaplain, Fr Dominic, dissolved a tablet in a spoon of water and administered this to him each morning and the authorities did begin to suspect that MacSwiney's relatives were secretly feeding him.<sup>64</sup> When

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they found a substance in the glass in which MacSwiney washed his teeth, the Home Office had it tested (it was soap) and they tested his faeces on 19 October, but again the results revealed 'nothing'.<sup>65</sup> The authorities themselves did, however, contemplate secretly feeding the prisoners. In the first days of MacSwiney's strike, Andrew Bonar Law raised the possibility of surreptitiously introducing vitamins into his water, but Higson rejected the strategy as too high risk. Anything that was likely to be of use in sustaining MacSwiney would taste and if MacSwiney suspected he was being fed, Higson believed, he would stop drinking as well as eating.<sup>66</sup> In early October, Dr O.F.N. Treadwell, the medical inspector of prisons, affirmed this position.<sup>67</sup> Cork was a different matter. On 26 August, Mark Sturgis noted in his diary: 'The Cork boys are getting albumen in their water — they don't know it but they should not die just yet'.<sup>68</sup> Two days later he recorded that 'the Amazing Ass who is RAMC doctor at Cork has put into his report that the hungry there were having albumen in their water — as all these things leak of course it has got round to them and they have now 'waterstruck' too, so it had to be discontinued as it was done only on the quiet — damn him!'<sup>69</sup> This obviously informed the Cork prisoners' subsequent reluctance to receive any treatment from medical officers, and their plea to be left alone to die.

For MacSwiney, the fear that his integrity, the authenticity of his good death, would be sullied by the consumption of any sustenance became a pressing issue at the very end. In August, officials at the Home Office and English Prison Commission had decided that their best hope of sustaining MacSwiney was that he 'reached a state of mind [by which they meant delirium] at which he would swallow liquid food under persuasion'.<sup>70</sup> At this time, Higson mentioned to MacSwiney and his relatives that he would consider feeding MacSwiney if the point arrived that 'the prisoner was too weak to resist'. This called forth what Higson characterized as 'an hysterical outburst' from Mary who 'regarded it as merely a way of prolonging life'.<sup>71</sup> In the last week of MacSwiney's protest relations between the authorities and the family deteriorated as these issues arose. He developed scurvy, prompting his doctors to urge him to take some lime or orange juice. He refused, stating that if he did 'the scurrilous Press egged on by the Government' would say he was taking food, and he was supported in this by Mary who argued that his taking juice would be misrepresented because 'you English all tell lies from the Government downwards'.<sup>72</sup>

On the next day, 19 October, G.B. Griffiths, the doctor then in charge, reported that MacSwiney became 'black angry' with him when he tried to persuade him to take juice. According to Annie MacSwiney,

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Griffiths had threatened to make Terence take the juice and MacSwiney had responded by threatening to 'give up swallowing everything'. In her view, this incident was fatal as it excited her brother to such an extent that it pushed him towards delirium.<sup>73</sup> In the succeeding days relations between the family and the doctors collapsed entirely because when MacSwiney slipped into unconsciousness the doctors began to give him food. Griffiths recorded that the family accused him of 'only prolonging the torture' whereas he explained that they were acting as they had informed MacSwiney they would weeks earlier.<sup>74</sup> According to Annie, Terence became extraordinarily agitated when, in lucid moments, he realized that he had been fed:

'They tricked me, they tricked me, how did they do it? How did they do it?' And then he went off again into delirium striking out again with his hands at both sides of the bed. As a result all the stuff they gave him came up again, and it was agonizing to see the added pain and struggle it all meant to him.<sup>75</sup>

The doctors came to believe that Annie was inciting this resistance, while they consistently felt the lash of Mary's tongue. This was Shortt's experience also; when he commented on the matter in parliament, Mary accused him of misrepresenting MacSwiney's action as the voluntary consumption of food, alleging: 'of all the infamies possible to an individual, or a government, that of lying about an unconscious victim, who for the time being, is in their power, is the most vile'.<sup>76</sup>

The doctors' final role in the cases of the hunger strikers was to give evidence at the inquest or, as was the case for Fitzgerald and Murphy, at the military inquiries held *in lieu* of inquests after their deaths. These were fora where the authorities attempted to disrupt the narrative of a good death that the men and their supporters wished to construct. It was at these inquiries that the cause of the strikers' death was officially established and in each case the authorities were determined that a verdict of suicide should be returned. The courts of military inquiry obliged — in both instances returning the verdict that the striker had 'feloniously kill[ed] himself'.<sup>77</sup> In the case of Mac Swiney, the authorities had an extra motivation to secure a verdict of suicide. Under English prison law this would have allowed them to bury the body, thus depriving the family and Sinn Féin of an enormous propaganda funeral. The jury did not oblige, simply finding, in accordance with the medical evidence, that MacSwiney 'died from heart failure and acute delirium following scurvy, due to exhaustion from prolonged refusal to take food'.<sup>78</sup>

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If the authorities were anxious to present these deaths as suicide then the hunger strikers and their supporters presented them as exemplary Christian deaths. In the nationalist newspaper the reports of the men's final hours emphasized their faith and piety in their final moments. The *Irish Independent's* account of Fitzgerald's *hors mori* was particularly comprehensive in this regard. It told that as death approached, four priests and four nuns gathered around his bed. Friends and families of the prisoners assembled within the prison, and hundreds more gathered outside. The following passage gives a clear sense of the occasion, of the impression they sought to create, and of its impact:

In the bare whitewashed apartment the priests and nuns knelt about the bed. From a table close by two candles lit on either side of the Crucifix threw their light across the pallid form breathing painfully in the last hour of life. Outside in the passage and at the door friends murmured the responses to the prayers for the dying.

At 9.15 pm the voices of the many hundreds outside the prison gates answering their Rosary could be faintly heard. At about 9.30 the singing of the hymns could be heard more clearly still. There was a silence and the crowds without could be heard moving away. Then Fr Fitzgerald [the prison chaplain] began the recital of the third Rosary within the cell.

One of the Bon Secour Sisters, who had been as angels of mercy and comfort to the dying man, took the Crucifix, and held it to the poor sufferer's lips. He seemed to know, and kissed it devoutly.

The Rosary continued and as it did it was noticed the breathing was becoming more and more laboured, the face twitched somewhat, and when the second decade had been reached a look of repose came over the pale, worn face, and everything ceased.

The Sister turned around to the kneeling group. She did not speak. There was a quiet resigned look on her face. Everyone understood. They knew the end had come. The Rosary begun for one in his last moments concluded for the peace and happiness of a noble soul now beyond the reach of pain and suffering.<sup>79</sup>

It seems clear that the piety ascribed here to the striker and his supporters was genuine, but it is also evident that the public projection of this image through the press was calculated, and that it was crucial to the overall portrayal of the hunger strikers as men of deep faith, and the strike as a quasi-religious act. In the case of Murphy the *Irish Independent* reported that 'while the Litany of the Sacred Heart, to

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which the intrepid prisoner had a great devotion, was being recited by Father Fitzgerald another soul left its earthly tenement to join the spirits of those who died that their country might be free.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, MacSwiney's final hour, as described by Fr Dominic and recorded by various newspapers, constituted an unmistakable version of a good, Christian death. Having completed the prayers for the dying and the rosary, Dominic stated that 'I again approached the bedside and continued the prayers from the ritual, "Subvenite Sanotia Dei. [Subvenite, Sancti Dei, — Saints of God, come to his aid]". Just as I had finished the Antiphon the Lord Mayor breathed his last.'<sup>81</sup>

Having achieved such a death, it was desirable that the presiding priest should be a willing public advocate for the deceased. MacSwiney certainly had such a priest in Fr Dominic, while Fr Fitzgerald, at Cork prison, also appears to have been supportive of the prisoners. The press reported that Fitzgerald and the assistant chaplain, Fr Duggan, were prominent when Murphy's remains were transferred from the prison to his local church.<sup>82</sup> Such support could not be taken for granted. During the strike at Wormwood Scrubs in May 1920, the Catholic chaplain in Wormwood Scrubs, Fr Musgrave, had experienced 'qualms of conscience with reference to giving the sacraments to the men who were on hunger strike', but he was persuaded to relent.<sup>83</sup> During the hunger strike at Mountjoy in April 1920 the authority figures within the prison who were most consistent in their opposition to the strike were the prison chaplains, led by Fr John Waters. As a consequence of the chaplains' efforts to persuade the men off the strike, using the threat of damnation, Liam Gogan, a prisoner in Mountjoy at the time though not on hunger strike, described them as a 'rotten lot', 'false shepherds', and 'only the hirelings of Dublin Castle'. Todd Andrews, who was on that strike, remembered that the 'chaplain was the only one of the prison staff who kept his nerve and did his duty, although in our estimation "doing his duty" was merely doing the dirty work required by his British employers'. According to Andrews, the prisoners were sufficiently bolstered against this by the knowledge that the wider Irish public felt that their actions were morally justified.<sup>84</sup>

As the differing approaches of the priests implies, before during and after the Cork and Brixton strike, the morality of the hunger strike was contested publicly. On 9 September, the Irish press carried Mary MacSwiney's vigorous defence of the morality of her brother's actions. This was a direct response to the public suggestions of a well-known English Jesuit Father Bernard Vaughan that the sacraments should be denied to the hunger strikers, and it was characteristically trenchant.<sup>85</sup> MacSwiney made a brief, blunt theological defence of hunger strike

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and asked 'how then, can any one be so stupid, or so malicious, as to suggest that the Lord Mayor of Cork, or any other man in a similar state, for the sake of a great principle is guilty of self-murder'.<sup>86</sup> This was not an isolated incident. There was a good deal of diplomatic activity in Rome as some senior English diplomats and ecclesiastics sought a 'condemnation of hunger-striking by the Holy See', which sparked a determined and successful defensive campaign by sympathisers with the Irish cause.<sup>87</sup> Extensive contemporary debates on the morality of hunger strike took place in theological and clerical journals (to which John Waters regularly contributed), in the press, and beyond.<sup>88</sup> Although many Catholic churches facilitated masses and vigils for the strikers, this was not always so.<sup>89</sup> Archbishop William Walsh of Dublin received complaints when Monsignor Dunne, the parish priest of Donnybrook, refused to make his church available for regular Masses in support of MacSwiney.<sup>90</sup> As a Quaker, Rosamond Jacob was perhaps not as susceptible to the already burgeoning martyr cult as others, but her diary entry on the news of MacSwiney's death probably reflected the private thoughts of many Irish nationalists: 'I can hardly think of anything braver that was ever done, but I'm not sure about the rightness of hunger strikes always'.<sup>91</sup>

So it was not just the arguments of the British authorities that the prisoners and their supporters aimed to counteract as they sought to set at rest their own minds and those of others. On 9 September at Cork prison, one of the strikers, Thomas Donovan, sought reassurance, asking 'that the Pope should be communicated with in regard to giving him his blessing'.<sup>92</sup> In his statement to the Bureau of Military History, Michael V. O'Donoghue recalled that the crowds that gathered outside Cork prison in this period developed a nightly habit of singing the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers'. This had the purpose, in O'Donoghue's opinion, of banishing 'any conscientious scruples or theological misgivings which the hunger strikers within may have had about their deliberate abstention from food even to death'.<sup>93</sup> Throughout, MacSwiney appears to have been confident of the morality of his actions, but many of the statements attributed to him during the course of the strike seem designed to emphasize his piety and thereby reassure any doubters.<sup>94</sup> On 1 September, Father Dominic told the press that MacSwiney had asked him to convey a message: 'I wish that those who are praying for my release would include in their intentions an appeal to Almighty God to grant me the grace of a happy death and the strength to endure my sufferings in the final hour'. The *Irish Independent's* report concluded that MacSwiney's 'only interests now are preparation for death and news from his fellow-sufferers in Cork Jail'.<sup>95</sup>

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Just as it was important to demonstrate that the strikers' actions were honest and that they were pious, it was crucial that their deaths should be presented as patriotic and manly. Consequently, very often, piety and patriotism were wedded in the presentation of events. This is true of a statement released to mark the fortieth day of the strike — a moment of obvious significance to those religiously minded. MacSwiney, speaking on behalf of his colleagues at Cork also, included the paragraph: 'we forgive all those who are encompassing our death. This battle is fought with a clean pure heart purely for our country. We have made our peace with God, and bear illwill to no man.'<sup>96</sup> The fifty-seventh day of the strike was the occasion of another statement; this one took the form of a message to his colleagues in Cork asking them to join him in prayer, a prayer that concluded:

I offer everything Thou askest for Ireland's resurrection; it is Thy Will. Accept our willing sacrifice for our people. May we in dying bring glory to Thy Name, and honour to our Country that has always been faithful to Thee. We rely on Thy Mercy to sustain us in the last moment for the constancy of our martyred people, and the redemption of our Country. God Save Ireland! God save, bless, and guard the Irish Republic to live and flourish and be a model of Government of Truth and Justice to all Nations. May the liberty of the Irish People shine with Thy Glory, oh my God! for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>97</sup>

Dying in a prison hospital was not, however, an obvious example of soldierly patriotism: it may seem to offer all of the downside with none of the glory. In response, sympathisers sought to present MacSwiney's death as an example of how to die for one's country. On 3 September, while MacSwiney was still alive, the *Freeman's Journal* printed a poem by A.E. in which he became a model for all of how to 'go to death alone, slowly and unafraid'.<sup>98</sup> Francis P. Donnelly, a Jesuit, also addressed this concern in 'He Taught us how to Die', which emerged soon after the events. In the ballad, Donnelly took various archetypes of patriotic death, beginning with death in battle, and found them all wanting when compared to MacSwiney's:

In flaming fight when man his man is facing  
And down the line ten thousand madly cheer  
When through his veins the blood goes hotly racing  
Then, death forgotten loses all its fear.  
But let the strife through months of anguish lengthen

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And all be silence save our lonely sigh,  
 Be with us God, our frightened soul to strengthen  
 'Twas so MacSwiney taught us how to die.

Oh! all too swift was Barry's sacred scaffold  
 And swift the guns their gifts to Plunkett sped  
 And hurried graves have often tyrants baffled  
 When Ireland calls to fame her patriot dead  
 But here was one who clung to death's embraces,  
 Who, drop by drop, let all his life go by;  
 Dark Rosaleen, how queenly are thy graces,  
 For thee, he dared death's longest death to die.<sup>99</sup>

In the cases of both MacSwiney and Murphy, former colleagues have suggested that these men's determination in pursuing their hunger strikes derived, at least in part, from a desire to make amends for past failings or 'purge' alleged misdemeanours that might have sullied their reputations as patriots.<sup>100</sup>

In emphasizing MacSwiney's patriotism his family and supporters brought another element of the good death into play: the last words. Writing about the importance of last words to the families and communities of those soldiers who died during the American Civil War, Gilpin Faust has noted that great weight was placed on these because it was believed that the dying used this opportunity to tell the truth and because last words 'imposed meaning on the life narrative they concluded and communicated invaluable lessons' to those left behind.<sup>101</sup> MacSwiney's final words, as regularly recounted in the press, were 'I am dying as a soldier of the Irish Republic. God Save Ireland.'<sup>102</sup> Given that his death had been long anticipated and closely watched, he had had a number of rehearsals. Under the headline 'Patriot's Dying Message', the *Freeman's Journal* of 31 August recounted how Mac Swiney expressed the hope that 'my death may be of greater service to the Irish Republic than the whole of my life's work'.<sup>103</sup>

Reports of Fitzgerald's and Murphy's deaths were also decorated with manly, martial adjectives and phrases. Upon Fitzgerald's death the *Irish Independent* described him as one of 'the gallant band of hunger strikers in Cork jail', but more than that he was an IRA officer and as such, the *Independent* continued, he had 'acted the part of leader with extraordinary courage and fortitude ... A man of brave and robust physique, he battled bravely for the first seven weeks of the strike, and when the strength of some of the other and more youthful prisoners gave way he still held up and encouraged by his word and example.'<sup>104</sup>

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Instead of last words from Murphy, the *Meath Chronicle* quoted his father: 'I am proud that my son Joseph died for Ireland ... If he had been a criminal I would hang my head ... but now I can walk with my head erect through Cork.'<sup>105</sup>

Gilpin Faust begins her book by acknowledging the shared human experience of death, before warning that 'death has its discontinuities as well. Men and women approach death in ways shaped by history, by their culture, by conditions that vary over time and across space. Even though "we all have our dead", and even though we all die, we do so differently from generation to generation and from place to place.'<sup>106</sup> Terence MacSwiney, Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy died in a certain way at a certain time, and they, their families, their friends and their supporters were conscious of this. The manner in which MacSwiney has dominated this story for posterity to the exclusion of the other strikers is bound up with the unmistakably successful efforts made by him, those around him at the time, and others since, to use these circumstances to create a martyr. The representation of his death was obviously an important element in this. On the day after he died, a cartoon in the *Freeman's Journal* by Shemus depicted Lloyd George and a figure — perhaps Hibernia, perhaps death — standing at the door of MacSwiney's prison cell as the figure tells Lloyd George: 'Hush, little man. You know how to live, but my concern is with one greater than you — one who knows how to die.'<sup>107</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to focus on the work of martyr creation to the exclusion of the other, more immediate, purposes that the hunger strikers, their families and the nationalist movement had as they attempted to shape perceptions of the deaths. In seeking to ensure that these deaths were seen as good deaths, they attempted to influence how these men would be remembered. And, indeed, to influence what would be forgotten. But in returning to these men's efforts to achieve a good death and by placing these efforts in detailed context, it becomes clear that their primary audiences were contemporaries. They wanted to establish that the strikers' protest was honest because it was suggested otherwise. They trumpeted the Christian character of the deaths because the strikers faced the charge that their deaths were not Christian deaths, and emphasized that dying on hunger strike was a manly, patriotic manifestation of death precisely because it did not conform to the contemporary models for such a death. As they did this, the manner in which future generations of nationalists, never mind how historians, might regard them, mattered a whole lot less than their worries about how the doctors were treating the strikers, whether priests would minister to them, whether the strikers could reconcile

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themselves to the death that faced them, and whether their families and communities would approve, or at least not disapprove publicly, of their actions. Those who have been created martyrs eventually come to exist outside of time, part of an ahistorical tradition or elite. It is important to remember, however, that these men died but once and in very particular circumstances.

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