

THOMAS MacCURTAIN

by Mike McCormack

Born 20 March 1884 in the small Co. Cork town of Mourné Abbey, Tomas grew up with a love of his native land and studied her history alongside classmate Terrence MacSwiney. Both he and Terry Mac, as he called him, would serve as Lord Mayors of Cork and leave an indelible mark not only on Cork, but on Ireland and the world! Devoted to Irish culture and independence, Tomas joined the Gaelic League in 1902 and the Sinn Féin League in 1907. In 1908, he married Elizabeth Walsh, a Gaelic League student who was as nationalist as he and became a valued ally. After Tom Clarke revitalized the IRB in 1908, Tomas became an active member and even joined Fianna Éireann in 1911 as Treasurer. A gifted fiddle player and organizer, he was an asset to every group.

After two daughters, Elizabeth gave him a son whom he named Patrick. At age 3, Patrick took ill and died on 25 November 1913 – the day the Irish Volunteers were formed in Dublin. Tomas, with his grieving family, missed that meeting and tragedy followed as Elizabeth, pregnant at the time, gave birth the following month to a stillborn son! The effect on the couple was severe and they threw themselves into working for Ireland's freedom even harder. In December, the first Cork meeting of the Irish Volunteers was held by Tomas' friend, John Joe Walsh and he joined. However, because of his Volunteer activities, Walsh was banished from Cork in May 1915. He moved to Dublin and became Vice-Commander of the Hibernian Rifles affiliated with the American AOH. Tomas became the Volunteers organizing secretary and even formed a Pipe Band among them. By 1914, they were a formidable force and even received some of the guns smuggled into Howth Harbor.

When Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond split the Volunteers in September 1914, offering his followers to the British Army in WWI, Tomas was adamant that the Volunteers only fight for Ireland, not England! Elizabeth, as his personal secretary agreed; the sorrow they had shared in 1913 strengthened the bond between them and they worked on the crest of a wave that was headed for action. In late 1914, Tomas became Volunteer Brigade Commander and Terry Mac Vice-Commander. Elizabeth gave birth to a son, Tomás Óg, on 16 June 1915.

The performance of the Cork Volunteers at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in Dublin on 1 August 1915 was impressive and on 23 November, Tomas led a parade to commemorate the Manchester Martyrs hanged that date in 1867. Maj. John MacBride complimented them; Tomas and Terry Mac were the pride of the Cork Brigade. Meanwhile, Volunteer activity caused the British to react and leaders were arrested, exiled or harassed. Tomas' home was constantly raided and searched between midnight and dawn to cause the most distress. Mattresses were tossed and slashed open and dressers emptied on the floor as guns in the candlelight terrified the children, frightened Elizabeth and angered Tomas.

The Cork Brigade was readying for a rising on Easter Sunday, 1916 when orders came from Volunteer Chief of Staff, Eoin MacNeill, to stand down. Frustrated, Tomas learned that the scheduled arrival of arms in Kerry had been foiled and Roger Casement was captured. Reluctantly he sent his men home to await further orders. After learning that the Rising had taken place he knew that the Brits would come for his men; he led them to defend the Volunteer Hall Headquarters. The British surrounded the hall and demanded their surrender or they would shell the building; Tomas refused. The local Bishop and Lord Mayor intervened and guaranteed that the surrender of arms would defuse the situation, amnesty would be given to all Volunteers and arms would be returned after the crisis in Dublin was resolved. Trusting the Bishop and Lord Mayor, the Volunteers surrendered their arms and left the hall. Then, instead of the promised amnesty, the British stepped up action against them; Tomas blamed himself for ignoring the history of past British betrayals. He and Terry Mac were arrested and on 31 May 1916, sent to Frongoch Prison Camp where they renewed acquaintance with another Cork Man – Michael Collins.

Despite their absence, their homes were constantly raided. Then, on 24 December 1916, Tomas was released. The damage to the Volunteer movement was significant and Tomas and Terry Mac began rebuilding it. On 26 February, District Inspector Swanzy arrested them both once more and exiled them to small towns in England. On 21 June 1917, they were released and returned to a new, more nationalist Ireland. After the executions of the 1916 leaders, all things Irish – books, songs and historical writings – were in demand. Even Sinn Féin found more support and began to contest elections. The reinvigorated Cork Volunteers openly defied a ban on public assembly on 21 October as Tomas and Terry Mac led a 1000-Volunteer march from their old Hall to Blarney. Tomas then attended a Volunteer Convention in Dublin and, on his 30 October return, was arrested and held without charge until Christmas. Hearing that he was to be lifted again, he went on the run in March. After a year, he learned that the authorities had reduced oppressive activity as a result of Parliamentary concern over growing world opinion

In January 1919, Tomas returned to Volunteer activity. Meanwhile, after a Sinn Fein landslide in the December election, an independent Dail Eireann parliament was formed and Michael Collins came to Cork to see Tomas. The War of Independence was on and the Volunteers were now the Irish Republican Army in which he was to remain an officer. On 30 January, at the county elections, Terry Mac nominated Tomas and he was unanimously elected the first Republican Lord Mayor of Cork; the tricolor went up over city hall. He reorganized the city administration just as Henry Ford, son of a Cork exile, opened a factory providing great employment. After attending a Harvest Festival on 19 March, Tomas stopped at the Hall as Elizabeth, who was once again pregnant, took the family home to secretly prepare a cake for a surprise 36th birthday party she planned for him the next day. Her mother, brother and sister, who were staying with them, went off to bed, then the children and finally Elizabeth. She heard Tomas when he arrived later and came to bed.

It seemed, she had just closed her eyes when a loud banging on the door woke her. She jumped out of bed, told Tomas to stay put and went to the head of the stairs calling "*Who's there?*"; a loud voice shouted "*Come Down.*" She put on her robe as Tomas began putting on his pants. She ran down the stairs wondering what could be so urgent that they had to call on the Lord Mayor at 1 AM. As she reached the door, shattered glass and splintered wood greeted her as men with blackened faces burst in shouting, "*Where's MacCurtain!*" She replied "*Upstairs*" as rough hands held her and six men rushed up the stairs. The commotion roused the children who were screaming for their mother as the men went to Tomas bedroom and shots rang out! Tomas staggered in the doorway and Elizabeth scrambled up the stairs as the black-faced men ran down pushing the pregnant woman before them out into the street. Her brother, Jimmy, was shouting for police from the upper window when a voice from across the road ordered "*Fire*" and bullets drove him back into the house. He went to console Tomas as the children were hysterical around their father. "*Yer only wounded boy*" he said to Tomas whose head was cradled in the arm of Elizabeth's sister Annie. "*Get a doctor*" "*Get a Priest!*" he shouted. Minutes later, Father Butts pushed his way through the crowd gathered outside the house and raced up the stairs to administer the last rights. Tomas opened his eyes and whispered, "*Into thy hands O Lord, I commend my spirit.*" There was absolute silence as Elizabeth leaned over to whisper to him the words he had often used to comfort her, "*Remember darling, it's all for Ireland.*" Tomas sighed and closed his eyes for the last time. Tomas MacCurtain, the first Republican Lord Mayor of Cork had been murdered in front of his pregnant wife, his children and his loving family members on the morning of his 36th birthday!

Elizabeth cleaned the body and laid it out on clean white sheets; Tomas looked at peace. As the family knelt by the bedside in a vigil of prayer, a banging on the door interrupted them. Elizabeth opened the shattered door to policemen who announced they had come to search the house. Elizabeth shouted, "*My husband has just been shot dead*", but they pushed past her and ran up the stairs and into the bedroom where Tomas lay. They pulled up the mattress to look underneath and the still warm body of the Lord Mayor was tossed onto the floor. The house was in utter shock as children cowered in the corner and the baby wailed in her pram. The police found nothing and left the house in disarray. The only weapon in the house was Tomas' pistol in the pram under the baby's mattress. Unopened gifts lay hidden downstairs and the birthday cake, with candles that would never be lit, lay uncut!

The killing caused widespread outrage. The official coroner's inquest identified the men with blackened faces as members of the RIC under Inspector General Oswald Swanzy, who ordered the attack, and they rendered a verdict of willful murder against British Prime Minister Lloyd George and members of the RIC. Swanzy was transferred to the little Protestant town of Lisburn in County Antrim to get him out of harm's way. Tomas' pistol was given to Michael Collins who, in turn, gave it a squad of men with a specific mission. On 22 August 1920, RIC Inspector Swanzy was shot dead with Tomas' MacCurtain's pistol, while leaving a Lisburn Pub, sparking what authors Tim Pat Coogan and Pearse Lawlor (*my Lisburn cousin*) called a "pogrom" against the few Catholics in the town.

Tomas MacCurtain was buried in St. Finbarr's Cemetery, Cork and his successor as Lord Mayor of Cork was his close friend Terence MacSwiney, whose death on hunger strike in London's Brixton prison, two months later, left another indelible mark on Cork, on Ireland and the world; but that's another story!