

MURIEL MACSWINEY ON BALLINGEARY, AND HER LETTERS TO A GRANDSON OF BALLINGEARY

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[For other articles of mine on Muriel MacSwiney, published in 'Irish Political Review', see http://free-magazines.atholbooks.org/.../2.../IPR_April_2006.pdf for "On Fascism, Fact and Fiction - The Case of Muriel MacSwiney and Others; and http://free-magazines.atholbooks.org/.../IPR_August_2006.pdf for "Muriel MacSwiney on 1916"; and http://free-magazines.atholbooks.org/.../IPR_November_2008.pdf for "Muriel MacSwiney - Three Unpublished Letters"; and http://free-magazines.atholbooks.org/.../IPR_November_2009.pdf for "On Press Suppression of the Unpalatable"]].

A bare month after the hunger strike death in Brixton Prison of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920), his widow, Muriel Frances Murphy MacSwiney (1892-1982), travelled to the USA, together with her sister-in-law Mary MacSwiney (1872-1942), and possessed the fortitude to give powerful testimony in Washington to the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland, on December 9, 1920. The full transcript can be found as an Appendix to 'Irish Republican Women in America: Lecture Tours 1916-1925', by Joanne Mooney Eichacker (2003).

It must have been particularly harrowing, so soon after her husband's final days, to have to describe them in public. But Muriel also spoke most warmly of Ballingeary, where she and Terry had spent the happiest moments of their married life together. They had been married in England in 1917, while Terry was imprisoned in Brixton Gaol. Following his release, it was to the Cork Gaeltacht village of Ballingeary that they repaired for a honeymoon which, in fact, lasted for three months. As Muriel told the Washington Commission:

"We were married in our own language, the Irish language, the ninth of June 1917. About a fortnight later the men were released. I went back to Ireland with him and then we went off to the country together. And that time was about the only one that we had together, at Ballingeary, in County Cork, a very, very beautiful place out in the country where they still do things in the old Irish way. Some of the old people do not know English yet, I am glad to say, and they are very much the better of it."

The 74 days hunger strike death on October 25, 1920, of Terence MacSwiney - who had been elected to Dáil Éireann in December 1918, and would be elected Lord Mayor of Cork following the R. I. C. murder of Lord Mayor Tomás MacCurtain on March 20, 1920 - came during his final period of frequent imprisonment. MacSwiney was imprisoned April-December 1916, February-June 1917, November-December 1917, March 1918 - March 1919, and was arrested for the last time in August 1920 and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. During a year-long period of Terry's imprisonment, Muriel had given birth to their daughter - Máire MacSwiney Brugha (1918-2012). As Muriel told the Washington Commission:

"Máire was born in June 1918. He was in Dundalk when she was born, but he was moved to Belfast soon afterwards and we had to take her up there to see her father. She was six weeks old. We stayed there about a fortnight. I don't suppose anyone so young had ever been taken into that prison before. She was so young. Her father, of course, was delighted to see her."

It was March 1919 before Terry was freed. And, once again, Ballingearry called. As Muriel went on to relate:

"That was the place where we spent our honeymoon. Because what time we spent in England when we were married we did not count as a honeymoon. When my husband was released in March we went to live in Ballingearry. The little girl was about nine months old. She was beginning to understand what we said to her and we wanted her to speak her own language first. I did not know very much Irish at that time. My husband knew it very well, but I did not know much. I had not made much headway with it. So, we all went to live in this Irish-speaking district. In the towns the Irish language had died out a bit and only the old folks knew it. Do you see this? This is called the Fáinne (indicating a small gold circle on her dress). You can get this ring when you sign a paper and say that you will not speak English to anybody else who has this ring. And after I was back in Ballingearry a while I got this ring. And after I got it, I never spoke a word of English to my husband or to the baby, now about two and one half years old. She speaks Irish. In this district where I was, there are a lot of tourists and they speak English, of course. But for the last three months I was there I never spoke a word of English to anybody. Of course, my husband was there then and he never spoke a word of English either. We gave one of these rings to the baby when she was born, so that she would always speak her own language. We had to take it away from her because she put it in her mouth, but I think it is time to give it to her again. We returned to Cork in November 1919. I should like to say that while we were in Ballingearry the English soldiers and police twice raided her house we were living in at 4 o'clock in the morning. Luckily my husband was not there either time. He used to go back and forth from Cork."

In the Spring of 1962, when not yet thirteen years of age, I was privileged to meet Muriel MacSwiney on a visit to our family home. My father, Micheál O'Riordan (1917-2006), was the Cork City son of Ballingeary parents - Micheál O'Riordan of Inchinossig and Julia Creed of Illaninagh. But it was in his capacity as the then General Secretary of the Irish Workers' Party, and future General Secretary of the reunited Communist Party of Ireland, that Muriel MacSwiney was primarily visiting him, for she had been an early post-War political supporter of this Spanish Anti-Fascist War veteran. As another supporter, the playwright Sean O'Casey, put it on May 21, 1951: "Michael O'Riordan is his own message. He has all the decent and daring qualifications to represent the people; therefore he'll find it damned hard to win a way for them. He looks a sturdy lad, as, of course, those who fought for Republican Spain were sturdy lads. He has nothing to sell but his soul, and he isn't likely to do that; though he'll be told he'll lose it by holding on to it."

Muriel had the patience to include me in the conversation that ensued in the O'Riordan home. She explained that, in English, she had disliked her given name, Muriel, preferring her second name, Frances. The Irish language was quite another matter. When she met and fell in love with Terry, and he explained to her that the Irish form of her name, Muirgheal, broke down as "muir gheal", meaning "bright sea", she took to that Irish form, and it was as Muirgheal she would write to me in those few letters we would subsequently exchange.

Writing to me from London on March 28, 1962, Muriel addressed me in old Gaelic script and apologised that the letter was not "as Gaolainne". She asked after my sister Brenda, my mother, Kay Keohane O'Riordan (1910-1991), and my maternal aunt and godmother, Máire Keohane Sheehan (1909-1975). Muriel wrote:

"I should be delighted if you would write me asking me for any information you want . You will get the answers. I was in the Irish movement from 1915, until the end of '23 when I went to live in Germany. (I am still in it in the way your father & mother are.) I think we should know our history, especially when all knowledge of it has been suppressed so long by a foreign usurping power, but what is more important is what we are doing in the present day, & preparing for the future. Therefore people of your age are the most vital. Your father and your aunt from Cork made grand speeches at the (Party) Congress. With all best wishes to your parents and your nice sister."

She concluded: "Le meas mór, Muirgheal Bean Mhic Suibhne. (You, unfortunately, must write my name as Béarla, or the Sassenach does not understand.)"

On April 7, 1962, Muriel's second letter to me was postmarked Tonbridge, the Kent market town residence of Alex Blakelock (1926-2009) - her daughter by Pierre Kaan (1903-1945). He was a French Jewish Communist, and they had been active together in the Communist Party of Germany. Muriel, however, left Germany in 1932, getting out in advance of the imminent achievement of power by the Nazi Party. In my own letter, dated April 1, I had asked Muriel two questions: the first as to whether she had known any people who had witnessed and spoken of the Famine, and the second about Germany. She replied:

"The best thing I read about the famine was Arthur Griffith's introduction to John Mitchel's 'Jail Journal'. This was a new edition in 1914 or '15. Terry lent it to me when we hardly knew one another. My father used to say that the people were dying everywhere of what was called "famine fever". I think he was about 20 at the time. All my family, although entirely Irish by race (Ó Murchadha), were West Britons, English Imperialists, but I think now that my father was a Liberal & did not like the famine. The Irish famine was not caused by the failure of the potato crop, that happened all over Western Europe. There were however plenty of crops in Ireland (wheat, barley etc) which the capitalists in Ireland exported to make money & thus caused the famine. I shall write you a longer letter about Germany. The Germans were, & perhaps still are, the most unpolitically minded people in the world, that is why they voted for the Nazis, the voting was free at the time."

Earlier in that letter, Muriel had written: "I too much prefer to obtain information by word of mouth, except when I want to pin down a lying propagandist when one has to keep the printed text of what they have said. I will be in Dublin again & we can have another talk."

Regrettably, we never had that second meeting. Nor did I come back to her on the "German question" in any further correspondence. My third and final letter from Muriel was dated April 4, 1966, and was in response to an enquiry from me if she would be coming to Dublin on the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. She replied:

"I am not coming over for the 50th anniversary of 1916. I consider that not alone after 50 year, but 5, there should be proper conditions especially for the children, free health services, good schools, full employment (not having to quit our own Éire to be able to live, we had it during the English reign), Religious Freedom... A very disgraceful thing has happened in connection with the 50th anniversary. I expect you will know that Tom Clarke was chosen (at a private meeting of the leaders before the Rising) as the President of the Irish Republic. I know this from my husband and Cork volunteers etc; and although your father is so much younger I think he will also be aware of it. All the Dublin papers

published a letter from me to this effect a short time ago. Well, we are not allowed by the government to honour our great President. There is an old man living, I suppose, not so far from you, J. Clarke... He was in prison with my husband. He wrote a very good letter to me saying that he had known Tom Clarke personally well, and that of course he was chosen as President. However Clarke has not sent this to any of the papers and has not protested to the Government... Tom Clarke was a Fenian aged 16. They were kept for years in solitary confinement, and some lost their reason. A small number had escaped to America and did not suffer this. T Clarke after being released went to the USA and married the daughter and niece of Fenians (especially the uncle John Daly), Limerick, famous. They came back to Éire and had a small tobacconist and newspaper shop in O'Connell St., at the corner beyond Parnell's monument."

"Well, don't do this if there is any reason against it, but if you could go to see J Clarke and ask him from me why he did not protest to the Government? I should be grateful. You can tell him that although I have nothing to do with them, that I wrote to Lemass protesting, and I had a reply. Pearse was military Commandant of all Ireland, not President, and Connolly Commandant of Dublin. Your father will know I think why Cork was not in the glorious 1916 Rising, but Cork did make up for this later. It is for this reason also - Tom Clarke's not getting what he more than deserves - which prevents me being in Dublin 1966."

Joe Clarke had been a hero of the 1916 Rising battle of Mount Street Bridge and was now Vice-President of the then Sinn Féin that recognised neither State nor Government. In any case, I was too much in awe of him to present him with any ultimatum from Muriel. Moreover, I subsequently came to the conclusion that they were both mistaken on the issue of who was President, and that, despite Tom Clarke's widow's wish to have him recognised as such, Tom Clarke himself had concluded that a single chain of command made the most sense.

(See <https://www.historyireland.com/volume-22/heckling-dev/> for when I did get involved with Joe Clarke in 1969: the plan for him to heckle President de Valera at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Dáil Éireann, demanding that the Government release the homeless housing activist Dennis Dennehy, then on hunger strike in Mountjoy Gaol, and also being supported by Muriel MacSwiney.)

My last, 1966, letter from Muriel had been postmarked France, where she was once more active in Communist politics, and alternating between living in Paris and the Breton commune of Plestin-les-Grèves. She enclosed a bulletin from her local Communist Party cell, and wrote:

"It is my little corner of Brittany, full of wicked communists like myself. The same is true of many other parts; & the Party in France is very large as you probably know. De Gaulle is being very good in his

foreign policy. I don't approve of career officers, which he is, or of political Catholics, which he also is, altho' rather independent; but I do admire him for being a real French nationalist. He could have done what nearly all the French officers did at the time when France was invaded, 1940, go over to the Germans, their hereditary enemy. Same as the English for us Irish. And now he does not see, & neither do I, why France should be swallowed by the United States. I think myself, & so do many French people, that the only real bulwark against the USA Bonn axis is France independent... However, De Gaulle is very bad at present in interior France. There are not enough government credits for schools & hospitals, and altho' a great number of flats have been built they are far too dear. Not like the 3% of wages paid for accommodation in the Soviet Union... Spain is stirring a good deal. The result of the seeds sown by the International Brigade."

Much as I now regret that I missed the boat in 1962 to ask Muriel follow up questions on her intriguing remarks about Germany, I also regret that I never asked her any questions about the wartime French Resistance. It was only last year that I learned of the leading role played by her former partner, Pierre Kaan. For it was in June 2015 that I learned from my friend of fifty years, Muriel and Terence MacSwiney's grandson Cathal MacSwiney Brugha, of how Pierre Kaan had operated and died. Kaan had been among the founders of Libération-Sud. In 1942, following the success of many of his operations, Kaan was made deputy to Jean Moulin, leader of the unified Resistance forces, and given responsibility for safeguarding transport and communication links between Lyon and the occupied half of France. Denounced by a close collaborator in the winter of 1943, Pierre Kaan was arrested by the Gestapo in Paris on 29 December, tortured by them, and then deported to Buchenwald concentration camp. From Buchenwald, Pierre Kaan was later deported to Gleina, where he would be liberated by Czech anti-fascist fighters, only to die a few days later, exhausted and stricken by typhus and T.B., on 18 May 1945.

Forty years subsequent to my last letter from Muriel, I gave an address, on behalf of the International Brigade Memorial Trust, at Figueres fort in Catalunya. It was Easter Sunday, 2006, and I marked not only the 90th anniversary of our own 1916 Rising, but also the 75th anniversary of both the Second Spanish Republic and Catalan autonomy. I recalled the mass demonstrations of solidarity with Terence MacSwiney that had taken place in Catalunya over the course of his hunger strike, and the subsequent solidarity of his widow Muriel with the Spanish Republic. That Easter Sunday was just a month before my father's passing on May 18, 2006, and I also recalled how he had carried the flag of Catalunya at the commencement of the battle of the Ebro in July 1938, and was now, from his hospital bed, sending his greetings to his second homeland, Catalunya. In May 2007, close to his first anniversary, we scattered my father's ashes in the river Ebro, at exactly the same spot where he had carried that flag across the river. On that occasion I sang an adaptation I had done of a poem the French communist poet Louis Aragon had written in honour of the Catalan melody "Santa Espina".

In June 2015 the Government of Catalunya sponsored a conference in Cork City Hall to commemorate the 1920 Catalan solidarity with Terence MacSwiney. A keynote speaker was his grandson Cathal MacSwiney Brugha, whose other illustrious Republican martyr grandfather was, of course, Cathal Brugha (1874-1922). We then proceeded to Cork City Museum, where Cathal showed us the doll - in traditional Catalan dress - that had been sent to his mother as an act of Catalan solidarity with - and comfort for - the infant Máire, during the course of her father's hunger strike. Following that, we next proceeded to St. Finbarr's Cemetery, where Cathal gave an address at the three side-by-side graves of his grandfather Terence Mac Swiney, MacSwiney's predecessor as Cork IRA Commandant and Lord Mayor of Cork - Tomás MacCurtain, and his successor as Cork IRA Commandant - Denis Barry. Cathal then announced that we would now proceed the short distance to another grave - that of my Ballingeary paternal grandparents, Micheál Snr and Julia, my uncles Diarmuid and Donal, and my aunt Nora, and where I had previously placed a very small portion of my father's ashes. Here I once again sang "Santa Espina" - captured on a video recording that can be accessed on the Facebook page of the Catalan writer Toni Strubell, where also can be found a video of Cathal's address at Terence MacSwiney's graveside. At the O'Riordan graveside, Cathal went on to pay tribute to the Anti-Fascist struggles of both his grandmother Muriel MacSwiney and her martyred partner Pierre Kaan. As Cathal pronounced in St. Finbarr's, with such successive graveside ceremonies, we were finally "closing the circle".

- Manus O'Riordan