

TOMAS MAC CURTAIN

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

January 30, 1920 was a happy day for Tomas MacCurtain. He had been elected Lord Mayor of Cork. Born as Thomas Curtin in Ballinknockin, Co. Cork, on 20th March 1884, he began using the Gaelic version of his name, Tomas MacCurtain, when he joined the Gaelic League in Blackpool, Cork City in 1901. By 1902 he was the group's Secretary. He was also a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (American Alliance) in Cork City and rose to be the Division President. Tomas was interested in Irish history and was a bagpiper as well as an accomplished violinist and often played in an orchestra. This brown-haired, blue-eyed Irishman had great determination.

After he left school he worked at Marks Mills in Crosses Green and in his spare time he taught the Irish language to those wishing to learn. He met Eilish Walsh, also active in the Gaelic League, and they married on 28th June 1908. They had 5 children and lived at 40 Thomas Davis St in the northern part of Cork City.

By 1911, he was involved in the running of Fianna Eireann, and he became a Volunteer in 1914. He fought for Irish freedom and for that cause served prison terms in 1916 and 1917 in Wakefield, Frongoch and Reading Jail in England. He became Commandant of the Cork Brigade of the IRA which grew so large that on Jan 5, 1919, it was divided into 3 Brigades with Michael Collins presiding over the meeting. Commandant MacCurtain was left to command Cork Brigade No 1 and Tom Hales became Commandant of Cork Brigade No 3. The following day, MacCurtain presided over a meeting in Mallow to form (North) Cork Brigade No. 2.

Under a policy of ignoring institutions established by the British, the Irish used the legal elections held by the Brits to elect their own representatives, and establish their own Parliament instead of sitting in Westminster or accepting Crown appointed officials. On January 31, 1920, elections were held in Cork City, and Sinn Fein dominated local councils. Tomas was elected by his Ward and was chosen to be Lord Mayor of Cork City. The Brits were furious. Tomas began implementing changes with a mind toward the dream of a free Ireland.

On March 19, 1920, at 11 PM, a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary was shot and killed on Pope's Quay, Cork. Some hours later (just after 1 AM, March 20) men disguised with blackened faces burst into the MacCurtain home and shot the Lord Mayor in his bed. In the house at the time were Mrs. MacCurtain, her children, her brother, 3 sisters, 2 nieces and a nephew, and her invalid mother Mrs. Walsh. Tomas' sister-in-law Annie came down the stairs with a Crucifix and holy water. They knelt down and prayed by the lifeless body, Annie holding her arm under Tomas' head. He was bleeding from around the region of the heart. Annie described how they remained praying until the priest came in response to Mrs. MacCurtain's telephone call. *I called on the Sacred Heart to spare him, at least until the priest would come, Annie said. When the priest came I went away for a few minutes, but came back then to see him die. His last words were: "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit"*.

Tomas died just after receiving the Last Rites. Such was public reaction, that the funeral on Monday 22nd March, from the North Cathedral was the largest ever seen in Cork city. Tomas MacCurtain, musician, pioneer of the Gaelic revival movement, Commandant of the Cork Brigade, Sinn Fein member, AOH President, founding member of the Irish Volunteers, was laid to rest in St Finbarr's Church graveyard, in a plot facing the main gate. His personal pistol was given to his friend, Michael Collins. The Cork City Council held an inquiry and indicted the British government for MacCurtain's murder. Among those involved in the murder was RIC District-Inspector Oswald Swanzy, who was secretly transferred to Lisburn in Northern Ireland to safeguard him from retaliation.

However, retaliation was the order of the day as far as Collins was concerned. It took a few months to locate him, but In August, Collins handed Tomas MacCurtain's pistol to a hand-picked team who went north and on August 22, 1920 dealt justice to Inspector Oswald Swanzy from MacCurtain's own gun. Swanzy's death so infuriated the Brits that the entire Catholic section of Lisburn was burned to the ground.

MacCurtain was succeeded in office by Terence MacSwiney – and that's another story.

