

Letter from Terence MacSwiney to Margaret (Peg) MacSwiney, 30 Jan. 1914

Terence MacSwiney Papers,
UCD Archives, P48b/4¹

¹ The original letter and a transcript of its contents (by Conor Mulvagh) are reproduced below.

Terence MacSwiney to Margaret (Peg) MacSwiney, 30 Jan. 1914

Terence MacSwiney Papers, UCD Archives, P48b/4

The poignancy of primary sources is often found in their innocence. Unlike history books, the authors of primary sources write without knowledge of impending events. Thus, we can frequently find in them traces of aspirations unfulfilled and plans that were interrupted by the course of subsequent events.

The first of a monthly series of 'From the Archives' documents (Revolutionary Decade Archival Collection) finds a 35 year old Terence MacSwiney writing to his sister Margaret (Peg), a nun then living in America and working as a teacher while writing a doctoral dissertation on the German philosopher and Nobel laureate, Rudolf Eucken. It would appear from the Morin Chavasse's 1961 biography of Terence MacSwiney that the letter found its way into Terence MacSwiney's papers when Chavasse made contact with Margaret in writing his biography of Terence in the 1950s. MacSwiney's letter focuses on literary matters with both Terence and Margaret looking forward to the publication of their respective works. 'Well, Peg, if you and I both publish books this year, you in America and I in Ireland, wont it be a sensation for our friends and relatives on both sides of the Atlantic.' (p. 8).

By October 1920, MacSwiney would be dead. The hunger strike that caused his death made him one of the best known figures within Irish republicanism on the international stage at the time. The prominence and media interest generated by his hunger strike, which lasted 74 days, from 12 August to 25 October 1920, was unsurpassed in the period. In the history of hunger strike as a tactic in Irish politics, arguably only the name of Bobby Sands is more recognisable in public memory today than that of MacSwiney. As Lord Mayor of Cork, and having come into this appointment through the violent death of his predecessor and close friend, Tomás MacCurtain, MacSwiney rapidly became the most high-profile inmate in the British criminal justice system in the autumn of 1920.

As the commemorative calendar of 2014 moves towards the very beginning of the ‘age of violence’, ushered in by the Ulster crisis in Ireland and the First World War in Europe, it is important to look back at the *status quo ante bellum*, and to examine the way in which future participants thought and acted prior to committing themselves wholly into political and military struggles. In interpreting the Ireland of 1914, it is important that events and personalities should not be seen purely in an island context but rather through the lens of European and global transformations. By 1914, the era of European empires was passing with the close of the ‘long nineteenth century’ and the beginning of the twentieth. The ‘freedom’ to which MacSwiney devotes so much of this letter is analogous to sentiments of nationalism, revolution, and self-determination which flowed from the mouths and pens of figures as diverse as Gavrillo Princip, Lenin, and even Woodrow Wilson in the years after this 1914 letter was composed.

Likewise, MacSwiney’s comments on materialism and the conflict between the working world and literature link into a wider cultural zeitgeist in which thinkers and politicians across Europe struggled with the perceived loss of old-world virtues in a modernising, bureaucratising, and urbanising civilisation. This is a concern shared both by Terence and Margaret MacSwiney. Indeed, Margaret’s dissertation on Rudolf Eucken already mentioned above was a treatise on anti-materialism which did eventually get published in 1915, though not in 1914 as MacSwiney hoped in his letter.

Reflecting the incompatibility of monetary and literary concerns, MacSwiney refers to his distaste for teaching business methods, a post he had taken up full time in 1912 as a travelling commercial instructor with the Cork technical instruction committee. ‘After a lesson on them [business methods], I’m not in the mood for poetry’ (p. 5). What MacSwiney is reflecting is exactly that distaste for a mundane existence that preoccupied many literary and intellectual figures of his generation.

In his poem 'The Volunteer', Herbert Asquith, son of the Prime Minister and an artillery officer during the First World War, wrote of just the same sentiment. His protagonist, a clerk 'toiling at ledgers in a city grey' abandons this life and enlists to fight and die in battle. Asquith concludes:

His lance is broken; but he lies content
With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
And falling thus he wants no recompense...

Yeats too explores the same belief, although with markedly less enthusiasm, in *Easter 1916* where he describes the men who he has seen 'Coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk among grey' to parade as members of the Irish Volunteers. These men were equally caught up in the vogue of militarism and masculinity that brought willing citizens into recruiting offices across Europe in the early phase of the First World War. By the time he wrote this letter Terence MacSwiney was just such a volunteer, having been one of the founder members of the Irish Volunteers in Cork.

MacSwiney was very much part of what Robert Wohl described as 'the generation of 1914'. Like Herbert Asquith's service on the western front, MacSwiney would eventually embark upon his own departure from the life of the ordinary citizen into politics, activism, and ultimately a fatal hunger strike. What is being witnessed in all these cases, and what draws a common thread between them, is that MacSwiney and many of his contemporaries belonged to a generation that came to see military service and conflict as the antidote to the staleness of sedate, commercial, and urbanised life in the Europe of 1914.

In a letter as wide-ranging and rich as this there are any number of themes that could be examined. It illuminates the history of Irish emigration, education, literature, religious faith, and even commemoration; MacSwiney's comments on writing a play to mark the ninth centenary of the Battle of Clontarf are particularly interesting. Unfortunately, it would appear that this play was never completed. However, given the subsequent path taken by Terence MacSwiney, his melancholic remarks on death will strike the reader as particularly prescient. In drawing his letter to a close, he remarks to his sister that 'I may have to make my exit from the stage of life with something undone, which I earnestly pray may not be the case' (p. 7).

This insight into MacSwiney's mindset in 1914 provides an intriguing vignette into his thoughts and outlook just before political developments fundamentally altered the course of his life and eventually cut it short. We might return to Yeats to conclude with a final excerpt from *Easter 1916* suggesting the importance of a letter such as this to understanding its author:

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead

Further reading

Moirin Chavasse, *Terence MacSwiney (with a foreword by Daniel Corkery)* (Dublin, 1961)

Francis J. Costello, *Enduring the most: the life and death of Terence MacSwiney* (Dingle, 1996)

Seamus Deane, 'Yeats and degeneration' in Jacqueline Genet (ed.), *Studies on W.B. Yeats* (Caen, 1989), pp 209-221 (available [here](#)).

Margaret M. MacSwiney, *Rudolf Eucken and the Spiritual Life* (Washington, 1915, e-book available [here](#))

Patrick Maume, 'MacSwiney, Terence' in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (9 vols, Cambridge, 2009, available online at dib.cambridge.org).

Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979)

Riverside,
Blackrock,

Wk 30 Jan 1914.

My dear Ray,

It will give me great pleasure to send
the presentation copy of "The Music of Freedom" as you
desire - it will go by this post - but ~~you~~ I must
make a few remarks about it which you will please
repeat to your friend when it arrives.

It is just on seven years ago since
the book was published. It is a first attempt, immature
and not "literature" in the sense that we use the
word when we speak of great things. I'm not
too modest to make some high comparisons. Browning
would not admit "His first poem" "Pauline" to the
list of his works. He began with the next "Paracelsus",
I think. Shelley always objected to being judged by
his first poem "Queen Mab". I speak from memory
but think I'm right. It is a common case. With
some rare exceptions most beginnings are crude
and immature. A writer has more need of
hard apprenticeship than the worker in any
other trade or profession. "The Music of Freedom" is
some of my "apprentice work".

This refers more to the question than to the
 thought. I am more firm now if anything on the question of
 reason and than then - perhaps I've developed more and
 gone wider and deeper. That remains to be seen.
 It will be sufficient, I think, if I let the book
 go - mentioning its immaturity and how long it
 is written and let it win what commendation
 it may on its merits.

Though it's not necessary - for me to go into
 an examination of it, a few general points may be
 laid down. Abstract principles are best dealt with in
 a book on metaphysics or some philosophical treatise.
 In poetry we must come down to the concrete; must
 touch flesh and blood to reach the heart and reaching
 the heart mount to the soul. When we introduce
 living people and the experience of humanity, every single
 word or turn may call up a situation of the
 reader's own and touch all the keys of life, and
 the reader is led moved and reanimated. When
 this is done we have not merely written a book,
 we have made literature.

(2) Another thing: we must not labour the
 obvious or be hackneyed. This is not by any means
 a simple matter even when work is original; for
 exposition is always necessary. Every line of a book

can't be absolutely new. Something that is obvious must be said to lead up to what is not obvious; this I would say is one of the writer's greatest difficulties - how far to go and where to draw the line. Popular writers get on the difficulty by being obvious all the time, but playing up to a sentimental appeal.

Now I am off on the general question of literary values and principles! However, the writing and publishing of "The Mosaic of Freedom" did me great service. I got some useful criticism and learned that it was necessary to read and study the great models, and I had done so to some purpose. I had not previously made any critical study of literature. In this I made amends by going deeply into the matter and reading some of the best works of criticism and the philosophy of literature - Plato, Aristotle, Grotius, Lessing, Cousin, Hegel, Rodenbach, Schelling, Lamb, Arnold, Pater - to mention some of the best. A course such as the kind of deep reading these others in plenty - good, meddling and worthless. I have a fair idea now of what is needed even when I fall far short of it. Much of the play writing I've done has been little better than practice; but the one I'm about to publish is an effort on a larger scale

© UCD Archives P48b/4

and I'm wondering what its fate will be.

When you suggest a possible opening in America you touch a hope of mine - how ardent. Peg, pray for it, the opening, somewhere - pray, pray, pray. Peter suggested America in a recent letter and I mean to ask him for some information about American theatre actors and plays. You set my thought on it again with your suggestion. I suppose you wouldn't have ways of getting information of this kind. I want an opening - oh, how badly! I don't lack patience I think, but time won't wait. Politicians don't get old till after 60; but writers and athletes begin to age after 30. I'm just on 35-35 and still practically beginning. To be held down in the teens is good discipline but when that age is doubled to be still hoping is the sort of thing to extinguish one. Am I near the turning-point? Again, Peg, pray it may be so.

It was a great boon to get out of Berlin, and I have more free time now. But going about so much wastes time; the travelling is tiring; and the class being night classes and optional are often tiring and very fatiguing. Then I should like to make the

teaching profession a success for my spare time to looking up new textbooks, keeping abreast of things generally; but I want my spare time for literature; and trying to do both is very wearing and often very depressing. I keep on hoping the corner will soon come.

And Commercial teaching gives you no chance of appealing to the ideal in people. Not satisfaction is shut out. It aims at material welfare and the world will find that material and hateful if we continue on our present lines. The material welfare must of course be saved to let I fear other things are being obscured. If I were teaching literature, I might get something to open out on with enthusiasm; - but ~~business methods~~ ^{business methods} and accounting are my chief subjects. After a lesson on them, I'm not in a mood for poetry.

5/ all this gives you a hint of an American public! You see you touched a secret spring. In Ireland the book buying public is not large. I should not write for the English public, - so the chance of an American public raises a hope. As matters are to publish in Ireland I must save money to pay the cost in advance. I was very fortunate for the past couple of summers in

being sent on ground that enabled me to effect fairly considerable saving in expenses. I put all this down for my publishing project; and it enabled me put the present work in motion; but I'm still effecting economies for there's still more to pay. The conditions are half cost in advance, the balance on the eve of publication. I've paid £15; about as much again must be forthcoming later on. The entire expense of publishing will be such that I shall be fortunate if I recover it even if the edition is all sold. If I do recover it I'll be satisfied as this would finance me for another venture. I can't effect the same saving this year owing to a change of ground - though I may do a little. So you see I'm always in a clump of problems.

b/ You ask about 'The Last Warriors of Lwile'. This is not printed but if it's of any service to you - I may have another typed copy. It occurred to me already that it might be good for school production. Should you ever care to try the experiment, of course you have my ~~express~~ permission. My first plays I may publish later on in one volume - for the present I'm more anxious to issue new plays separately on a larger and more

ambitious scale. I actually have ^{another} ~~time~~ designed now which I hope to complete this year. It is on the subject of Brian & Molachy and their struggle with the Danes, which ended in the Danish overthrow at Clontarf. The battle of Clontarf was fought on 23rd April 1014; the ninth centenary falls this year. I had a fleeting hope last year that I might have the play now designed ready for the anniversary, but that is out of the question. The play which is being printed occupies me longer than I had reckoned.

It would be good work to have the Brian play finished within this year - that's my hope now. The work of composition, writing and revision is so exacting that to do ~~it~~ justice I really would want my whole time for it - otherwise I may have to make my exit from the stage of life with something undone, which I earnestly pray may not be the case.

(well, it's true I said a word about yourself. We were delighted to hear of your progress with the treatise and most interested in everything. I do feel assured it will be a great success. You are wise, I think, to follow the new lines suggested.

by Dr Pace in touching a particular writer. You did not mention his name but if he is a modern you keep abreast of the time and true to the post by criticising him in the light of ancient Truth. Dr Pace may have his own reasons which it would probably be a very good thing for you to satisfy. Well, Peg, if you and I both publish books this year, you in America and I in Ireland, won't it be a sensation for our friends and relatives on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since I began the letter news has come of a most unexpected and terrible shock to the Cahills. Kitty Cahill who was teaching in England was taken suddenly and dangerously ill. Marren went over. News came ~~that~~ to say Kitty was out of danger and turning round; and the next message came to say she was dead.

Her people were reassured and then the terrible news of the end came. Altho' it is very sad, and poor Kitty had a post engaged for next year. Minnie will send you all details.

I must close up now, my dear Peg. I hope Sister Vincent will be pleased with the 'house'. With remembrance from us for your work and asking your prayers for mine I remain
Your loving brother Jerry.

Transcription of UCD Archives P48b/4
Terence MacSwiney to Margaret ('Peg') MacSwiney
30 Jan. 1914

1

Riverside

Blackrock

Cork 30th Jan 1914

My dear Peg,²

It will give me great pleasure to send the presentation copy of 'The Music of Freedom'³ as you desire – it will go by post – : but ~~you~~ I must make a few remarks about it which you will please repeat to your friend when it arrives.

It is just on seven years ago since the book was published. It is a first attempt, immature and not "literature" in the sense that we use the word when we speak of great things. I'm not too modest to make some high comparisons. Browning would not admit "P his first poem "Pauline" to the list of his works. It began with the next – "Paracelsus", I think. Shelley always objected to being fudged by his first poem "Queen Mab." I speak from memory but thing I'm right. It is a common case. With some rare exceptions, most beginnings are crude and immature. A writer has more need of hard apprenticeship than the worker in any other trade or profession. "The Music of Freedom" is some of my 'prentice work.

[end p. 1]

2.

² Margaret MacSwiney was the fifth of seven surviving children born to John and Mary (née Wilkinson). Two further children did not survive infancy. Terence MacSwiney was the fourth surviving child and the first to be born in Ireland (Cork), his three older siblings having been born in England while his father taught in London.

³ Cuireadóir [Pseud., Terence MacSwiney], *The Music of Freedom* (Cork, 1907).

This refers more to the execution than to the thought. I am more firm [deleted word] if anything on the question of freedom now than then – perhaps I’ve developed more and gone wider and deeper. That remains to be seen. It will be sufficient, I think, if I let the book go – mentioning its immaturity and how long it is written and let it earn what commendation it may on its merits.

Though it’s not necessary for me to go into an examination of it, a few general points may be laid down. Abstract principles are best dealt with in a book on metaphysics or some philosophical treatise. In poetry we must come down to the concrete; must touch flesh and blood to reach the heart and reaching the heart mount to the soul. When we introduce living people and ^{the} experience of humanity, every single word or turn may call up a situation of the reader’s own and touch all the keys of life; and
(2) the reader is held moved and reanimated. When this is done, we have not merely written a book, we have made literature.

Another thing: we must not labour the obvious [word deleted] or be hackneyed. This is not by any means a simple matter even when work is original; for exposition is always necessary. Every line of a book
[end p. 2]

3.
can’t be absolutely new. Something that is obvious must be said to lead up to what is not obvious: this I would say is one of the writer’s greatest difficulties – how far to go and where to draw the line. Popular writers get over the difficulty by being obvious all the time, but playing up to a sensational appeal.

Here, I am off on the general question of literary

values and principles! However, the writing and publishing of “The Music of Freedom” did me great service. I got some useful criticism and learned that it was necessary to read and study the great models, and I have done so to some purpose. I had not previously made any critical study of literature. For this I made amends by going deeply into the poets and reading some of the best works of criticism and the philosophy of literature – Plato, Aristotle, Coleridge, Lessing, Cousin, Hegel, Wordsworth, Shelley, Lamb, Arnold, Pater – to mention some of the best. A course such as this involves also reading [deleted word] others in plenty – good, middling and worthless. I have a fair idea now of what is needed even when I fall far short of it. Much of the play writing I’ve done has been little better than practice: but the one I’m about to publish is an effort on a larger scale [end p. 3]

4

and I’m wondering what its fate will be.

When you suggest a possible opening in America you touch a hope of mine – how ardent – Peg, pray for it, the opening, somewhere – pray, pray, pray. Peter⁴ suggested America in a recent letter and I mean to ask him for some information about American theatres actors and plays. You set my thought on it again with your suggestion. I suppose you wouldn’t have ways of getting information of this kind. I want an opening – oh how badly! I don’t lack patience, I think, but time won’t wait. Politicians don’t get old till after 60; but writers and athletes begin to age after 30. I’m just on 35 – 35 and still practically beginning. To be held down in the teens is good discipline but when that age is doubled to be still hoping is the sort of thing to extinguish one. Am I

⁴ Presumably Peter MacSwiney, their elder brother.

4 near the turning-point? Again, Peg, pray it may be so.

It was a great boon to get out of Dwyer's,⁵ and I have more free time now. But going about so much wastes time; the travelling is tiring; and the classes being night classes and optional are often trying and very fatiguing.⁶ Then I should like to make the
[end p. 4]

5.

teaching profession a success, give my spare time to looking up new textbooks, keeping abreast of things generally: but I want my spare time for literature; and trying to do both is very wearing and often very depressing. I keep on hoping the corner will soon come.

And commercial teaching gives you no chance of appealing to the ideal in people. That satisfaction is shut out. It aims at material welfare and the world will grow more material and hateful if we continue on our present lines. The material welfare must of course be seen to but I fear other things are being obscured. If I were teaching literature, I might get something to open out on with enthusiasm; but [word deleted] ^{business methods} and accounting are my chief subjects. After a lesson on them, I'm not in a mood for poetry.

5 All this from your hint at an American public! You see you touched a secret spring. In Ireland the book buying public is not large: I would not write for the English public: – so the chance of an American public raises a hope. As matters are to publish in Ireland I must save money to pay the cost in advance. I was

⁵ Dwyer and Co., Cork, a warehouse and distribution company where MacSwiney worked from 1894 to 1912.

⁶ Initially a part-time lecturer in business methods at the Cork Municipal School of Commerce, MacSwiney took up a full-time post as a travelling commercial instructor for the Cork Joint Technical Instruction Committee in 1912.

very fortunate for the past couple of summers in
[end p. 5]

6

being sent on ground that enabled me to effect fairly considerable saving in expenses. I put all this down for my publishing project; and it enabled me put the present work in motion; but I'm still effecting economies for there's still more to pay. The conditions are half cost in advance, the balance on the eve of publication. I've paid £15; about as much again must be forthcoming later on. The entire expense of publishing will be such that I shall be fortunate if I recover it even if the edition is all sold. If I do recover it, I'll be satisfied as this would finance me for another venture. I can't effect the same saving this year owing to a change of ground – though I may do a little. So you see I'm always in a clump of problems.

6 You ask about "The Last Warriors of Coole".⁷ This is not printed but if it's of any service to you – I may have another typed copy. It occurred to me already that it might be good for school production, should you ever care to try the experiment, of course you have my [word deleted] permission. My first plays I may publish later on in one volume – for the present I'm most anxious to issue new plays separately on a larger and more
[end p. 6]

7

ambitious scale. I actually have ^{another} one designed now which I hope to complete this year.

⁷ The first of MacSwiney's plays to have been staged, it was produced by the Celtic Literary Society (Cork) in 1910. Terence MacSwiney, *The Last Warriors of Coole: a heroic play in one act, the Cork Dramatic Society, plays by Corkery, Robinson, MacSwiney and MacCarthy* (ed. R. Burnham and R. Hogan) (Newark, 1984).

It is on the subject of Brian & Malachy and their struggle with the Danes, which ended in the Danish overthrow at Clontarf. The battle of Clontarf was fought on 23rd April 1014; the ninth centenary falls this year. I had a fleeting hope last year that I might have the play now designed ready for the anniversary – [word deleted] but that is out of the question. The play which is being printed occupied me longer than I had reckoned. It would be good work to have the Brian play finished within this year – that's my hope now. The work of composition writing and revision is so exacting that to do [word deleted] it justice I really would want my whole time for it – otherwise I may have to make my exit from the stage of 7 Life with something undone, which I earnestly pray may not be the case.

Well, it's time I said a word about yourself. We were delighted to hear of your progress with the treatise and most interested in everything.⁸ I do feel assured it will be a great success. You are wise, I think, to follow the new lines suggested [end p. 7]

8

by Dr Pace⁹ in touching a particular writer. You did not mention his name but if he is modern you keep abreast of the time and tune to the past by criticising him in the light of ancient Truth. Dr Pace may have his own reasons which it would probably be a very good thing for you to satisfy. Well, Peg, if you and I both publish books this year, you in America and I in Ireland, won't it be

⁸ Margaret MacSwiney was at that point in the final stages of writing a doctoral dissertation on the German Philosopher, Rudolf Christoph Eucken, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1908. See Margaret M. MacSwiney, *Rudolf Eucken and the Spiritual Life* (Washington, 1915).

⁹ Edward Aloysius Pace, Professor of Psychology and Philosophy, and at that time Dean of the School of Philosophy, at the Catholic University of America.

a sensation for our friends and relatives
on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰

Since I began the letter news has come of a
most unexpected and terrible shock to the Cahills. Kitty
Cahill who was teaching in England was taken suddenly
and dangerously ill. Maureen went over. News came
[word deleted] to say Kitty was out of danger and coming around;
and the next message came to say she was dead.

§ Her people were reassured and then the terrible
news of the end came. Altogether it is very sad, and
poor Kitty had a post engaged for next year. [name illegible]
will send you all details.

I must close up now, my dearest Peg. I hope Sister Vincent
will be pleased with the "Music". With renewed
good wishes for your work and asking your prayer for
mine, I remain,
Your loving brother,

Terry

[end]

¹⁰ In 1914, Terence MacSwiney did publish one of his most famous works, *The Revolutionist*, although there is no reference to it by name in this letter. Terence MacSwiney, *The Revolutionist: a play in five acts* (Dublin, 1914).