

Hunger Strikes

KING: ... *He has chosen death:
Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
Disgrace upon me; for there is a custom,
An old and foolish custom, that if a man
Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve
Upon another's threshold till he die,
The Common People, for all time to come,
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
Even though it be the King's.*

The King's Threshold, a play by W.B. Yeats (1904)

The Irish did not invent the hunger strike; history may even record Mahatma Gandhi as its chief exponent, with his seventeen strikes against British colonial rule. In the 1990's, the hunger strike is more commonly found as a means of protest in the republics of the former Soviet Union than it is in Ireland. No one can deny, however, that dramatic hunger strikes in Ireland since the 1916 Easter Rising have made the world aware of the continuing tension between Ireland and England. To what "foolish custom" was Yeats referring?

W.B. Yeats' play The King's Threshold reminded the Irish of a tradition that dates back to the 7th-8th centuries in Ireland, the era of the Brehon Laws. For a common person to enforce a claim against a person of higher status, the commoner had first to fast against the debtor. The culture of the time made it outrageously disgraceful not to submit to this means of seeking redress and doubly more expensive: "He who refuses to cede what should be accorded to fasting, the judgment upon him, according to the Brehons, [the penalty] is that he pay double the thing for which he was fasted upon." Some sources say this fasting was to last from sunrise to sunrise, not to death or settlement of the claim, but others point to references to achieving justice by starvation. If, as in the Yeats' play, the debtor allows the plaintiff to die, the debtor is responsible for the death.

Christianity also plays a part in the tradition of fasting in Irish culture. Christians are accustomed to fasts, such as at Lent and before communion. The Beatitudes teach the devout to "hunger after justice's sake." St. Patrick often fasted against people to compel them to do justice.

The use of the hunger strike as a political weapon in Ireland exploded after the 1916 Easter Rising. In 1917, Thomas Ashe struck for political prisoner status while in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. Force fed, Ashe died in prison and 40,000 mourners marched in his funeral procession, 9,000 wearing the uniform of the Irish Volunteers. Then in 1920, the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney staged a hunger strike that was followed around the world. MacSwiney, an IRA commander in the Cork area, was arrested at an IRA meeting and sentenced to two years for sedition. Poet, playwright, philosopher, Mayor MacSwiney insisted Britain had no jurisdiction in Ireland. He died after seventy-three days of fasting, believing that "It is not those who inflict the most but those who suffer the most who will conquer." The strike generated a spate of commentary on its efficacy and morality. Those who supported MacSwiney called his act noble, a response to tyranny, and his refusal to eat morally justifiable. Opponents judged the fast to death as suicide and, therefore, morally wrong. The Westminster Gazette's editorial at the time called MacSwiney a martyr and stated, "He has won his battle."

More recently, Bobby Sands, along with nine other inmates of the Maze/Long Kesh Prison in Northern Ireland, fasted unto death in 1981. They too sought political prisoner status. When Sands died after sixty-six days of fasting, many governments and publications from such diverse countries as Spain, France, Russia, Mexico, Mozambique and Poland expressed sympathy for Sands, an elected member of Parliament. The New York Times said he had "bested an implacable British Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher]."

In the face of such committed resistance, kings (governments) usually do not give in. The King in Yeats' play is typical:

*I cannot give way.
Because I am King; because, if I give way
My Nobles would call me a weakling, and it may be,
The very throne be shaken.*

Even the government of Eamon de Valera allowed strikers to die in Irish prisons "rather than the safety of the community be threatened."

Why have so many Irish, loyal to the country they love subjected themselves to self-consuming hunger strikes? Perhaps Yeats answers that question in his play Cathleen ni Houlihan, a play in which [Cathleen ni Houlihan](#) personifies Ireland:

*If anyone would give me himself, he must give me all They that
have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake. ... They shall be
remembered forever/ The people shall hear them forever.*

(Written by John Walsh and originally printed in September 1993)

© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area