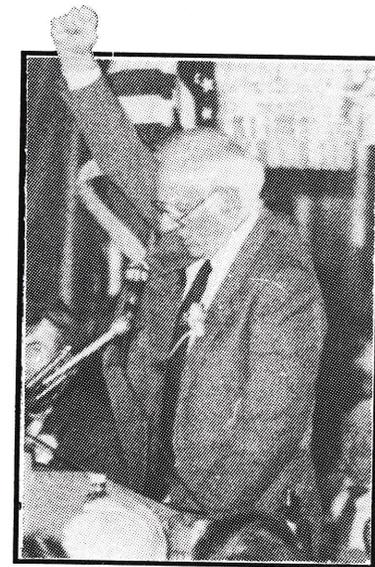


VOLUNTEER
SEAMUS TWOMEY
1919-'89



A Tribute

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Seamus Twomey died on September 12th 1989. One of the foremost IRA soldiers of the last two decades, Seamus, a Volunteer to the very end, was both feared and respected by the British. A modest man, Seamus's many exploits and colourful occurrence will never be fully appreciated until Ireland's freedom is won.

Réamhrá

I first met Seamus Twomey in 1969. We were thrown together, like many others, in the political turmoil of that year. Although he was thirty years older than me (and that seemed a bigger gap then than it does now) he and I became friends. From those days of Belfast pogrom and national upheaval until his death in 1989, in all of the twists and turns of our struggle, our lives were to be intertwined.

I have many memories of Seamus. Memories of exciting times. Times of tension and drama. Sad times. Times of heartbreak and sorrow. Happy times. Times of fun and comradeship and good humour.

This tribute to Seamus it not meant to be a biography. It is much too short for that. Such a study, of a man — one of a tiny handful — who led the Irish Republican Army, must of necessity wait until the struggle is over. This is not Seamus' life story. It is a celebration of his life by friends and comrades. It is personal rather than polemic.

He would be pleased that we would think of commemorating him in this way. That was one of his best qualities. His forcefulness in adversity and his occasional short temper camouflaged his modesty for those who did not know him well. But he always had a sense of his own ordinariness. That should not be lost in the myths created by writers of history and weavers of popular legend. To allow this to happen would be to rob Seamus of his humanity.

It was this humanity, his sense of ordinariness which made him so extraordinary. It is also a reminder that struggles like ours are

fought by ordinary people who are motivated to do extra-ordinary things in a noble cause.

So it was that this ordinary working-class Irish man, a father, later a grandfather, and a husband who loved his family, a lifelong GAA enthusiast with a grá for the Irish language and music, a man who loved a pint, a bet and a bit of craic; so it was that he came to be the leader of an extraordinary army in an extra-ordinary period of our country's history.

At times he was lonely, pitifully so, for his family and his native city. At times the odds against our struggle must have seemed awesome to him. But always he remained resolute, even when his health deserted him.

I visited him many times when he was ill, at different hospitals and houses. He never complained. He faced death with a quiet faith. He knew it was heart-breaking for Rosie, for his sons and daughters and for us to see him becoming weaker. So it was that he cheered us up. So it was in the end that his death, though expected, surprised us.

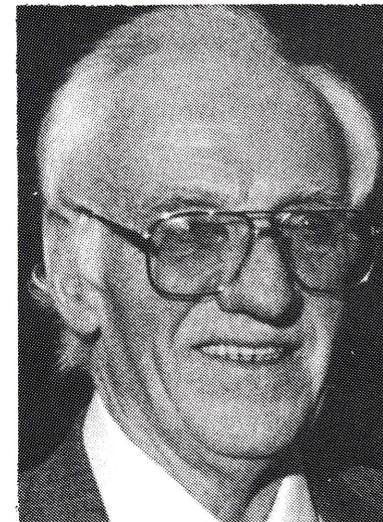
It left us with an unfinished business to complete and with our own recollections of a unique Irish patriot, a republican leader, a comrade and a friend. I am glad and proud to have known him.

Go ndéanfaidh Dia trocaire ar a hanam dílis.

— Gerry Adams MP.

VOLUNTEER SEAMUS TWOMEY 1919-'89

"Freedom does not mean simply the freedom of green fields: it means that every person in the country is catered for so that every family in the country would be able to live free from poverty and unemployment."



So said one of the foremost IRA soldiers of the last two decades in an interview shortly before his recapture in 1977. These words characterised a man whom the British feared as well as respected. A man who was modest of his many exploits and the colourful occurrences that graced his life. His contribution to the struggle will not be fully appreciated until Ireland's freedom is won.

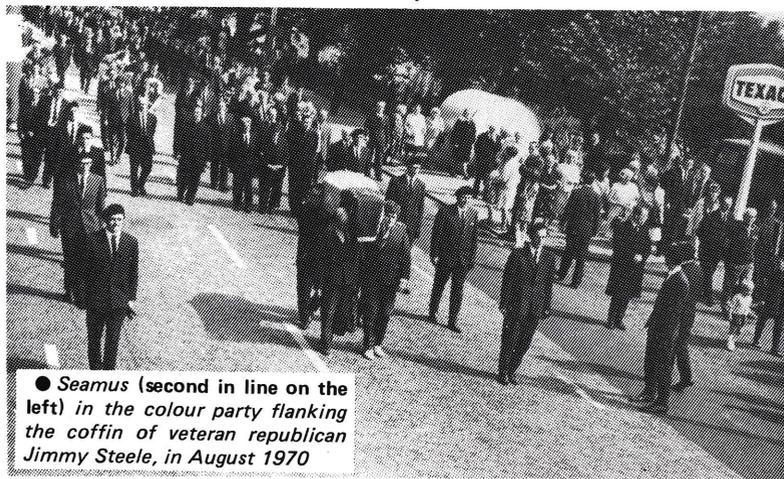
A forceful man in his convictions, Seamus Twomey nonetheless wished only to be able to return to his many pastimes in a future peaceful united Ireland and to this goal he gave his all. After a full

alist mobs began to storm nationalist areas in 1969, at a time when the IRA had dumped arms. Republicans like Twomey had been edged out of the Movement by the present leaders of the Workers' Party. The nationalist areas had been betrayed — left to face loyalist bullets and the violence of the 'B'-Specials without any protection.

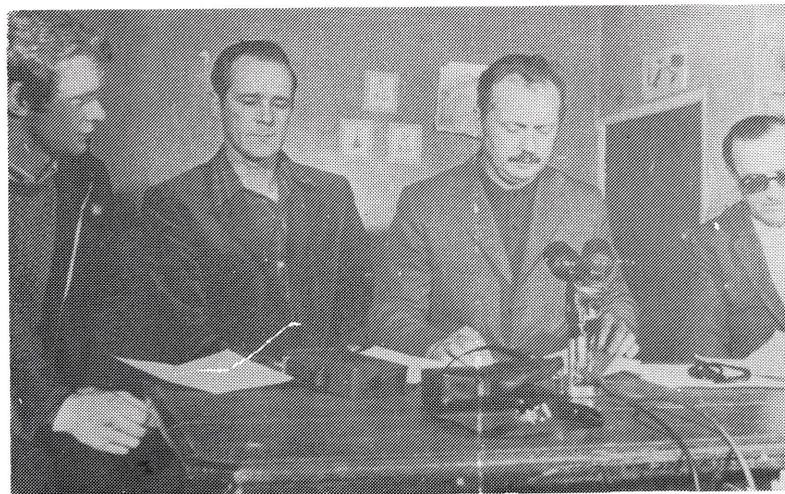
During the '60s Seamus had set about organising auxiliaries foreseeing what the leaders were doing, and understanding the defence needs of nationalist areas. After 1969 Seamus and a small band of colleagues set about recreating the IRA. They were not short of potential Volunteers. Belfast men and women virtually queued up to join. But they lacked nearly every other item of equipment vital to a guerrilla struggle. In the teeth of opposition from nearly every quarter they fought back, saving hundreds of lives.

When the IRA took the offensive against the British troops, the Belfast Brigade, under Seamus, was always in the vanguard. In August 1971 he became O/C of Belfast Brigade.

It was the June 1972 Truce which brought the name of Seamus Twomey to prominence outside of Belfast. The lead-up to the 1972 Truce began with a press conference in Free Derry at which Seamus, along with Dave O'Connell and Seán Mac Stiofáin, offered safe passage to the British Secretary of State for the North, William



● Seamus (second in line on the left) in the colour party flanking the coffin of veteran republican Jimmy Steele, in August 1970



● Martin McGuinness, Daithí Ó Conaill, Seán MacStiofáin and Seamus at a press conference to announce details of the 1972 Truce

Whitelaw, into the IRA-controlled sector of Derry to discuss the terms of a truce. Whitelaw refused.

But, following on from this, there were several negotiations between senior civil servants and republican representatives. Following these detailed discussions conditions for a bi-lateral truce between the British and republican forces were agreed by the British government and the Republican Leadership. As part of these Whitelaw granted political status to the POWs, thus allowing the IRA to call a cease-fire on June 26th. The British agreed to keep out of nationalist areas while the cease-fire continued and barricades were set up in most nationalist areas and armed IRA Volunteers patrolled the streets.

On July 7th, a republican delegation made up of Seamus Twomey, Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams, Ivor Bell, Seán Mac Stiofáin, Dave Connell and Myles Shevlin, were flown to a secret meeting at 96 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, the home of one of Whitelaw's ministers. The delegation put their demands:

The right of the Irish people as a whole to self-determination; a British withdrawal; and an amnesty for political prisoners.



● Seamus at the head of nationalists in Lenadoon on July 9th 1972

Whitelaw made no promises other than that the British government would consider all the demands and meet again with them. In the meantime, it was agreed that the IRA and British army would have freedom of the streets, the IRA could bear arms as long as open displays were limited to republican areas, and searches of individuals, vehicles and homes would cease.

Seamus returned home with the delegation, aware of what the feelings of the Volunteers in his command would be, having failed to gain any concessions. Two days later it was all to end abruptly in the Lenadoon estate in Belfast with these words: "Okay, that's it — you've violated the truce."

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the government body controlling housing in Northern Ireland, allocated houses in Lenadoon Avenue to the Catholic families who had been forced out of their homes in other areas of Belfast by the Orange ultras of the UDA; the British army made no objection to this. It was only when the UDA objected to the rehousing that the British army discovered that this might lead to a breach of the peace. After three meetings to try and iron out this difficulty, the people in the neighbourhood themselves took the initiative to rehouse refugees and some 2,000



● British troops moving in on the lorry carrying the furniture

Catholics marched behind a lorry carrying the furniture of the families on Sunday, July 9th.

The British army used a large Armoured Personnel Carrier to ram this lorry, and then used CS gas, rubber bullets and water cannons against the local people in clear breach of the cease-fire.

Seamus Twomey, who was to the fore of the marches and whose words signalled the end of the truce, issued a statement as O/C of the Belfast Brigade stating:

"The truce is broken. The truce which we fought hard to maintain was today breached on a number of occasions.

"During the past 48 hours, we have been negotiating with the office of the Secretary of State in an endeavour to reach a peaceful solution to the homeless problem that has arisen in the area as a result of UDA intimidation.

"Despite hours of talk, and the fact that we withdrew on two occasions, British representatives bowed the knee to pressure from the sinister UDA and refused to permit families who have been legally allocated houses in Horn Drive, entry to their own homes.

"When a lorry with furniture for one of the families tried to gain access to the south side of Lenadoon Avenue, it was rammed by a



● Soldiers firing rubber bullets and CS Gas into the crowd on Lenadoon Avenue

Saracen armoured car and almost overturned, much to the delight of the UDA.

"The British forces then opened up on the crowds of civilians with rubber bullets, CS gas and a water cannon, injuring many people, including some schoolchildren. It is again most unfortunate that our people here become targets for British army oppression. In the circumstances, we have no other option but to resume offensive operations against the British forces of occupation."

He later said at a press conference on July 13th:

"Our GHQ in Dublin was fully aware and fully informed of everything that took place and were in complete agreement with Belfast and units all over Northern Ireland going back into action."

Seamus was to be involved in further negotiations in 1974 at Feakle, County Clare, with Protestant clergymen. These talks were cut short when republicans got advance notice of a Special Branch raid.

Just over a year after the first truce, Seamus was jailed for three years for IRA activities. He was Chief of Staff at this time and he was held in Mountjoy Jail. It was to be a short incarceration.

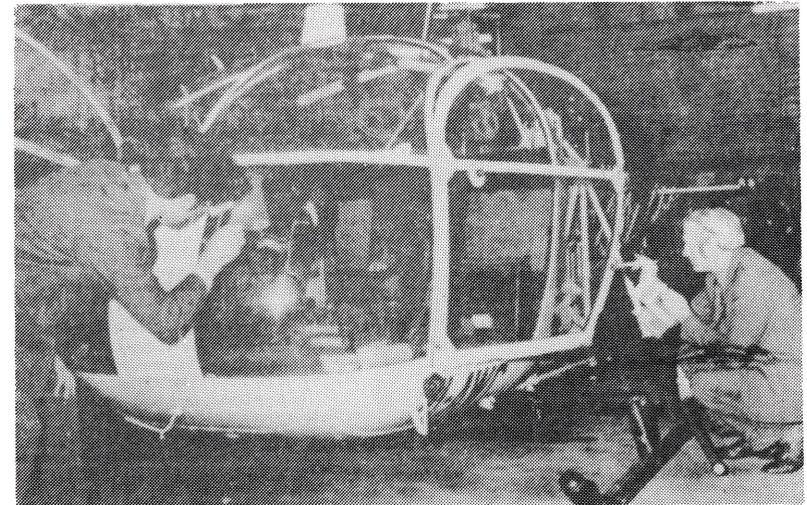
On Halloween Eve one of the most audacious, cleverly-planned jail escapes in Irish history occurred when Seamus, JB O'Hagan and Kevin Mallon were lifted by helicopter from the exercise yard of Mountjoy Jail's 'D' Wing at 3.40pm to the cheers of other prisoners and the bitter embarrassment of the Cosgrave coalition government in Dublin.

Seamus had only been in prison for three weeks. A republican POW in Mountjoy, wrote:

"One shamefaced screw apologised to the governor and said he thought it was the Minister of Defence arriving. I told him it was our Minister of Defence leaving."

In Belfast, bonfires blazed in celebration of the event and in Dublin over 300 detectives searched hundreds of homes in a vain attempt to track down the escapers. A typically downbeat IRA statement referred to the event at the end of a list of operations against the crown forces:

"Three republican prisoners were rescued by a special unit from Mountjoy prison on Wednesday. The operation was a complete suc-



● Garda forensic officers examining the helicopter used in the spectacular escape



● Republican News cartoon after the escape

friends had arrived from Lurgan to visit me. The helicopter was expected at 2.30pm, so I told the screw that my wife Bernadette was to visit that afternoon and I must refuse the others. They must have felt sore for sure, coming all that distance to be turned away. The radio news bulletin later told them the real story. I heard they all joined in the big cheer that went up all over the country when the news of our escape came across.

"The Sports Committee had been asked to organise a football match. We were pacing around as usual and occasionally taking the game in. The 2.30pm deadline came and passed and some anxious looks appeared on the faces of those in the know. We learned later that the helicopter pilot had arrived with a full fuel tank and that he had to use up a lot of fuel to ensure a successful lift-off with all of us on board. About 3.40pm the helicopter appeared to view. I could see the look of amazement on some of our comrades — others were clearly expecting it. It's a pity, I remember thinking, that they couldn't all come.

cess and the men are now safe, despite a massive hunt by Free State forces." The matter of fact statement bore the hallmark of the freed IRA leader.

His comrade and fellow escapee, JB O'Hagan, takes up the story:

"I remember that Hallow' Eve very well. I was on my way to the exercise yard at about two o'clock. I made sure to appear just as I always did, so as not to alert the screws. I was stopped and told that

"Kevin Mallon rushed forward and produced two white handkerchiefs from his pockets. He waved the pilot into land. Kevin got on first, I was second and Seamus last. I remember noticing a screw lifting a concrete block and heading towards us. He did not get far. The escape team in the yard blocked him off instead. I held onto the inside door handle. It was not properly closed and I was afraid Seamus might fall out. We were rising now. We could not hear the cheers below for the noise of the helicopter but you could see the men jumping up and down and striking the air with their fists. They were clearly overjoyed. There was one Volunteer in the 'copter with the pilot. The small cabin area was full with the five of us. The city looked wonderful below — the cars so small and the people were just tiny dots.

"We landed at the old Baldoyle racecourse. We thanked the pilot for the lift and headed off to the roadway and our car, then approaching. It was only later, we three sitting back with a cup of tea in our hands, that we fully appreciated the achievement. It was a real spectacular. However, all the credit is due to those on the outside who planned and carried out the escape. They were the real heroes."

For over four years Seamus evaded capture by either the crown



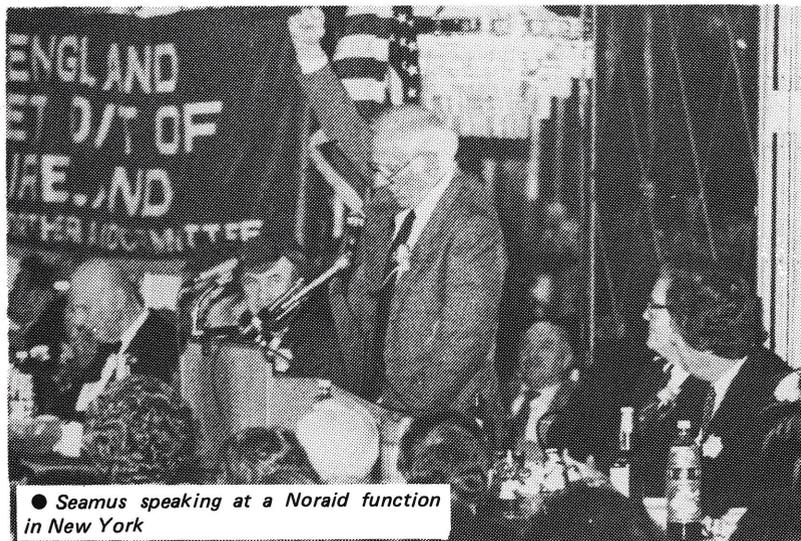
● Bridie McGill, Seamus, Joe Cahill and JB O'Hagan at John Joe McGill's funeral in 1988

forces or those of the Cosgrave government but on December 3rd, 1977, he was taken by gardai in Mount Street, Dublin, after a car chase. He was later imprisoned once again for IRA membership, for his daring escape and for incriminating documents in his possession.

A journalist in the magazine *Hibernia* noted that "a man who escaped from Mountjoy Jail in spectacular fashion and whose face was known, moved freely in the North and the South, evading with ease the mesh of an extensive security net on both sides of the border".

During his period of freedom he once again became the IRA Chief-of-Staff, a position he held for a year before his arrest in 1973. It was during this period that he oversaw the most effective and long-lasting re-organisation in the IRA's history but he refused to take personal credit for this, citing the fact that the Movement had evolved a co-ordinated leadership which could easily replace an individual who was imprisoned or killed:

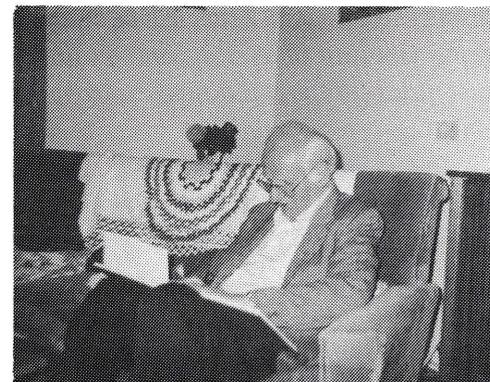
"There is no elitist group of persons within the Movement but there is a collective leadership and this means that there is continu-



● Seamus speaking at a Noraid function in New York

ity no matter who is arrested or who is not. There is always a nucleus there."

Much of the details and the reasons for this re-organisation and re-evaluation remained a closely guarded secret until the flat Seamus was staying at in Royal



● Seamus reading in 1989

Terrace, Dun Laogh-aire, was raided following his recapture.

"We are burdened with an inefficient infrastructure of commands, brigades, battalions and companies. This old system with which the Brits and Branch are familiar has to be changed. We recommend re-organisation and remotivation, the building of a new Irish Republican Army."

This re-organisation led to the adoption of the cell structure to protect itself from the infiltration by British army agents and to improve efficiency, the organisation abandoned brigades in favour of smaller units. It also determined on the present 'long war' strategy, dropping the over-optimistic one that had characterised its statements in the early '70s. The IRA made it known at Bodinstown in 1977 that victory was not 'just around the corner' but that it would be gained through an unremitting struggle which would wear down British imperialism. The political task of republicans was to build a mass movement to force it to withdraw.

The success of the re-organisation, which Seamus had laid the groundwork for, can be gauged from the capture of a top secret British military intelligence document, Document 37, which said:

"The Provisional IRA (PIRA) has the dedication and the sinews of war to raise violence intermittently to at least the level of early 1978, certainly for the foreseeable future."

"Even if 'peace' is restored, the motivation for political inspired

violence will remain. Arms will be readily available and there will be many who are able and willing to use them. Any peace will be superficial and brittle. A new campaign may well erupt in the years ahead...

"The Provisionals' campaign of violence is likely to continue while the British remain in Northern Ireland."

Seamus was a practical, no-nonsense leader, devoid of any pretensions or self-importance. An interview before his capture in April 1977, with the journalist Peter Jennings in the newspaper *Hibernia*, shows much of his character. In it he explained that he seldom gave such interviews: *"In my work in the Republican Movement and as a soldier, I don't think I'm the person cut out to give them."*

Seamus, also in that interview, outlined the IRA stance on truces:

"There will be no truce again. When we are genuinely trying to get it going, genuinely trying to speak of peace, politicians of every ilk and every creed take it as a sign of weakness on our part and everyone lambastes us from the height, that we are talking from weakness."

"I would not be prepared to have representatives do the same sort of exercise as Mac Stiofáin did when we went over and talked to the British government in London. I did not think that was really a worthwhile exercise because I found that Mr Whitelaw told lies in the British House of Parliament afterwards. He denied that negotiations had been taken up, that representatives of his and representatives of ours had agreed and that an independent person was there to witness the declaration of this particular document."

Peter Jennings: What was the real reason for your December 1975 Truce?

Seamus: *"The reason for that truce was because we thought, going into that negotiation (we were negotiating every week in most cases with British representatives), we were going to gain something and that it was going to be an honest and genuine attempt for peace. We*



● **Seamus speaking at the Belfast Easter Commemoration during the 1975 Truce**
discovered that politicians from all parties are dishonest — their statements can be traced back in the press. They asked the British government not to speak to us, and sectarian assassinations escalated. We discovered that in the long run the British government weren't sincere in their talks and politicians don't seem to want peace."

Seamus Twomey's life virtually summarised the current phase of the struggle and his clear-thinking determination helped to gel together the IRA into a fighting force. But he was no 'hard man'. Under the constraints forced upon him by the war, he cherished a very close family life with his wife Rosie and children Patricia, Rosemary, Veronica, Diarmaid, Seamus and Gerard.

The man who slipped easily through British and Dublin government 'security' to lead the IRA was also able, in secret, to maintain extremely close contact with his family, despite the activities of both the crown forces and the gardai.

His children do not remember a time when Seamus Twomey wasn't on the run but he was far from being an absent father to them. They saw him regularly, no matter what the constraints.

Once, in the early '70s, while on the run, he uncharacteristically



● Seamus with some of his family shortly after his release in 1982

decided to stay at the family home overnight only to be woken by his wife Rosie at the break of dawn to be told the Brits were at the door. Rosie, looking down at him, noticed that he bore a resemblance to his brother who was an asthmatic and, with that, Seamus had asthma. The family were roused and the story explained to them just before the Brits came storming in. They were told about the ill brother-in-law and avoided searching that room till last. As they opened the door, Seamus got struck by an asthmatic fit which doubled him over. The Brits apologised for disturbing him, but lifted him from the bed, they apologised again and returned him to the bed. So, ended Seamus's asthmatic career.

Seamus gave few interviews during his life. He gave one to *Der Spiegel* two weeks after his escape and two in 1977, one to *Hibernia*, the other to *Crane Bag*.

In the *Crane Bag* interview he again shows his modesty when he says: "I am only an average person with an average outlook."

In that interview he outlines exactly what he fought for:

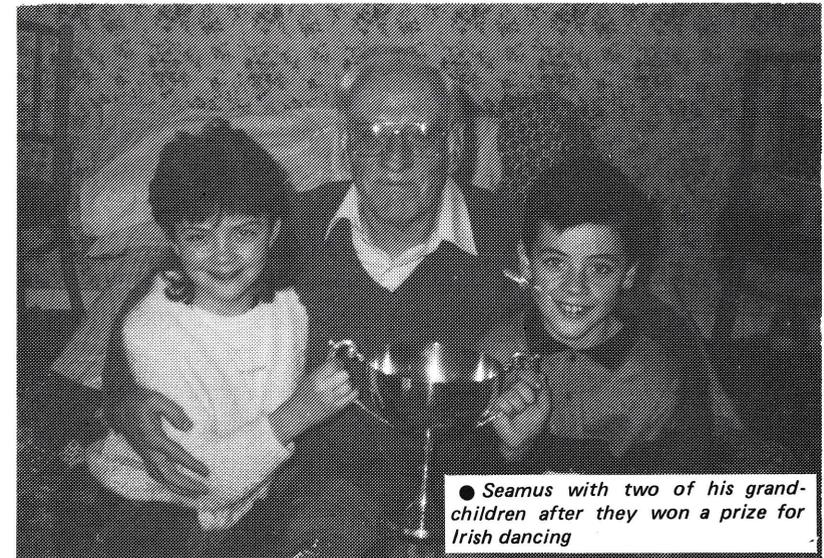
"Freedom does not mean simply the freedom of green fields: it

means that every person in the country is catered for so that every family in the country would be able to live free from poverty and unemployment.

"Peace has to come with justice... From all wars peace has sprung. Peace has never been built out of anything else except violence... Any person that is in the Republican Movement, if he does not feel he is quite capable of carrying out military operations, if these things give him cause for doubt at all, then he simply shouldn't be in the Movement."

By the time of his re-capture four years later Seamus was 57 years old. But he received an eight-year sentence from the Special Court without any qualms. Nothing the authorities could do to Seamus Twomey could shake or even surprise him. He had already been imprisoned on both sides of the border. When he was released in 1982 he stated that he would make himself once again available to the Republican Movement "to be used as it sees fit".

He was still active until he was hospitalised and even there his opinion on matters was sought.



● Seamus with two of his grandchildren after they won a prize for Irish dancing

Still threatened with jail if he re-entered the Six Counties, Seamus spent his last years South of the border. But that threat didn't stop him sharing Christmas with his family in Belfast two years ago and his daughter Patricia remembers a particularly enjoyable party which ended at around 6am with Seamus singing at the top of his voice despite the fact that the family's door was wide open, almost inviting his arrest by any passing British army convoy. Intimidation could not silence Seamus.

"After the struggle, his family meant more to him than anything," says his daughter Patricia. *"I'm only glad that he died before our mother. If she'd died before him, he'd have been unable to go on."*

In another incident Seamus, showing tremendous poise and nerve when stopped by a UDR and RUC patrol, persuaded them he had been away in Scotland till recently and even got them to push-start the car when they were finished.

Seamus spent whatever leisure time he had visiting historical sites or attending football matches, and he insisted, where possible, on walking everywhere. In 1977 Seamus said:

"I would have no great grá to be a politician. It just wouldn't suit my temperament. If this war was over tomorrow I would like to go back to my own ways: going to football matches, watching sports, which I'm very fond of, and having a few bets maybe on a horse."

At the time of his death Seamus was a member of the IRA's ruling body, the Army Executive. He had been elected to that body by his comrades at the Army Convention of 1986. This was the convention which changed the IRA's attitude to abstentionism. This change was supported by Seamus. To the very end, and despite a terrible illness, Seamus remained the forceful man he had always been.

Throughout his long illness Seamus had shown the courage and resilience which had always characterised him. On several occasions he rallied and was out of hospital and back among his friends and family in Dublin. But that illness finally took its toll early in September 1989 and Seamus was admitted for the last time to hos-



● Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Danny Morrison carrying Seamus' Tricolour-draped coffin in Belfast

pital. The end came at midday on Tuesday, September 12th.

While his family and friends had known the seriousness of his condition this did not diminish the loss felt by them when he passed away. Republicans all over Ireland were saddened to learn of his death and like that of John Joe McGirl in December the year before it seemed to mark the end of a phase in the struggle and the breaking of another link with the past.

Seamus Twomey's body lay in state in the mortuary chapel of the Mater Hospital on Tuesday evening, September 12th, and a steady stream of people visited to pay their last respects. On Wednesday morning several hundred people attended as Seamus's wife Rosie and children prepared to follow him on his final journey to Belfast.

Because of the British occupation of our country Seamus could not openly visit his native city and among those to pay their respects on Wednesday were many republicans who similarly cannot return to the place where they were born and brought up while Britain remains. Among them was Seamus's long time comrade Joe Cahill. Also present were Kevin Mallon and JB O'Hagan who accompanied Seamus on that famous helicopter flight in 1973.

As people queued to sign the book of condolence, prayers were

led in the chapel by An tAthair Piarais O Dúill. Then the Tricolour-draped coffin, bearing the black beret and gloves of an IRA Volunteer, was carried by Seamus's sons to the waiting hearse.

Flanked by a six-person republican guard of honour the hearse led the funeral procession out from the Mater. It went past the gates of Mountjoy Prison which will always be associated with Seamus and the morale boost the daring IRA escape gave to republicans everywhere at Halloween 1973.

Followed by hundreds of mourners the cortege proceeded down the North Circular Road and into Dorset Street. It halted at the canal bridge before proceeding northwards out of the city. Republicans had also gathered in Dundalk and joined the cortege as the hearse continued at walking pace through Clanbrassil Street and Church Street. As evening fell Seamus Twomey crossed the border for the last time. His body was brought to the family home in Andersonstown. 'With the laying to rest of Volunteer Seamus Twomey in his native Belfast last Friday came the end of an era in the Republican Movement. He was, in the words of Gerry Adams, "one of the few; who became the many" in '69 when republican activists were very thin on the ground.



● A republican colour party flanking the hearse in Dublin



● The funeral procession emerging from St Agnes' Church in Belfast

The Tricolour-draped coffin, with beret and gloves on top, headed a funeral cortege of over 1,000 people from St Agnes's Chapel to Milltown Cemetery. British soldiers and RUC had camped out around the Twomey family home since the arrival of the remains from Dublin on Wednesday evening, and stopped and harassed mourners going to the house to pay their respects.

As the coffin was carried down the road, RUC Land Rovers hemmed the cortege in and more RUC and British soldiers were massed at the gates of Milltown. A group of senior RUC officers stood in a cluster pointing out mourners as Fr Piarais O Dúill began a short graveside service.

Sinn Féin Councillor Alex Maskey announced the laying of wreaths from all branches of the Republican Movement as well as from his family and the sporting and cultural organisations Seamus was associated with.

He then called for a piper to play a lament followed by a minute's silence. For a change the incessant rattle of British army helicopters was absent from above a republican funeral.

Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams delivered the graveside oration. Referring to the role played by Twomey he said:

"Too often we are too close to a situation or a person to realise

how historic it is or the part they played in it." He mentioned the Feakle Talks, the daring escape from Mountjoy, the truce and the talks with Willie Whitelaw, Twomey's tenure as O/C of the Belfast Brigade and then as Chief of Staff of Oglaiigh na hEireann.

He spoke too of the personal side of Seamus Twomey, how he liked a bet, greyhounds and hurling. He mentioned Twomey's quick temper which had earned him the name of 'Thumper', a trait that was useful, he noted, when Willie Whitelaw outlined what he saw as Britain's role in the Six Counties. Seamus thumped the table and outlined what he saw as the end of Britain's role in the Six Counties.

He noted how Seamus had been with his family in Belfast at Christmas and how he had, despite being so active and on the run for many years, managed to be with his family when they needed him. He reminded the RUC that they had never once managed to capture Seamus Twomey in all his years of active struggle.

He spoke too of Seamus's modesty and how when released from prison he offered his services once again to the Republican Movement, not with any aspirations for leadership but to do what was required of him. "Despite his illness, he went anywhere he was asked, using his good offices whenever required".

In conclusion he berated Gerry Collins and the Dublin administration for their meeting with British direct ruler, Peter Brooke.

"We know what their administrations are like and there is not one of them fit to tie the shoe laces of Seamus Twomey."

And there isn't.

I measc laochra na hEireann go raibh a anam dilis.