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<http://www.inac.org/irishhistory/hungerstrikes/chapters/12>

Irish Hunger Strikes Chapter 12

The Road to the "First" Hunger Strike The 1970s: Part II

In 1974 and 1976, two Irish Republicans died on hunger strike in British jails in unsuccessful bids for political status, Michael Gaughan in Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight and Frank Stagg in Wakefield prison. Both Gaughan and Stagg were natives of Mayo. Perhaps the success of the Price sisters, Kelly, and Feeney in achieving repatriation to Irish jails, although not immediately, gave them reason to hope.

At the time of Gaughan's hunger strike, Brit policy for dealing with such protests remained one of forced feedings, a brutal process whereby the jaws were painfully forced open with clamps and a pipe rammed down the throat into the stomach. Sometimes it went down the windpipe by mistake. It was to be the last time the Brits would use force feeding as a tactic.

As the protesting Republican prisoners in the H-Blocks and Armagh Women's prison contemplated putting their names forward for the imminent hunger strike, and the prison command staff began the process of deciding who would be the ones to go on it in grim, successive waves, the deaths of Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg were the last that they could reflect on. It wasn't very pretty.

The Demands

The basic demands of Gaughan and Stagg were essentially the same demands that were being put forward by the hunger strikers of 1980: political status, the right to wear their own clothes [which really meant the right *not* to wear criminalizing prison gear], and not to be forced to do prison work like ordinary prisoners.

Michael Gaughan began his strike on 31 March 1974 and was force-fed from 22 April until his death, officially of pneumonia, a condition brought about as a direct result of the abuse his body took from the forced feeding. He steadfastly refused all medical treatment.

Gaughan received but one visit throughout his ordeal, his Mother just three weeks before he died. They both cried. What made his death even more pitiful was that the Brits had only a week earlier given in to the demands of several Loyalists who were also on hunger strike at the time. But as Tim Pat Coogan was to write in *The IRA: a History*, "... there would be no capitulation to the demands of a lone IRA hunger striker in a British jail." And so he was let die.

The Aftermath: Controversy, Tears and Posthumous Triumph

Gaughan's death was to set off a major debate among medical professionals and self-professed British moralists: does a patient have the right to end his own life for any reason, political or otherwise? The use of forced-feeding by prison authorities was clearly a form of assault, not a benign gesture on the government's part to save hunger strikers' lives. It was a political strategy just as much as was the hunger strike itself.

Later, in a similar display of cynical righteousness, a prominent bishop of the Catholic Church in England by the name of Hume was to make the astounding pontification in 1981 that dying on hunger strike for one's beliefs was the moral equivalent of suicide.

In any case, nothing in particular came of the whole controversy, at least not enough to effect the death on hunger strike two years later of Frank Stagg.

The controversy and publicity disaster the Brits endured over Michael Gaughan's funeral and burial in his hometown of Ballina, Co. Mayo, was another matter. The British government was in a quandary as to what to do when it discovered that Gaughan was to be very publicly buried with full IRA honors, but not before a tearful yet triumphant funeral procession across the breadth of Ireland, from Dublin airport through the center of the country to a Co. Mayo grave in the Republican plot. If the Brits used physical force or overt political pressure to prevent this from happening, they would have been hammered in the press and elsewhere. To allow it to happen was perhaps even worse. But the Dublin government was in no position nor inclined to stop the funeral and so the Republican movement was able to pull off an emotional and political demonstration of strength in the face of the Brits, who were hopping mad at being flaunted in such an arrogant manner.

Hundreds of thousands participated in one form or another. The press went wild on both sides of the Irish Sea and in America. The

classically romantic and poignant song "Take Me Home To Mayo" is a tearful reminder of those times. Whenever the opening words "My name is Michael Gaughan..." are heard it's impossible not to get caught up in the emotions of his death, his love of his country, and the meaning of his sacrifice. Even if you never heard the name of Michael Gaughan before in your life, you knew something was calling you from the grave.

But as we know, the Brits do get even, or at least try to, regardless of the cost to themselves or others.

Frank Stagg

On 12 February, 1976, Frank Stagg died after 62 days on hunger strike in Wakefield prison for political status. Because of the Gaughan publicity disaster, the Brits were resolved not to allow the Republican movement to so publicly canonize another martyr for the cause of Irish freedom. Stagg's last request as he lie dying, blind and his body wasted to a fraction of himself, was to be given an IRA military funeral along the same route that Michael Gaughan's body was taken, from Dublin to Ballina, in Mayo.

The world media waited in ghoulish anticipation at Dublin airport for the expected showdown between the British government and IRA supporters over the Frank Stagg's coffin. But the clash never materialized as the Brit aircraft with Stagg's body overflew Dublin, landed stealthily at Shannon airport, and whisked the remains to Leigue Cemetery in Ballina, where the Gardai [Irish police] hastily dug a grave in his family's plot and buried him under 18 inches of solid concrete to ensure against his removal. His grave was within sight of Michael Gaughan's, but it was not in the Republican plot which was his dying wish.

The next day Joe Cahill, undoubtedly the most publicly prominent Republican of the time, gave a powerful oration over Frank Stagg's grave, promising that one day he would lie with his comrades. Joe must have also been thinking of his best friend Tom Williams lying in an unmarked Crumlin Road jail grave 30 years after his execution. It would be 50 years before Williams would be buried with honor. Frank Stagg didn't have to wait that long.

The Gardai put up a 24-hour watch. But on 6 November, 1976, after the guards had removed their constant vigil, at around midnight a group of IRA volunteers accompanied by a priest dug throughout the night, tunneled under the concrete to recover Frank Stagg's coffin, blessed it, and reburied Frank in the Republican plot just a hundred yards away.

The Past and the Future

These events were well known by the men and women Republican prisoners in Long Kesh and Armagh as they prepared for the much anticipated hunger strike in 1980. If they hadn't heard of the hunger strike martyrs of the past before being imprisoned, they certainly found out about them now.

Frank Stagg

From <http://irelandsown.net/hayden.htm>

Oration by Josephine Hayden, Ard Chomhairle, Republican Sinn Féin at the commemoration in Ballina, Co Mayo for hunger-strikers Michael Gaughan, Frank Stagg and Sean McNeela on Sunday, February 11th 2001

See above site for full text

Frank, who was born and grew up in Hollymount, Co Mayo where he played handball and football, was sentenced to 10 years on conspiracy charges. Frank came from a Republican background. His father, Henry, and uncle were both Volunteers. Comdt General Tom Maguire was Henry's O/C. Frank had been agitating for political status from the beginning of his sentence, ie refusing to do prison work, and as a result spent much time in solitary in the punishment cells. Frank undertook a few hunger strikes in three different prisons. He was 68 days on hunger strike when he was ordered off after the death of Michael Gaughan. On his final hunger strike, realizing he was dying, Frank sent out the following message to the Leadership of the Republican Movement "We are a risen people, this time we will not be driven into the gutter, even if this should mean dying for justice. The fight must go on. I want my memorial to be, Peace with Justice". On the day before he died Frank instead of being moved into hospital, was moved into a dungeon of a cell with no heat and which was very badly lit. This was and still is the contemptuous attitude of the British government to the Irish POWs and is equalled only by the contemptuous attitude of the Free State. Even in death the Brits and Free State were afraid of Frank -- his body was guarded by the peelers on both sides of the Irish Sea.

The Free State even went a few steps further in the case of Frank Stagg when they hijacked his body and in an unprecedented move, the special branch opened the grave, carried his coffin and buried him under a ton of cement. But the people were not found wanting -- from the gravediggers who refused to open a grave under the circumstances, to the many thousands who turned out for his funeral in England and Ireland, right up to the men who finally removed Frank's body from under that ton of cement and laid him to rest here in Leigue Cemetery in the Republican Plot beside his friend and comrade Michael Gaughan.

FRANK STAGG

(from An Phoblacht/Republican News Thurs. 15/02/01

by Jonathan O'Meara on the 25th anniversary)

"We are the risen people, this time we must not be driven into the gutter. Even, if this should mean dying for justice. The fight must go on. I want my memorial to be peace with justice."

- Frank Stagg

Born in the village of Hollymount, County Mayo, in 1941, Stagg was the seventh child of a family of thirteen. He attended Newbrooke Primary school and later went on to attend the Christian Brothers Secondary School in Ballinrobe. People in his native village remembered him as being a 'nice lad from a nice family', others recalled his prowess at Gaelic football and handball. On leaving school he worked with his uncle as a gamekeeper before emigrating to England.

In England, Frank was employed as a bus conductor and later qualified as a bus driver. In 1970 he married Bridie Armstrong from Carnicon, County Mayo. He joined Sinn Fein in Luton in 1972 and shortly afterwards joined the IRA. Frank remained in touch with home and spent his annual holidays in Hollymount up to the year of his arrest and imprisonment in 1973. In the words of his mother, "he never forgot he was Irish".

Stagg was arrested in Coventry in April 1973 and was convicted in November of conspiring to commit arson, for which he received a ten-year sentence. At his trial the following October with six others, including Rev. Patrick Fell, he was described as commanding officer of the Coventry IRA unit.

There was little or no evidence to connect him with the charge.

Stagg was convicted under the notorious British Conspiracy Laws, brought in during the latter half of the 19th century to imprison Irish political activists without a fair trial.

Frank Stagg began his sentence in Albany Prison on the Isle of Wight. Insisting that he be treated as a political prisoner, he refused to do any prison work, which resulted in him spending most of his time in solitary confinement. In March 1974, while in Parkhurst Prison, he and Michael Gaughan joined the hunger strike begun by the Price sisters, Hugh Feeney and Gerry Kelly demanding repatriation to Ireland. All suffered the horrific ordeal of forced feeding.

Stagg continued for 70 days. Following the death of Gaughan, as a result of force feeding, the remaining hunger strikers ended their fast after assurances from the prison authorities that they would be transferred to a prison in Ireland.

Frank's prison life was one of broken promises and torture. Promises that his demands would be met. Three simple demands:

- * A guarantee that he would not be returned to solitary confinement;
- * The right to educational facilities and not to do prison work;
- * The setting of a 'reasonable' date for a transfer to an Irish prison.

The authorities however, pursued a policy of giving in to prisoners' demands when they were on hunger strike only to renege on their promises once the prisoner came off protest. Frustrated by such vindictive tactics and determined to secure his demands or die, Stagg embarked at the end of 1975 on another hunger strike, his fourth in two years.

In early February 1976, as Stagg and Mealey entered their eight and seventh weeks, respectively, on hunger strike, Stagg, recognising the intransigence of the British Home Office and the hopelessness of his own status, persuaded his comrade to end his fast, for the sake of his wife and children.

One week later, the inevitable happened. Frank Stagg died after fasting for 62 days. In his final message to his comrades in the Republican Movement he wrote: "We are the risen people, this time we must not be driven into the gutter. Even if this should mean dying for justice. The fight must go on. I want my memorial to be peace with justice."

In order that he be afforded a republican funeral, Stagg stated in his will that his body should be entrusted to Derek Highstead, then Sinn Féin organiser in England. The Wakefield coroner complied with his request.

While the remains were being flown home to Dublin, the 26-County government tried to cajole, intimidate, and bribe members of the Stagg family to collaborate in a week of desecration. Having failed, the institutions and servants of the state were used to hijack the body and orchestrate a parody of a funeral of honour. The Fine Gael/Labour coalition government under Fine Gael Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave chose to defy in the most callous and insulting manner imaginable the deathbed wishes of a hero and to use the Special Branch to bury him.

The state's hijacking of Frank Stagg's body was vile enough and virtually a carbon copy of the Crown's treatment of Tomás Mac Suibhne's remains in 1920, but not even the Crown dared to defy Irish traditions and interfered no more once the diverted coffin reached Cork. It was a shaming and shameful affair.

On Saturday, 21 February, Requiem mass, boycotted by almost all his relatives, was held. His body was taken to Ballina, where it was brought by Special Branch men to a grave some 70 yards from the Republican Plot in Leigue Cemetery, where he asked to be buried. In order to prevent any reinterment by republicans, the Special Branch afterwards poured six feet of concrete on top of the coffin.

The following day, republicans held their own ceremonies at the Republican plot, despite a mass presence of Gardaí. A volley of shots was fired by IRA Volunteers to salute their fallen comrade.

Following an oration by Joe Cahill, a pledge was made that Frank Stagg's body would be moved to the Republican Plot to fulfil Frank's wishes. On 6 November 1976, Frank Stagg's remains were removed by IRA volunteers and re-interred beside the remains of his comrade, Michael Gaughan, in the Republican Plot.

Volunteer Frank Stagg died on hunger strike on 12 February 1976, 25 years ago this week.

Stagg was convicted alongside Fr. Patrick Fell who spent more than 10 years in jail on charges of conspiracy to create explosions.

Fr. Fell is strongly suspected of involvement in the Claudy Bomb of 31 July 1972, the same day as Motorman.