

DENIS DARMANIN recounts the events as they most probably happened that led to the execution of Thomas McSweeney

## The execution of Thomas McSweeney

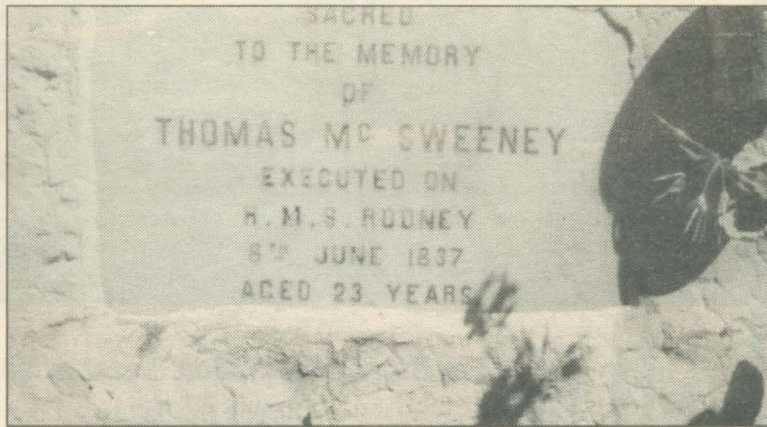
Then the prisoner requested that the Mate and Lieutenant Payne be called upon to speak of his character. Mr Norman stated that he had mustered him for the last six months and that he never found any fault in him. Lieutenant Payne said that he knew the prisoner from the time when the *Rodney* was commissioned and that his conduct was always good and orderly.

By noon, the court had adjourned and had unanimously reached the opinion that the charge was fully proved. The following verdict and sentence were given:

"In consequence of which... the prisoner is to be hanged by the neck until he is dead at the Yard Arm of such of his Majesty's Ships, and at such time as shall be decided by the Commander-in-Chief..."

By today's standards, the verdict appears to have been severe and subsequently it was questionable whether McSweeney had a fair trial, even by the standards of the time. He did not have a lawyer to defend him and his only statement looked like it was probably written for him, probably by one of the ship's officers. The existing evidence indicates that there was no reason to cross-examine the prosecution witnesses nor to guide his defence.

It is unlikely that McSweeney had intended to kill Allen, and the Sergeant was very unfortunate to die considering that his fall was onto the main deck, barely six feet below. It looks evident that McSweeney only intended to slightly injure Allen and pushed him while thinking that all he would suffer was a few cuts and bruises. McSweeney had admitted this in his defence, but it was unfortunate that the Act of 1749 which governed Naval Law at the time made no provision for manslaughter. There was only the possibility of an appeal or their



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Lordships submitting a recommendation to the Monarch, but this did not happen. Could the fact that Allan was English and a Protestant and McSweeney an Irish and Catholic have influenced the verdict?

The sentence was to be carried out on board HMS *Rodney*, in the presence of the Squadron. An urgent message was sent out to her to return immediately to Malta from Port Mahon in the Balearic Islands. She set sail and entered Grand Harbour on 5 June 1937.

On the morning of 8 June, a tender-boat drew along HMS *Cylon*, where the prisoner was being held, and departed with McSweeney on board. It headed towards HMS *Rodney*, which was anchored in the middle of the harbour opposite Senglea Point. The *Rodney* was in full view of the surrounding bastions, where large crowds had gathered and the air was filled with a strange tension. Surrounding her were several other ships, their crews, mustered on the decks to witness this execution.

McSweeney boarded the *Rodney* assisted by members of the clergy who had been with him from the day the sentence was passed. Padre Maestro Tonna and C. Falzon of the *Konfraternita Dumnikana tar-Ruzarjanti* worked hard to prepare

him for his fate. The rigging of all other ships were manned and perfect silence prevailed when Captain Parker read the Warrant, his voice clearly heard from every corner of the harbour. Not even an oar moved on the numerous boats which had surrounded HMS *Rodney*. The condemned man was standing on a platform rigged over a hammock netting under the foreyard, listening to the exhortations of Padre Tonna. The common hangman, Michele Prestigiaco, had adjusted the noose around his neck. The rope was reeved through the block attached to the yard-arm and was in the hands of a number of Marines on deck, along with two seamen from each ship, waiting for the concerted signal.

As soon as the Warrant was read, a gun was fired and the wretched man was launched into eternity. His body ran quickly up the yard-arm at the height of 20 to 75 meters. Death was instant as his body went limp immediately. Any resistance had long gone due to the time spent imprisoned and his fear of death. After hanging for some half an hour, the body was lowered down and conveyed by boat to *Tas-Salvatur* chapel, accompanied by members of the Confraternity. A Mass, *presente cadavere* was said for his soul's repose and his body

was then taken to the cemetery of St Lawrence. The procession was made up of local people who walked after the coffin saying the Rosary, and was reported to have been a most moving sight. At the entrance of the cemetery was the Archpriest of Vittoriosa, the Reverend Fr Karlu Aquilina, who conducted a short ceremony and helped bury McSweeney. The grave was well kept and tended by the local people. News of the Court Martial and McSweeney's fate had brought about a great deal of sympathy from the Maltese community.

Stories relating to McSweeney's grave have grown over the years. By the end of the 19th century, it was an accepted fact that his ghost had been seen in the cemetery. This was given substance by the following account: An old devotee visiting the cemetery one evening to replenish the oil for the lamps on some graves arrived late and found the gate already closed. It was now dark and stormy and in the darkness she saw a figure standing near McSweeney's grave, to whom she called out to open for her. This the figure did and closed the gate after the old lady. It led the way along the path and on reaching McSweeney's grave, it disappeared.

As soon as this encounter became known, local people started to care for his grave and pray over it. Over the years, a strong McSweeney cult grew and people of the three cities provided money for oil and candles that were always lit on his grave. Tours were organised to visit the grave during the month of All Souls, November, and a ballad in Maltese was even written about the execution. Candles and flowers are still placed on the grave by a few but visits have become very infrequent. The cemetery has occasionally been the target for vandals, but since its restoration has become a community concern by those whose relatives are buried there.