

# 1919 – Daíl Éireann, chaired by Sean T. O’Kelly meets for the very first time at Mansion House in Dublin.

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As part of this meeting, the adoption and the ritual of ‘the Turning of the Seal’ establishing the Sovereignty of the Irish Republic is begun.

The Turning Of The Sovereign Seal

by Bridget Haggerty

“On the morning of the 21st January, in Vaughans Hotel on Parnell square, a man named Tom McGuire elevated and turned the Sovereign Seal of Dáil Éireann, from the rising sun to the setting sun, from north to south and from east to west, and from Pagan to Christian to Sovereign; As in the 1916 Proclamation, claiming sovereignty over the elements, earth, air, fire and water and all there in and there of, on behalf of the Sovereign people and the Sovereign Republic of Éire.”

That caption appears on the base holding the seal and it describes what happened in the year 1919 at Vaughan’s Hotel – a haunt of Michael Collins and other revolutionaries of the War of Independence. It was also the secret headquarters of the first Dáil Éireann.

Every year since then, a member of the Maguire/Mcguire clan – the designated keepers of the seal- arrives at the official residence of the mayor, Mansion House in Dublin, to perform this little known Irish ritual which according to the records must take place and be witnessed in order for the sovereignty of all the organs of the state including the Dail, the courts, licenses and even of the nation itself to continue. Thus, at 12 noon in the Cabinet Room, with a harp playing softly in the background, the Sovereign Seal is turned once again.

The tradition has been passed down from generation to generation of McGuires. Today, Billy McGuire of Askeaton Co, Limerick performs the duty first carried out by his ancestor Tom in 1919 and then later by his father. Billy took it over from his late father in 1967.

Extrapolating the facts behind this annual ritual from a number of sources immediately raises some questions: First off – why is it that the McGuires perform it? The obvious answer would be that it was because the McGuire family were the owners of the hotel where the ceremony first took place. In 1917 the McGuires acquired Vaughn’s on behalf of the Irish Republican Brotherhood – a secret oath-bound fraternal organisation dedicated to the establishment of an independent

democratic republic and to Oglagh na Eireann (Soldiers or Volunteers of Ireland). In 1918, the hotel was the site of the 32 county Election which established the sovereignty of the Republic. On the morning of January 21st the Irish Republican Brotherhood implemented the 1916 Proclamation which vested the sovereignty of the 32 counties and the democratically elected TDs to Dail Eireann. However, it should also be noted that the surname McGuire and its variations has a long and illustrious history in Ireland which would make it worthy of performing such an important ritual. The family is first mentioned in the Annals as early as 956 A.D. Towards the close of the thirteenth century, with the installation of Donn Maguire, the family began to feature prominently in the records. Between that time and 1600 there were fifteen Maguire rulers of Fermanagh. Following the devastations by the armies of Cromwell and William of Orange, the Irish landed aristocracy, including the majority of the McGuires fled, in 1691, with the "Wild Geese" to France and Austria and a member of the family accompanied the Earls O'Neill and O'Donnell to Rome.

The McGuire titles, which died out in about 1795, were acceptable to the French court to which they had given their allegiance while serving in the many Irish regiments. Maguires appear in the archives of Europe's capitals, from Paris to Copenhagen and from Madrid to London.

John Francis Maguire (1815-72), the son of a Cork merchant, founded the still popular Cork Examiner newspaper and played a major part in politics – he was Mayor of Cork four times.

In 1880 Thomas Maguire was the first Catholic to be made a fellow and was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Trinity College.

Sam Maguire served Michael Collins as intelligence officer and later was important in the GAA both on the field and in its administration. Considered by many to be the GAA's founding father, Sam always wore the Sovereign seal on his jersey; the Sam Maguire Cup awarded to the winners of the All Ireland Senior Football Champions is named after him.

Other questions remain unanswered as of this writing. Does 'The Keeper of the Seal' bring it with him to the Mansion House each year and then takes it back with him after the ritual is performed? And is the seal that is turned the original one from 1919? It would appear from some of the videos in which Billy McGuire appears, that the seal goes with him where ever he does. But it's not known for certain if it's the original. The plan is to investigate further and try to fill in these gaps.

The Irish sovereign seal consists of a harp with 12 strings. The Harp is a symbol dense with meaning. In form it incorporates the ships compass, the horizon, the moon, the triangle and parallels of geometry and as such is an ancient compendium of knowledge. The Romans followed

the Harp in their design of Rome. Its importance in Ireland for ceremonial and later official use makes it, as a symbol, key to Irish civilisation and history.

Variations in the number of harp strings make their appearance on a wide range of Irish documents and other items. For example, there are eight strings on the harp symbol of the Army, 9 strings on the passport's harp, 13 on official documents of Dail Eireann and 14 on coins.

In court our judges sit under a 13 string Harp which is in reference to the Trinity (one in three) and ties their work to the Irish Constitution. Historically, the Sovereign Seal of the Irish Republican Brotherhood had 6 strings while that of the Fenian Brotherhood had 5.

Billy McGuire, who is the current President of the Republican Brotherhood, invests in all of this a great deal of important symbolism, and indeed, has tried to reprimand the president for flying a standard containing a harp with the wrong number of strings. And, according to Mr Maguire, peace in Ireland will not be truly reached until the British monarch removes the Irish sovereign seal which still takes up a quarter of the royal standard. Not many people know that.

It is also a strange anomaly of Irish history that the Seanad sit with their back to the Sovereign Seal which is on the back of their chairs. This happened because members of the house initially sat facing symbols of the British Crown. This practise is something that Billy McGuire would also like to see changed.

What this writer finds curious is why this custom receives so little attention. Somewhere in the pile of notes there is a notation that the turning of the seal is what grants a licence from the people of Ireland to the government to perform as they, the people, desire. Yet strangely, there seems to be an obvious absence of political leaders at the ceremony. Did they attend at one time and then, once Ireland became a Republic decided they didn't need to anymore? Delving into the notes simply raises more questions than it answers. But one thing is for certain: there is an old Irish proverb that says "Never make a custom or break a custom." Given the somewhat tenuous circumstances of dear old Eire today, this writer would be making sure she was in attendance at the Mansion House every January 21st to witness and celebrate what is essentially Ireland's Independence Day. Perhaps a nice fireworks display over the GPO would be a grand touch as well.