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# Revealing History

**Austin Stack**

Sportsman, Militant, Political Prisoner

## Introduction

As an Irish nationalist politician, militant republican, political prisoner, and celebrated athlete, **Austin Stack** made a significant contribution to the cause of Irish freedom. A gifted Gaelic footballer, he captained the Kerry team to All-Ireland victory in 1904 before serving as President of the Kerry GAA County Board. Elected as an MP and then TD continually from 1918 to 1927, he was Minister for Home Affairs from 1919 to 1922 where he helped create and establish the successful Dáil courts. Fervently opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Stack was active politically and militarily on the anti-Treaty side during the Irish Civil War. Imprisoned numerous times during the War of Independence and the Civil War, the harsh prison conditions and the hunger strikes he endured weakened his health and contributed to his early death.

## Digitisation of NLI Primary Sources

This PDF draws from primary source material held in the National Library of Ireland newly digitised to mark the Irish Decade of Centenaries (1912-1923). These documents range from personal letters, memoirs, and official papers to contemporary handbills, maps and photographs and help contextualise the decisions and motivations of the men and women, including Austin Stack, who helped shape the revolutionary period in Ireland.

# Key Moments

**1916**  
**-1917**

## **Arrests + Hunger Strikes**

Austin Stack failed to meet the German arms ship, the Aud in April 1916 when it arrived three days early. Arrested shortly afterwards he was sentenced to life in prison. Released in 1917 but quickly rearrested, Stack led a successful hunger strike demanding prisoner-of-war status for himself and his comrades. He was also elected joint secretary of Sinn Féin and onto the executive of the Irish Volunteers in this period.

**1918**

## **Deputy chief of staff of the Volunteers**

Appointed deputy chief of staff of the Volunteers in March, by December Stack had been elected unopposed for Kerry West in the British general election while still imprisoned in Belfast's Crumlin Road Jail.

**1921**

## **Negotiated with Lloyd George**

After the Truce that ended the Irish War of Independence, Austin Stack was part of the team, which included Arthur Griffith, that negotiated cessation terms with British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

**1919**  
**-1920**

## **On the run**

Having been transferred to Strangeways Prison in Manchester in April 1919, Stack escaped in October and went on the run in Ireland. In November 1919 he became Minister for Home Affairs and established the republican courts over the next two years. He also served as deputy chief of staff in the IRA in this period.

**1922**

### **A republican government**

Stack was a staunch opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. In October he helped set up a 'republican government' with other anti-Treaty TDs and was appointed minister for finance in that shadow authority.

**1923  
-1925**

### **Arrested**

In April 1923, Stack was arrested by Free State troops and imprisoned. He led multiple hunger strikes and was elected Sinn Féin TD for Kerry and Limerick West while still in prison. Finally released in July 1924, Stack married Winifred Úna Gordon in August 1925. She was an RIC widow whom he had met in 1920 while still a fugitive.

**1926  
-1929**

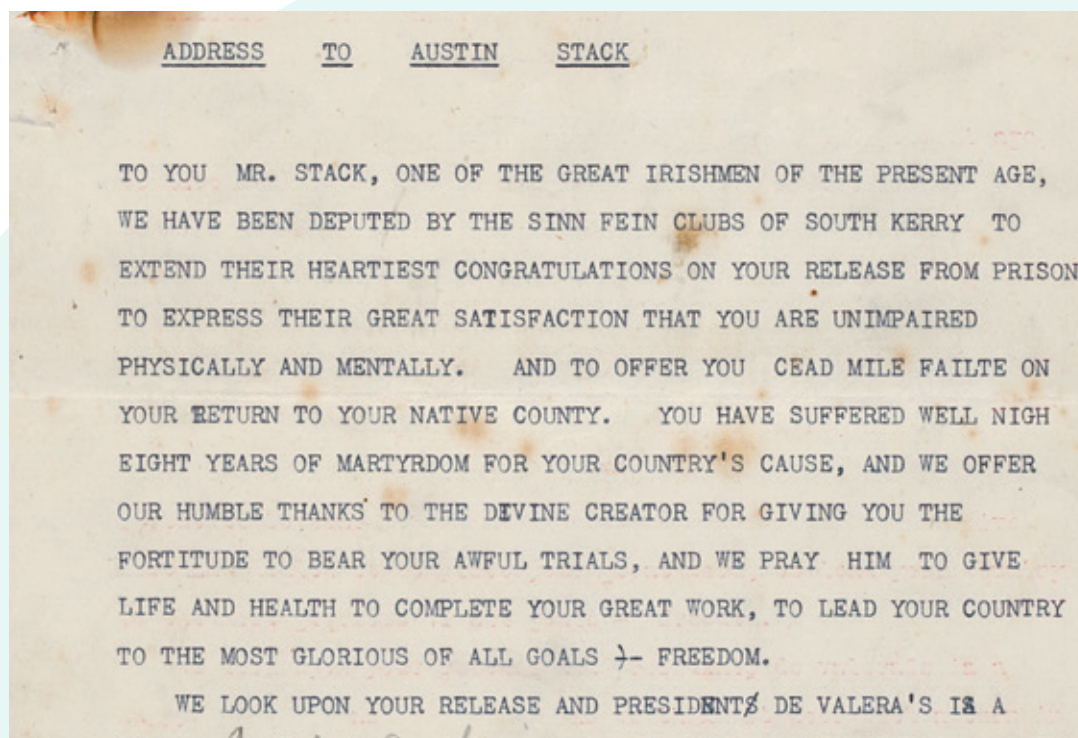
### **Death in 1929**

Austin Stack stayed in Sinn Féin when de Valera left to launch Fianna Fáil in March 1926. In the June 1927 election, he retained his Dáil seat but only after the eleventh count. He took no further part in elected politics. Falling sick with appendicitis, Stack died on 27 April 1929 at the Mater Hospital. He was buried in Glasnevin cemetery.



## GAA

Austin Stack was born in Tralee, County Kerry in 1879 to well-known Fenian and Land League leader William Moore Stack and Nanette Stack (née O'Neill). He was involved in both the Young Ireland Society at a young age and later in the Gaelic League, two organisations which promoted the study of the Irish language as well as the history and literature of Ireland. Leaving school at the age of fourteen, Stack worked his way up to the position of senior clerk in the office of Tralee solicitor John O'Connell. He was also income-tax collector for the Dingle and Caherciveen areas before being dismissed for his openly republican activities. A talented Gaelic footballer, he led his native Kerry team to All-Ireland victory in 1904. He served as President of the GAA Kerry County Board where he helped to reorganise the organisation into a much more effective body.



A typewritten address from Sinn Féin Clubs in South Kerry congratulating Stack on his release from prison in 1924. In Kerry these clubs were associated with both nationalist politics and Gaelic football. You can read this document (MS 17,087/2) in full at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo0780975>

## **Militant Nationalist**

As well as his prominent roles in the Irish cultural revival in Kerry, Austin Stack was a staunch militant activist through his membership of both the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). With his Fenian family background, he was an ideal candidate for the IRB. Cathal Brugha swore him into the secret organisation in 1908 and by the following year he was IRB county centre or chief in Kerry. He helped establish the Irish Volunteer movement in Tralee and, with his GAA credentials and large network of contacts, was widely recognised as its leading figure in the area. Stack was, however, dismissed from his duties as income-tax collector for the Dingle and Caherciveen areas for his active militancy.

In early 1916 Stack began to prepare for the April arrival of a German arms-carrying ship, the Aud, to Fenit Harbour in Kerry. Despite Stack's careful preparations, the German ship carrying 20,000 rifles, one million rounds of ammunition and three machine guns, arrived three days early and was intercepted by the British Navy. In addition, when Roger Casement arrived unexpectedly by German U-boat on Kerry's Banna Strand he was almost immediately captured. Stack was himself arrested that evening when he walked into a RIC station to find out what had happened to Casement. Despite being given a life sentence in June 1916 he was released under a general amnesty in June 1917. In the years after the Irish Civil War Stack claimed that he had had serious concerns about the viability of the Easter Rising after the Aud disaster and was particularly critical of the handling of the 1916 Easter Rising in Kerry.

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**Austin Stack was also a staunch militant activist through his membership of both the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood**

# LANDING OF CASEMENT

## THE AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE

Written by AUSTIN STACK.

### A Historic Document.

TO OUR READERS.

A great many persons were unable to procure a copy of last week's "Kerry Champion" owing to the great run on the issue, consequent on the publication of the first instalment of Austin Stack's gripping narrative of the landing of Sir Roger Casement on the Rathfriland coast on Good Friday 1916. We are therefore re-printing that instalment. Readers and new readers can obtain copy of same from our Newsagents.

#### A FOREWORD.

Very few in the County have any knowledge of the Casement landing in 1916, and the fact that no attempt was made to rescue Casement has naturally surprised a good many people. It has been my intention to write a few lines on the death of Austin Stack, as I happen to be one of the few people who are aware of most of the facts connected with the Casement Landing. Mr. Stack who was aware of my intention found an article on Terence MacSwiney written by him at the request of a French Nun Sister. Mrs. Stack was good enough to forward me this article which gives a very vivid account of Austin's efforts to get in touch with Casement on Good Friday morning 1916. I am adding a few extra notes of my own. These, I think, will not only elucidate a few points casually mentioned by Austin, but be of interest to your readers.

P. S. O'NEATHILL.

I, I rightly remember I first met Terence MacSwiney early in the year 1915. He was then, or had been up to a short time before, an instructor under the Agricultural and Technical Education Committee of the Cork County Council. He either resigned from this post, or was dismissed for political reasons, by the Technical Education Department, which was controlled by the British officials, in Dublin Castle—the Headquarters of the British Government in Ireland. He came into Kerry at the time of my first meeting with him—i.e. if my recollection be correct—for the purpose of inspecting the Irish Volunteers in

great length—the hope of getting material help from Germany being a matter which loomed largely before us, as this was bound to have a very great effect on the prospects of the Insurrection. (As is well known now, the Insurrection was held in Kerry on Easter Monday, 1916, took place on Easter Monday, after it had been called off by Mr. Eoin MacNeill who had been President of the Executive of the Volunteers, and, up to the middle of Holy Week, Chief of Staff of the Army.)

On the night of Holy Thursday, or in the early hours of the following morning, a German submarine had arrived near the coast of Kerry. It had on board Sir Roger Casement, and Robert Monaghan, who had been a Volunteer Instructor in Dublin, and was deported or ordered out of the country by the British in 1915, and an wireless, another named Boney, who had joined the Irish Brigade which Sir Roger Casement had attempted to form from amongst the Irish prisoners in Germany. The submarine placed Casement and his two companions on board a Rai-bottomed boat of Ballybegone Bay, and they succeeded in getting ashore. I began all this some time about nine o'clock on Good Friday morning.

It seems that after they had reached the shore, and attempted to get ashore again the boat from which they had landed, and to proceed in the same manner, small arms, and a flag, and a few personal belongings of Sir Roger Casement, they had set out to reach Tralee, Sir Roger Casement, however, was suffering from the effects of malaria, and was not able to continue the journey for very long. The others, accordingly, complied with his request to leave him in hiding, whilst they proceeded towards Tralee themselves. The distance between the place of disembarkment which Casement had reached

and where we were sent, we had only just entered when the boat was recognized took place in the bay, and the boat which his companions told us the story of embarking on this adventure would appear to be the same. Sir Roger was well known, had gone from America some time had been inspecting the aid for Ireland, but some with very little success, his knowledge, however, sources, that the Irish Volunteers were looking for Germans, which the G not able to offer them.

Monaghan told me what he the view of Sir Roger with regard to the Irish this war, that the same were making at the time, he had determined Ireland to put this view Leaders at home, and the to persuade them he was as an Irish Volunteer to not, and fight with the Irish home, had some the same thing, and had brought with them, as he had had experience of kind in the British Army.

(To be continued)

#### Notes.

(a) In this matter I am in error as there is Casement was the first the Irish Republic and signed by him with the on Easter Sunday 1916, in the evening a visitor at the Stack, Tralee, to understand that he is have and found it a leaf today known as the Cas Carrigrohane document. In the first two pages of the note, he signed inside his shirt and when read its contents. It particularly he gave me a copy of a Treaty of Alliance between Germany and the British Government in Berlin. Looking him with the document he believed and he handed it to me. I believed at the time, but later on I doubted his statement released from Tralee, up but could not connect with this Mr. G. to whom I mentioned stated: "It is a very of the document mentioned, but or destroyed. The Germany in a history of it is not clear that the had an express authority end with the area also but found it was not possible Casement was in fact he received a wire five day or two before he was known and got up from



SIR ROGER CASEMENT.

(The Nation.)



## VOTE No. 1 AUSTIN STACK.

Published by D. J. Browne, Solicitor, Tralee, Election Agent for the Candidate, and Printed by Tralee Printing Works, Courthouse Place.

A newspaper article, written by Stack but published after his death in 1929, giving an 'authentic narrative' of Roger Casement's landing in Kerry. You can find out more about this document (MS 17,075/8) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0779978>

An election leaflet for the 1918 British general election with Stack's photograph on it. You can find about more about this handbill (MS 17,073/1) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0779609>

## **Political Prisoner**

Austin Stack was not only influential in the Irish Volunteers and in the IRB, but he was also heavily involved in republican politics as a member of Sinn Féin. Imprisoned in Mountjoy Prison in August 1917, he led a strike demanding prisoner-of-war status for himself and his comrades. The hunger strike which followed, and in which Thomas Ashe died, was ultimately successful in achieving its aims. He went on another two hunger strikes before being released in November 1917. By the end of that year Stack had been elected joint secretary of Sinn Féin and by March 1918 was also deputy chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers. Arrested once again in May and imprisoned in Belfast's Crumlin Road Jail, Stack led yet another hunger strike alongside seventy other Sinn Féin prisoners. In the British general election of December 1918, he was elected as MP for Kerry West while still a prisoner.

## **Prison Escapee**

In April 1919 Austin Stack was transferred to Manchester's Strangeways Prison. Although their relationship would deteriorate later on, Michael Collins was impressed with Stack and determined to break him out. Taking personal charge of the escape plan, Collins, under a false name, visited Stack in Strangeways to confirm the final details. On 28 October 1919, six prisoners including Stack and Piaras Béaslaí overcame a warden while their confederates outside threw a rope ladder over the 35-foot wall of the jail yard. Stack was the first man over the wall. He clambered onto another ladder that had been set against the outside wall by their accomplices and was able to climb down to the street below. A crowd had been drawn by the prison break, but they were held back by a large group of armed Irish republicans, allowing all of the prisoners to make their escape. Stack would be on the run for the rest of the Irish War of Independence.

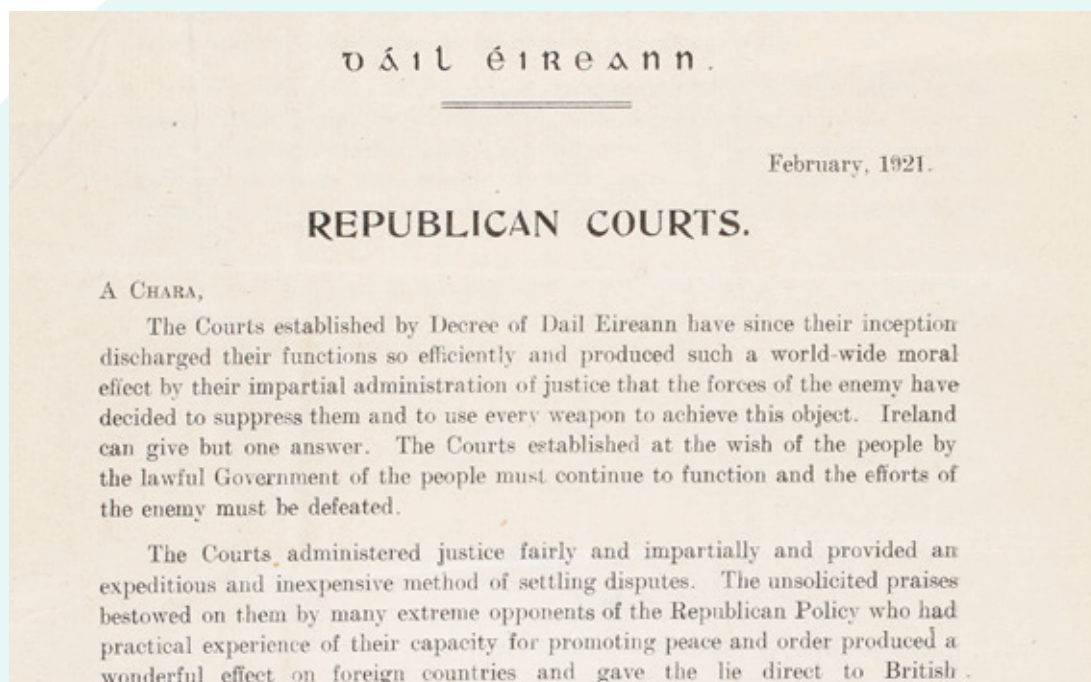




## Minister

Following his prison escape Austin Stack was smuggled back to Dublin and took over as Minister for Home Affairs from Arthur Griffith shortly afterwards. During his time as minister, Stack's most important achievement was the creation and administration of the Dáil courts which attempted to replace the British system of justice in Ireland.

In 1919 Stack established republican arbitration courts, a Supreme Court, district courts, and parish courts to make the British justice system in Ireland effectively redundant. A republican police force was also set up to support these Dáil courts. Operating under the increasing pressure of martial law in Ireland, the republican courts still managed to function fairly effectively across the island, except in parts of Ulster. Stack was widely credited with the establishment of the courts and their success boosted the cause of Irish independence abroad. The popularity of the Dáil courts reached its highest point after the truce of July 1921 but gradually they lost their usefulness. Once the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been ratified, the British gradually handed over all legal powers to the new Provisional Government. The courts that Stack had created were then formally abolished in October 1922.



A circular letter of February 1921 stating that the Dáil was 'determined that the Courts must continue to function' despite the serious pressure that British crown forces were exerting on their operations. You can find out more about this document (MS 49,356/9/5) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo588468>

## Anti-Treatyite

Austin Stack fiercely opposed the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He did everything he could to sway the vote and prevent the Dáil from ratifying the agreement. Stack went on a speaking tour to the United States in early 1922 to try and rally Irish-American support to the anti-Treaty side. His very public opposition to the Treaty agreement led to his replacement as Minister for Home Affairs by Eamon Duggan in January 1922. On Stack's return from America, he was once again forced to take up a fugitive life as the Irish Civil War had broken out.

Austin Stack's active opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty continued right through the period of the Irish Civil War. He became the director of finance for the anti-Treaty forces. Through the strong personal connections that he had built up in his native Kerry, he was also a leader in the Munster anti-Treaty movement, politically and militarily. In October 1922, Stack followed de Valera and other anti-Treaty TDs into a shadow 'republican government' in which he was appointed Minister for Finance.

Eventually captured and imprisoned by Irish Free State forces in April 1923, Austin Stack now went on his final hunger strike. His forty-one-day hunger strike in Kilmainham Gaol, to improve the conditions of anti-Treaty prisoners, was a part of a wider campaign involving other Irish prisons which at one point included 8,000 inmates. As an implacable opponent of the Treaty, Stack was kept in prison until July 1924 despite the end of the Irish Civil War in May 1923. While in prison he was elected as Sinn Féin TD for Kerry and Limerick West.

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**He did everything he could to  
sway the vote and prevent the  
Dáil from ratifying the agreement**

18. 3. '23.

My dear Winnie,

Vale! Vale! Vale!

I wonder is it. But anyway you won't get this unless I fail to return from a journey I am going on tonight. I expect to be back in a few days, and with God's help I shall.

It is ridiculous I know to be writing farewells, but you will never know.

I have little to say - no rhetoric to indulge in to you. Simply I have tried to keep to the straight path in life in national matters particularly. If I have deviated I am unaware of the lapse. I may not have done all my duty perhaps, but I have done about my best. My conscience is clear on that account anyhow.

Shall I send you a personal word? I shall not offend you by ~~not~~ expressing thanks for all yo

A letter of 18 March 1923, during the Irish Civil War, from Stack to his future wife Winifred Gordon saying goodbye in case he did not return from his planned journey. You can find out more about this document (MS 22,398/11) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtl5000781681/HierarchyTree>

The Clan-Na-Gael Expresses Sorrow on the death of Austin Stack

The Clan-Na-Gael of America, through its national officers, sends its heart-felt condolence to the bereft wife of the late lamented Austin Stack, one of Ireland's trusted leaders.

We condemn as cruel and despicable the hounding of this noted patriot by the English "Free State" officials, whose inhuman treatment has driven him to a premature grave.

We call upon his friends and comrades to resolve at his bier to continue with renewed energy the struggle which claimed the best years of his life and his wholehearted devotion.

A public notice from Clan na Gael in America expressing the organisation's condolences for the 'late lamented Austin Stack, one of Ireland's trusted heroes'. You can find out more about this document (MS 17,489/25) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtl5000610339>

## **Political Failure**

Austin Stack was re-elected as joint secretary at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in November 1924. When de Valera and his supporters split from Sinn Féin in March 1926 and set up Fianna Fáil, Stack called de Valera's departure a 'betrayal of the Republic' and stayed with the party. He was firmly in the minority though with the rank and file of Sinn Féin switching their support wholesale to Fianna Fáil. The establishment of this new political rival shattered Sinn Féin which now only had the finances to run fifteen candidates in the June 1927 general election. Stack retained his seat in Kerry and Limerick West but only just. Sinn Féin's poor financial situation left Stack without the campaign funds to run in the September 1927 election and his career as an elected representative was now over.

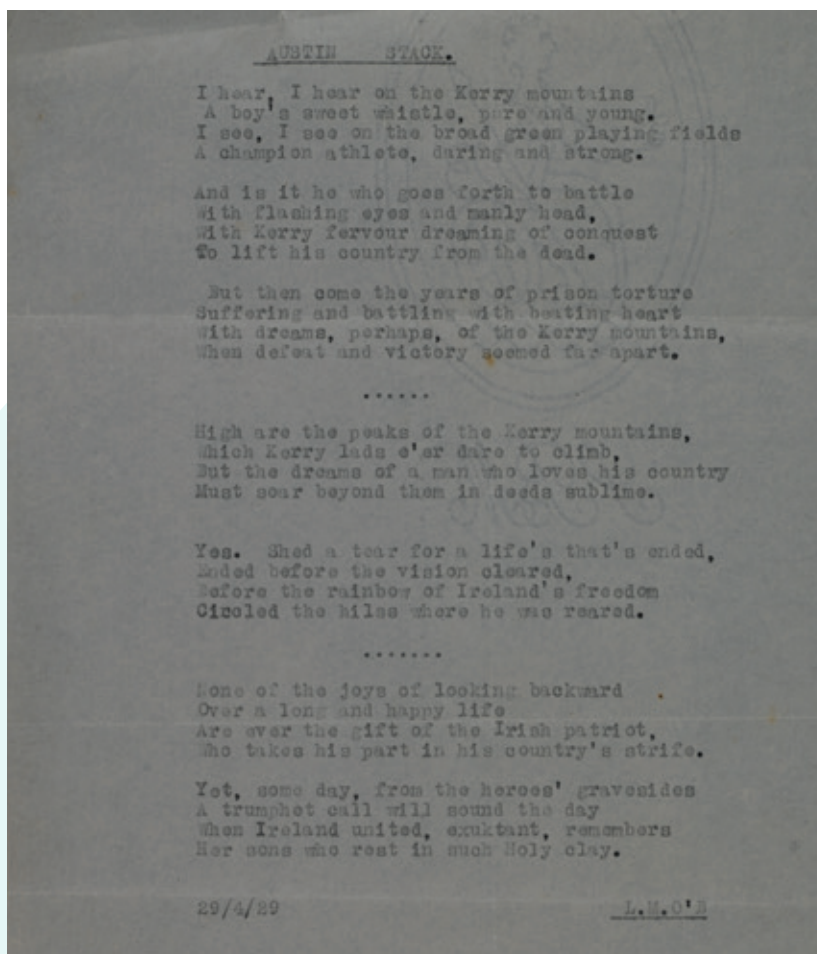
Life as a fugitive in both the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War as well as the multiple hunger strikes that he had undertaken while in prison left Austin Stack in poor health by 1924. His wellbeing was further undermined by systematic harassment from the Irish Free State authorities with his office routinely raided by an Garda Síochána. On 10 August 1925 Stack married the widow of an RIC inspector, Winifred Úna Gordon, in whose house he had stayed while on the run in 1920. Less than four years later on 27 April 1929, Austin Stake died of complications arising from appendicitis in Dublin's Mater Hospital and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery.

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**Stack called de Valera's  
departure a 'betrayal of the  
Republic' and stayed with  
the party**

## Conclusion

Austin Stack made a considerable contribution to Ireland's struggle for independence as Sinn Féin politician, militant republican, and GAA player. Working politically as an MP, TD, and Minister, Stack was also active in the military operations of the IRA and the anti-Treaty forces. Perhaps best known for his creation and administration of the Dáil Courts, Stack remained violently opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty and never accepted the new Irish Free State. He later broke with de Valera over what he felt was a betrayal of their republican principles. Living the life of a fugitive and enduring harsh prison conditions and multiple hunger strikes, Stack's health suffered greatly throughout the Irish revolutionary period leading to his premature death at just 49 years of age. His name lives on in Ireland today through the famous Austin Stacks GAA club in his native Tralee, County Kerry.



A poem written by republican nationalist Lily O'Brennan in Stack's memory two days after his death. It highlights his dedication to Irish nationalism as well as his prominent career in the GAA. You can find out more about this poem (MS 41,501/3/19) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo588052>



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