Eamon de Valera: A Will to Power

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Éamon de Valera (1882–1975) is considered by many to be the most significant political figure in 20th-century Ireland. He remains controversial and his achievements and legacy have often been challenged. In this new biography Ronan Fanning makes a very persuasive case that de Valera was indeed significant and that his achievements were considerable. His study challenges the negative conclusions drawn by Coogan that de Valera ‘did little that was useful and much that was harmful’. He has set the bar very high for future assessments of de Valera. Though the book is relatively short his judgement on most issues is balanced, well informed and judicious. Drawing on recent scholarship and his own research, Fanning provides the reader with an even-handed and reliable assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of an individual who was at the center of Irish politics from 1917 to 1959 and subsequently served two terms as President of Ireland.

It is telling that a case has to be made that de Valera is important or indeed that his contribution was significant. Born in New York, raised by an uncle in Ireland he was sentenced to death for his involvement in the 1916 rising. Reprieved, he became the public face of Sinn Fein and the republican movement during the war of independence. His political career seemed over when he opposed the treaty that established the Irish Free State and supported the insurgents in the civil war against the new government. Nevertheless, in 1926 he established a new political party, Fianna Fáil, which became the largest party in 1932, remaining so until 2011. De Valera served as head of government for 21 years between 1932 and 1959, the longest in 20th-century Europe. Moreover, he transformed the state’s relationship with Britain, introduced a new constitution as well as guiding Ireland’s most successful political party through some of the most difficult times for a democratic state in inter-war Europe (1932–45). The Irish state and Ireland’s political culture bears the mark of his actions into the 21st-century.

Despite this, opinion has always been divided about de Valera’s achievement and his legacy. He was criticised as a dictator by political opponents who ‘could never forgive’ his stance in the civil war. He was blamed for the severe economic circumstances of the 1950s and came to symbolise conservative Catholic Ireland for a new generation of Irish liberals after 1970. Critics of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ also highlighted his failure to solve partition, or to halt the decline of the Irish language. One of the merits of Fanning’s book is that he pays close attention to historical complexity, while providing persuasive explanations for actions
taken and not taken. At the heart of the book is the sub title ‘A Will to Power’ and this is the study’s distinctive feature. Fanning emphasises the importance of de Valera’s self-confidence, his self-belief and his ability to persuade others that his position was the correct one to follow.

Questions of agency and structure come to mind when evaluating de Valera’s career as presented here. At the age of 14 he demanded that his mother send him the money for passage to the United States or that he be permitted to continue his education against the wishes of his uncle. In the event, de Valera stayed in Ireland and became the politician and statesman revealed in this book. This implies that individuals make a difference and although the author does not make this claim his emphasis on de Valera’s will to power suggests such a view. This biography provides considerable evidence for the importance of individual agency but also how structural factors constrain even the most powerful agent. Would Ireland would have been significantly different if de Valera had returned to the United States or been executed after the 1916 Rising?(5)

Fanning’s reading of de Valera’s leads to the conclusion that, contra Coogan, de Valera achieved much and that Ireland would have been different in his absence. The author paints a picture of a man who is self-possessed, confident in his own opinion; independent minded, but also authoritarian and arrogant. This was most notoriously in evidence during the ‘Treat’ debates when he asserted: ‘whenever I wanted to know what the Irish people wanted I had only to examine my own heart and it told me straight off what the Irish people wanted’. This is not an isolated speech and it reinforced an elitist anti-liberal world view that was never entirely shaken in later years.(6) Fanning shows how his incisiveness gained de Valera the respect of members of the Irish Volunteers prior to the 1916 rising. This respect turned to adulation in the years after his return from prison in 1917 and the author notes that by 1919 ‘de Valera and his colleagues were already behaving as if his pronouncements were infallible and his authority unassailable’ (p. 74)

Fanning suggests that de Valera ‘survived 1916 because he was unknown’ (p. 45). If this is the case, he turned his survival into an advantage to become the symbol of Irish republicanism between 1917 and 1919. The author argues that de Valera turned his back on soldiering in 1917, ‘because he wanted to become a politician’ (p. 53). Though strictly accurate, de Valera owed his success at the East Clare by election in 1917 to his position as the most senior surviving leader of the 1916 rising. Moreover, the revived Sinn Fein party had all the appearances of a paramilitary organisation during the election campaign and in its subsequent evolution. De Valera was elected President of Sinn Fein in 1917 and simultaneously president of the Irish Volunteers (later the IRA), bringing the two sides of Irish republicanism together. In contrast to other political parties in Ireland at the time, Sinn Fein was not prepared to accept the legitimacy of the British state or its parliamentary system. Basing their reasoning on nationalism, Sinn Fein apologists argued that the basis for decision making was the island of Ireland rather than the British state and therefore decisions arrived at in Ireland were superior to those agreed by the British parliament. During the conscription crisis in 1917 a national consensus rejected the right of the British government to impose conscription without the agreement of Ireland’s elected representatives. De Valera achieved national prominence as a result of his election and his leadership during the opposition to conscription. He successfully brought the Irish Bishops on board and neutralised the influence of more moderate politicians. His successful leadership during 1917 laid the basis for Sinn Fein’s landslide election victory in December 1918, demonstrating the veracity of the author’s claim that it was during 1917 that ‘he carved out his path to power’ (p. 47).

De Valera believed that his election and Sinn Fein’s victory in December 1918 provided retrospective vindication for the 1916 rising. However, there is little justification for such a view in international law or theology at the time. The rising was an unrepresentative coup d’état which ran counter to the wishes of the majority of nationalists. Nevertheless, Sinn Fein’s electoral victory changed the political and moral environment considerably. While it did not make the demand for independence legitimate in international law, it did provide a democratic justification for such a demand. Sinn Fein had fought the election on an abstentionist basis and for an independent republic, while demanding representation at the Paris Peace Conference. However, the Irish case was rejected by President Wilson and the allied powers at the conference. De Valera threatened that ‘violence will be the only alternative left’ (p. 75) if the Peace
Conference did not support self-determination for Ireland. De Valera was preparing for war in 1919 and his language is suffused with militaristic images. Fanning recognises that de Valera played no active role in the violence of 1919–21 (he was in the United States most of the time), but legitimised it by writing ‘a presidential blank cheque covering the killings that would take place while he was away’ (p. 79).

Fanning provides an authoritative assessment of de Valera’s time in the United States, emphasising his failure to persuade Wilson’s Administration to recognise Ireland as an independent state. Nor was the President prepared to abandon his support for the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom. De Valera was a lot more successful in generating support for the Irish case among Irish Americans and he successfully raised $6 million for an external loan.

The discussion on the divisions that appeared in Irish nationalist politics during negotiations with the British government in 1921 is compelling and persuasive. Despite his enormous prestige, de Valera refused to go to London to negotiate with Britain. The Irish delegation was ill-prepared and outmatched by its British counterparts during the negotiations. Fanning teases out de Valera’s position in some detail and implies that he failed politically by refusing to take responsibility for the negotiations. Instead he remained aloof from them and fatally never considered that the ‘ultimate decision about the agreement might be made in London and not in Dublin’ (p. 113). By remaining outside the negotiations and holding himself as the final arbiter of the outcome, de Valera undermined his own authority. Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins established an alternative source of authority when they finally signed the Treaty, effectively challenging de Valera’s dominance. The limits to individual agency can be appreciated here. De Valera believed he could undermine the Treaty because he opposed it, but failed to do so. He lost the support of the majority of the cabinet, then the majority in the Dáil and finally the majority in the country. Yet, despite this he refused to accept the will of the majority over his will on this as on other issues. He quickly associated himself with the most intransigent sections of the republican moment and in effect created the political conditions for civil war.

Fanning makes a telling point that de Valera opposed the compromise negotiated by Griffith and Collins because it ‘was not his compromise’. But de Valera’s critics then and subsequently responded that he could have joined the negotiations at any time and had a direct impact. Another reading might be that de Valera remained an extremist and continued to identify with a militarist anti-political belief system. There is evidence from his speeches at this time to sustain such a view and when the civil war came he fully identified with the insurgents. Here again agency is relevant. What might have happened if de Valera had stood aside from the conflict? He might not have prevented the civil war, but he might have limited its impact. Fanning reserves his harshest words for de Valera’s behaviour during this period; ‘His behaviour in the immediate aftermath of the Treaty, in sum, was petulant, inflammatory, ill judged, and profoundly undemocratic’ (p. 266). The case of Seán O’Hegarty officer commanding the First Cork Brigade, IRA at the time of the Treaty offers a contrast to de Valera. O’Hegarty opposed the Treaty and considered it a betrayal of the republic. However, he refused to take up arms during the civil war recognising the dangers inherent in doing just that. His colleagues who fought believed that his absence weakened the military position of the insurgents. (7)

It is arguable that if de Valera had died in 1924, his political life would have been considered a failure. The standing he had acquired was undermined and he never again regained the authority or loyalty he had experienced between 1917 and 1922. The years between 1924 and 1926 provided the incentive for de Valera to finally become a democratic politician, perhaps for the first time. He reluctantly recognised that the Irish Free State had majority support and had gained legitimacy among the public and republicans had to come to terms with this. While de Valera was prepared to challenge the new state and indeed destabilise it, he was not prepared to use violence to do so. This acknowledged political reality but it also recognised that democratic politics could achieve what force could not. De Valera never admitted that the civil war was wrong but in practice every political decision he made between 1923 and 1932 sustains such a view.

In 1926 de Valera established Fianna Fáil which became the most successful party in independent Ireland and remained the largest party at every election between 1932 and 2007. When Kevin O’Higgins the
Minister for Justice was murdered in 1927, the government forced Fianna Fáil to end its abstentionist policy and enter the Dáil (parliament). In reviewing this period Fanning concludes that de Valera achieved his main aims: to situate republican opposition within Parliament and acknowledge that “Irish parliamentary democracy was no longer seriously flawed” (p. 155). Yet Fianna Fáil remained what Seán Lemass called ‘a slightly constitutional’ and an anti-system party until 1932. Irish democracy was not secure by this time, but it was stronger than it had been in 1924. Fianna Fáil successfully challenged Cumann na nGaedheal between 1927 and 1932, forming its first government in the latter year.

What is remarkable is the extent to which Ireland was transformed by de Valera and Fianna Fáil between 1932 and 1938. By 1938 Ireland was a republic in all but name, though the state remained a Dominion. Its sovereignty was widely recognised and the 1938 Anglo-Irish Agreements provided de Valera with the means to declare Ireland neutral in the Second World War. Change was incremental if not gradual and the British state did not seriously confront the new administration as it moved further away from the Treaty settlement. It is clear from Fanning’s discussion that though de Valera irritated the British he did not alienate them or push them into an impossible position. Though incremental, the changes were radical. This was a remarkable achievement which was due to de Valera’s political ability and British flexibility. What was achieved in diplomatic terms in the 1930s by de Valera confirmed Collins’s view that the Irish Free State provided the freedom to achieve freedom. Fanning is particularly attentive to foreign policy, rightly so as de Valera was Minister for External Affairs from 1932 to 1948 as well as head of government (Taoiseach after 1937). He concludes that ‘The case for ascribing greatness to de Valera rests on his conduct of foreign policy, which gives him a larger claim than any other twentieth-century Irish politician to the title statesman’, placing de Valera alongside Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle (p. 266). Fanning’s assessment of Irish neutrality during the Second World War is positive and he provides a close reading of de Valera’s visit to the German Minister in Dublin to offer his condolences on Hitler’s death. The author notes that de Valera was unapologetic, suggesting that there is ‘no better epigram for that impregnable sense of self-righteousness that characterised de Valera’s behaviour throughout his political career’ (p. 196).

My reservation here is that the emphasis on foreign policy deflects the reader from other equally important achievements. The 1937 constitution was and in my opinion remains de Valera’s crowning achievement. It established a republican foundation for political order while reconciling the competing demands of Catholicism, democracy, liberalism and nationalism. It also proved flexible enough to negotiate the challenges from a changing society after 1970, sometimes in ways that de Valera would not have intended. Many later criticisms of the constitution are a-historical as Fanning shows. This is the case in respect of the articles dealing with religion. Though personally pious, de Valera drafted these articles on an inclusive basis and rejected the integralist and authoritarian Catholicism promoted by the Vatican. While recognising the special position of the Catholic Church, the constitution also recognised the Protestant churches and the Jewish Community in Ireland. The latter was a dramatic liberal statement of inclusion in a context of widespread anti-Semitism in Europe. Despite intensive diplomatic efforts the Pope was not persuaded to endorse the constitution, but agreed to remain neutral. De Valera also secured a consensus between church and state that successfully regulated their relationship for three decades, while defending the state’s independence and its interests. Fianna Fáil defenestration of the report of the Commission on Vocational Organisation (a corporatist and clericalist document) in 1944 would not have occurred without de Valera’s say so. Notwithstanding this positive assessment, account needs to be taken of the negative impact of de Valera’s compromise with the Catholic Church. The 1937 Constitution outlawed divorce, while all access to contraception was prohibited. Censorship was particularly heavy handed in respect of information about birth-control, in effect denying individuals the right to be informed about a serious public issue. The compromise with the Church also legitimised majoritarian intolerance of minorities and intrusions into the personal life of families (pp. 230–37).

It is also possible to underestimate the successful consolidation of Irish democracy by de Valera and Fianna Fáil in the 1930s. Fianna Fáil was transformed from an anti-system party with close links to the IRA into an active promoter and defender of democracy. De Valera successfully defeated extra-parliamentary challenges from the rightist Blueshirt movement (which included Fine Gael the main opposition party) and from his
former allies the IRA. Furthermore, Fianna Fáil’s political success between 1932 and 1938 integrated disaffected sections of the society into the democratic system, making parliamentary politics the only game in town. Only the rump of the IRA remained unreconciled to what de Valera achieved. In a comparative context this was a considerable achievement. Irish democracy was probably not secured until 1938 and de Valera’s contribution is considerable and significant. Ireland is one of only two newly independent states that remained democratic in 1939. The challenges to Irish democracy were certainly as deadly as those faced by states that ceased to be democratic during the 1920s and 1930s, yet Ireland successfully negotiated these difficult times and in contrast to Finland reinforced its democratic system.\(^{(9)}\)

My other reservation is Fanning’s claim that ‘economic prosperity was not a priority for Éamon de Valera and he never saw it as an essential element in his bid for power’ (p. 156). De Valera may not have given economic issues priority but his party did. While de Valera clearly gave priority to constitutional and diplomatic matters, it would be mistaken to ignore the social basis of Fianna Fáil’s political success. Fianna Fáil attracted working class and trade union support in urban Ireland as well as lower income rural workers on the basis of social reform and welfare. Fianna Fáil was never simply another nationalist party, but occupied the reform-progressive political ground that might have been represented by a social-democratic party elsewhere (and Fine Gael clearly occupied the conservative right). The closest comparison with Fianna Fáil is the New Deal Democratic Party led by Franklin Roosevelt a comparison that was frequently made by American observers at the time and indeed by de Valera. Both were national parties committed to moderate reform and a counter-cyclical policy to address the challenges of the Depression. Both introduced rudimentary welfare systems that marked a considerable improvement on what previously existed. However, unlike social democratic parties neither was committed to egalitarianism or redistribution. Account also needs to be taken of the fact that the party established by de Valera participated in government for 60 out of 96 years of the state. These political achievements require more detailed assessment as they have influenced the course of Irish politics into the 21st-century.

This is not to say that all achievements were positive. De Valera’s refusal to acknowledge the extent of unionist opposition to a united Ireland or to recognise their British identity maintained the sense of grievance among nationalists and the siege mentality of unionists that led to the outbreak of violence in the 1960s. His dominance of foreign policy weakened Ireland’s international position in post war Europe and the state was slow to recognise or respond to the changes that occurred in Europe after 1945. It may be here that de Valera’s personal agency had the most negative impact. Fanning pay less attention to this period on the grounds that ‘the great things were done’ (p.225) but there is a case to be made that de Valera obstructed change at the very time when Ireland needed to re-evaluate its political, economic and diplomatic foundations. This did not occur until the 1960s and then it was too late to avert the long decline that the society had experienced.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Fanning’s book convinces this reader that de Valera was indeed the most significant political figure in twentieth century Ireland and that his legacy was profound and influential. If individuals do make a difference in history, de Valera should be placed in this category.

Notes

3. Maryann Giellanella Valiulis, “‘The Man They Could Never Forgive’ – the view of the opposition: Eamon de Valera and the Civil War’ in *The Achievement of Eamon de Valera*, ed. John P. O’Carroll and John A. Murphy 92–100.\(^{(3)}\)
4. It may be more accurate to say ‘De Valera’s Irelands’ as alternative meanings exist; see *De Valera’s Irelands*, ed. Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh (Cork, 2003), pp. 7–8.\(^{(4)}\)

6. His colleague and successor Seán Lemass describes how de Valera ‘relied upon the force of physical exhaustion to get agreement’, cited in Brian Farrell, *Chairman or Chief? The Role of the Taoiseach in Irish Government* (Dublin, 1971), p. 30. [Back to (6)]


8. The state harassment of theatre director Alan Simpson in 1957 is not treated by Fanning, but is one of the most puzzling cases of church-state complicity. *Spiked: Church-State Intrigue and the Rose Tattoo*, ed. Gerard Whelan with Carolyn Swift (Dublin, 2002). [Back to (8)]


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