

## **Eamon de Valera and the Making of Ireland**

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The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of a right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live.

—Eamon de Valera<sup>1</sup>

For much of its history, Ireland was a colonized nation firmly under the control of England. The Irish people entered the twentieth century far behind other European nations because they were not able, under English rule, to develop a strong economy or an independent national identity. These problems stem partly from the Act of Union in 1801, which linked Ireland and England closely and abolished the Irish Parliament. Furthermore, the Great Famine of 1845-1848 created great discontent among Irish citizens, and this discontent that was still strongly felt in the early 1900s.<sup>2</sup> In 1916, Irish nationalists rebelled against the English in the famous Easter Rising in an attempt to gain home rule. After the inevitable failure of the 1916 Rising, the movement for Irish nationalism remained strong, eventually leading to negotiations between the Irish and the English. In 1922, with negotiations between rebel leaders Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith and the English, southern Ireland was proclaimed an “independent state within the British Commonwealth” (Irish Free State), while six Northern counties—Ulster—remained under English control.<sup>3</sup> This compromise brought about civil war over the status of Ireland. Those adamant about creating an Irish Republic fought those who supported the compromise that created the Irish Free State. This civil war gave rise to one of Ireland’s most famous, successful, and controversial leaders—Eamon de Valera. According to historian Tim Pat Coogan, since the 1916 Rising, de Valera “had been the greatest single emotive force in [Ireland]...and from 1932, he became the greatest political force also.”<sup>4</sup> De Valera served as a Volunteer Commander in the 1916 Rising and would later become Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and President of the Irish Republic that he created.<sup>5</sup> De Valera is one of Ireland’s most intriguing political figures because of the controversy that surrounded him both in his lifetime and since his death. Because he ruled Ireland, for nearly fifty years, almost as a type of “dictator,” de Valera has become reviled by many. However, because of his devotion to Irish nationalism and his great accomplishments, he is revered by just as many. Regardless of how a student of history ultimately views de Valera, it is indisputable that he had (and still has) a great influence on Irish culture. In forming an opinion about de Valera, it is important to consider how

this leader came to power and how he influenced Irish culture with his power. Both his political and cultural influence greatly effect Ireland today.

Historian Tim Pat Coogan writes that the best way to understand de Valera's "creation" of Ireland is to look at the ten years—1928-1938—in which he gained and consolidated his power. In the first five years of this period, de Valera gained power from his political party, Fianna Fail, which is often described as "the best organized and most effective political party in Ireland" and by launching his own newspaper, the Irish Press. Coogan goes on to describes the second five years of "de Valera's decade" as a period in which he consolidated his power by separating Ireland from England and by drafting the Constitution of 1937.<sup>6</sup> Through a closer look at these years in de Valera's career, students of history can understand how this important figure controlled Irish culture and can better decide whether his actions should be looked at in a positive or negative light.

### A Rebel in the Making

Although Irish to the end, Eamon de Valera was neither born in Ireland, nor was he 100% Irish. De Valera was born in New York in 1882; his father was a Spanish musician and his mother a poor Irish immigrant from Bruee in County Limerick. De Valera's father died when he was only two years old, and the boy was taken to live in Ireland with his mother's brother.<sup>7</sup> His rearing in Ireland with his mother's family seems to offer some insight into his nationalistic heart and into the reasons he governed Ireland as he did . De Valera was brought up in rural Ireland during a time of heightened nationalist sentiment. In fact, his mother's brother, his guardian, was quite political.<sup>8</sup> As a child, Eamon was raised to believe that "constitutional methods could not induce Britain to concede justice to Ireland."<sup>9</sup> It seems that he took these beliefs and put them into action during his reign as leader of Ireland. De Valera was raised on a farm where, "from [his] earliest days [he] participated in every operation that takes place on a farm."<sup>10</sup> His early days—surrounded by farming, poverty, and often land disputes—point to his campaign promises, during his rise to power, about land issues and the support of rural laborers. Furthermore, de Valera biographer Tim Pat Coogan points out that de Valera's obsession with strict church marriage rules in his 1937 Constitution may have come from possible doubts about whether his own parents were actually married at the time of his birth. This confusion came from the impossibility of identifying a birth certificate with both his parents' names on it.<sup>11</sup> As a child in Ireland, de Valera grew up hearing the Irish language but never learned to speak it. Again, according to Coogan, this inability to speak Irish may well be why de Valera later "turned to the Irish language as part of a process of creating an identity for himself."<sup>12</sup>

While attending college, de Valera began to see politics as an interesting phenomenon. In one of his college papers, he wrote, "Englishmen, even the most liberal among them, with one or two notable exception, have never been able to understand the needs of Ireland properly."<sup>13</sup> These early writings indicate his knowledge about Irish politics and even suggest a fierce drive to change the political situation. During the years leading to the Easter Rising, de Valera became increasingly more political and joined the Gaelic League, which worked at promoting the Irish language and Irish culture. His work in the League led him to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), which would later become the main instigators of the Easter Rising that de Valera took part in.<sup>14</sup> De

Valera's participation in the Rising was only the beginning to his political career. He would go on to be one of the strongest opponents of the Irish Free State under Michael Collins, and from that opposition would grow his personal mission of creating an Irish Republic.

## The Rise to Power

De Valera's political career began to get underway seriously when, in 1926, he formed his own political party, Fianna Fail (Warriors of Destiny). He explained in a speech that he formed Fianna Fail because "it is only by political means that [Ireland] can hope for any measure of success in the near future."<sup>15</sup> The party's ideal were welcomed during the depressed Twenties and Fianna Fail gained strength partly because of the conditions in Ireland at the time: an economic depression caused by losing the six northern counties in the Irish Partition Treaty of 1922 (Ulster was a center of industry), a civil war that physically and mentally exhausted people, high unemployment, and heavy violence from the Irish Republican Army (IRA).<sup>16</sup> Fianna Fail appealed to the masses, focusing on the electors in rural areas and promising to ease Ireland's problems.<sup>17</sup>

In a 1926 press statement listing five aims, de Valera outlined how Fianna Fail would ease Ireland's problems:

1. Securing the political independence of a united Ireland as a republic.
2. The restoration of the Irish language and the development of a native Irish culture.
3. The development of a social system in which, as far as possible, equal opportunity will be afforded to every Irish citizen to live a noble and useful Christian life.
4. The distribution of the land of Ireland so as to get the greatest number possible of Irish families rooted in the soil of Ireland.
5. The making of Ireland an economic unit, as self-contained and self-sufficient as possible—with a proper balance between agriculture and the other essential industries.<sup>18</sup>

Fianna Fail's aims foreshadowed what was to come in Ireland. The party also appealed to the Irish because it was the Republican Party—it was quintessentially nationalistic. De Valera's campaign generated an excitement that had not been seen since the rebels rose in 1916. In speeches, he assured citizens that Fianna Fail was taking "the best means at [their] disposal to re-establish the Republic." He proudly told fellow citizens that "though we are in the British Commonwealth today, we are not of it."<sup>19</sup> In addition, most of his speeches had reoccurring themes about the Catholic Church and the Irish language. These themes were "as dogmatic about Irish identity as [they were] flattering to national pride."<sup>20</sup> De Valera's persona as "the ultimate Irish Catholic" helped in his quest for power; his attitudes appealed to citizens, especially women.<sup>21</sup> With promises of tackling Ireland's social and economic problems, de Valera won the support of the Labor Party, and with a strong nationalistic spirit, he won over IRA members.<sup>22</sup> By June of 1927, Fianna Fail had gained a number of seats in the Dail (national assembly).<sup>23</sup> Between 1927 and 1931, Eamon de Valera campaigned not only in Ireland but in America as well. In the United States, he successfully used a "sentimental appeal"<sup>24</sup> to get hundreds of Irish-Americans to invest in his campaign to launch a daily newspaper.<sup>25</sup> In 1931, de Valera founded the Irish Press, a newspaper that he would use to heighten awareness and gain support of his campaign. Furthermore, he would use the paper to combat other newspapers' negative views of him and of Fianna Fail. Along with Fianna

Fail's image and the economic plight Ireland found itself in, the Irish Press acted as a catalyst to de Valera's success.<sup>26</sup> His efforts were successful, and in the election of February 1932, Fianna Fail won 72 seats in the Dail, enough to allow de Valera to form a government.<sup>27</sup> De Valera had successfully gained power and was now ready to create what he had promised—an Irish Republic.

### De Valera's Ireland

De Valera wasted little time in beginning what he promised, starting with his supreme priority—independence. His first steps were to abolish the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown and the office of Governor General, which would be replaced by the office of president.<sup>28</sup> De Valera also renamed the Irish Free State Eire, or Ireland.<sup>29</sup> These were the first steps to distance Ireland from the British Commonwealth. Furthermore, de Valera did not ignore his promises made to laborers. He encouraged farmers to grow wheat, he offered unemployment assistance, and he initiated a house-building campaign. He discouraged foreign investment and spread factories to the countryside to offer employment in rural areas.<sup>30</sup> De Valera had begun to create his Ireland, and by 1936, he was described as a “unique dictator” who managed to run a country where opponents were virtually ineffectual.<sup>31</sup> In 1936, the abdication of King Edward VIII of England would provide an open door to further separate Ireland from England. De Valera used the event to introduce the Bunreacht na hEireann (The Irish Constitution, literally “Ireland's basic law”) in 1937.<sup>32</sup> De Valera, in his own words, wanted to create a constitution that would “inspire as well as control, elicit loyalty as well as compel it.”<sup>33</sup> The Bunreacht na hEireann was to be the document that would culturally shape Ireland and, later, cause so much controversy.

Two reoccurring themes in the Constitution of 1937 were religion and language. For de Valera's purposes, these themes were useful for gaining support because Ireland was in search of a national identity after the end of English rule, and religion and language seemed to be ideal as the country's “distinguishing marks.”<sup>34</sup> By focusing so heavily on these two cultural features, de Valera was able to create an Ireland that revolved, in a sense, around his own beliefs. The Constitution, written almost entirely by him, strongly guides Irish culture to this day.

De Valera's strong religious upbringing is reflected in the Constitution. A Jesuit priest and close friend to de Valera drafted the preamble to the document. The preamble recognizes Judaism and other Christian faiths, but supremely recognizes the “special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens.”<sup>35</sup> This preamble was only the beginning of the religious undertones of the de Valera Constitution; the document was apparently modeled after his traditional rural Irish Catholic upbringing. De Valera “made divorce unconstitutional, banned the import or sale of contraceptive devices, and regulated dance halls, besides incorporating Catholic teaching on the family, education, and private property” in the Constitution.<sup>36</sup> The thin line (if it even existed) between church and state created an Ireland that was dominated by religion—an image that remains today. De Valera biographer Tim Pat Coogan describes Catholicism in the Constitution as the perfect symbol of de Valera's feelings on church and state and the perfect symbol of how he governed Ireland. Coogan illustrates that relationship in the Joycean couplet:

Ireland my first, my only love  
Where Christ and Caesar are hand in glove.<sup>37</sup>

Not only did the Constitution exalt Catholicism, it also focused on the Irish language—Gaelic. Article Eight of the document states that the “Irish language as the national language is the first official language” and English as “a second official language.”<sup>38</sup> De Valera felt so strongly about the Irish language, that in a speech he said “Ireland with its language and without freedom is preferable to Ireland with freedom and without its language.” Furthermore, he saw language as the “primary badge of nationality.”<sup>39</sup> For de Valera, language was the only way that the nation’s spirit could be expressed on a daily basis. De Valera offered special grant money to schools that taught all subjects in Gaelic. He even reserved 80% of preparatory college places for fluent Irish speakers. Finally, even though less than 15% of civil servants spoke Gaelic, de Valera proclaimed it to be the language of everyday communication.<sup>40</sup> His adamancy about Gaelic’s restoration demonstrates de Valera’s absolute power and further suggests his desire for an Irish identity. His convictions also show the control he wanted, and had, over Ireland.

### De Valera in Retrospect

Those who look back today at Eamon de Valera’s long career in Irish politics differ strongly in their view of his achievements. De Valera remains a very controversial figure. Those who look favorably on his career point out his strong nationalistic spirit and his noble vision of Ireland’s future. Historian Tim Pat Coogan writes that de Valera is accused of many things by his opponents, but never of “incompetence in the political art.”<sup>41</sup> He was a fierce leader who knew how to please the masses and who always remained loyal to his vision. He succeeded in gaining power with his impeccable “understanding of the dynamics of [the] system of politics by consensus,” and this contributed to his “political greatness.”<sup>42</sup> Despite harsh criticism from some that de Valera did not make enough distinction between church and state, others, such as Emmett Larkin, writes that de Valera “demonstrated time and again that he understood the limits of the bishops’ rights...and was most careful in maintaining both his and his party’s authority” in the face of the church.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the deep religious convictions he imposed on Ireland helped justify Ireland’s neutrality in World War II. De Valera believed that Ireland, by staying neutral, “roused the world from a wicked dream...of tyrannical power.”<sup>44</sup> Historian F. S. Lyons writes “what [de Valera] did for Ireland can be summed up in a single sentence. [He] brought stability.”<sup>45</sup> Although some may see the long-term effects of de Valera’s career in a negative light, it is hard to argue with the point that de Valera stepped forward when Ireland needed a strong leader. He offered citizens a sense of belonging and empowerment. For some, his noble vision of Ireland is reason enough to view him in a positive light. De Valera himself once said that the Irish, through an understanding of the spiritual and intellectual, would “save western civilization.”<sup>46</sup>

For his opponents, however, de Valera’s positive qualities are not enough; critics see “rhetoric rather than reality [as] the hallmarks of de Valera.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, his opponents view his policies more as symbolic achievements rather than as real progress

for Ireland. Opponents see the Constitution of 1937 as a “a dark shadow over contemporary Ireland”<sup>48</sup> and as a “Catholicisation of the constitutional order.”<sup>49</sup> His critics see de Valera as a hopeless dreamer who did more harm than good by relying on an archaic institution, the Catholic Church, and by rejecting modernity. His vision for Ireland is symbolic, but lacking in substance. Furthermore, adversaries contend that his strong support of the Irish language was a waste of time because too few people knew the language. By offering perks to schools that taught Gaelic, de Valera used the language for political gain, while neglecting education.<sup>50</sup> Some historians even see frightening similarities between de Valera’s rise to power and the infamous great American political bosses use of “a system of control and patronage.” And these historians do not fail to mention de Valera’s Machiavellian style of ruling.<sup>51</sup> For some, his higher, idealistic visions were merely a cover for his lack of skill in being able to govern Ireland effectively and to deal with its real economic and social problems.

## Conclusion

The reign of Eamon de Valera is complex; nearly every action he took can be interpreted in either a positive or negative light. Perhaps this complexity is what makes him such an intriguing figure. No matter how one chooses to view him, de Valera is fascinating because he is one of few modern leaders who seemed to understand completely how to be successful as a politician and leader. No other political figure in the twentieth century has had such a strong impact on his country. In fact, it seems that most of Ireland’s history in the last century is essentially a history of de Valera. Interestingly, many Irish today revile this influential and representative figure in their history. Perhaps this hostility exists because contemporary Irish citizens cannot fully understand the political and social climate, and the desperate struggle for a republic, that existed during de Valera’s rise to power.

Although Ireland’s strong ties to the Catholic Church, to the Irish language, and to the land—all of which de Valera promoted—may cast a shadow over Ireland today, it is important to remember how important these things were for the Irish people in the 1920s and 1930s. The Irish, at this time, were a people in search of an identity, a people who had experienced nothing but struggle. Recent portrayals of de Valera have tended to cast him in an unfavorable light. For example, Neil Jordan’s popular film *Michael Collins* portrays de Valera as a ruthless opportunist who was willing to betray his friend and fellow nationalist Michael Collins. Jordan romanticizes Collins, making him almost saint-like in contrast to the more cunning and political de Valera. Whether by historians or by the general public, de Valera’s image will continue to be debated for years to come. After his death in 1975, de Valera’s wife Sinead de Valera said that if she were to write a play about her husband’s life and career, she would not know whether to make it “a comedy or a tragedy.”<sup>52</sup> Her statement seems to describe perfectly Eamon de Valera and the debate that will continue to surround him.

## Notes

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- 2 Conor Kostick and Lorcan Collins, *The Easter Rising: A Guide to Dublin in 1916* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2000), 15.
- 3 Roderick Phillips, *Society, State, and Nation in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 153.
- 4 Coogan, Ireland, 71.
- 5 Kostick and Collins, 66.
- 6 Tim Pat Coogan, *Eamon de Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 408.
- 7 Coogan, Ireland, 73-74.
- 8 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 3.
- 9 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 21.
- 10 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 18.
- 11 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 9-10.
- 12 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 11.
- 13 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 30.
- 14 Coogan, Ireland, 74.
- 15 Ronan Fanning, *Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Helicon Limited, 1983), 93-94.
- 16 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 408-409.
- 17 Charles Townshend, *Ireland: The 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 133.
- 18 Fanning, 96.
- 19 Fanning, 112.
- 20 Fanning, 128.
- 21 Coogan, Ireland, 72.
- 22 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 411.
- 23 Fanning, 97.
- 24 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 158.
- 25 Bill Severn, *Irish Statesman and Rebel: The Two Lives of Eamon de Valera* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1970), 137.
- 26 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 408.
- 27 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 433.
- 28 Townshend, 137.
- 29 Fanning, 118.
- 30 Coogan, Ireland, 74.
- 31 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 486.
- 32 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 486.
- 33 Severn, 155.
- 34 Fanning, 128.
- 35 Fanning, 130.
- 36 Emmet Larkin, "Church, State, and Nation in Modern Ireland," *The American Historical Review* 80, no. 5 (1975): 1274 [journal online], accessed 16 November 2001; available from <http://www.jstor.org>.
- 37 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 36.
- 38 Fanning, 134;
- 39 Townshend, 156.
- 40 Townshend, 156.

- 41 Coogan, Ireland, 71.
- 42 Larkin, 1274.
- 43 Larkin, 1274.
- 44 Townshend, 151-152.
- 45 Townshend, 147.
- 46 Townshend, 149.
- 47 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 693.
- 48 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 489.
- 49 Patrick O'Mahony and Gerard Delanty, *Rethinking Irish History: Nationalism, Identity, and Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 152.
- 50 Townshend, 156.
- 51 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 408.
- 52 Coogan, Eamon de Valera, 704.