

Nation and State: Eamon de Valera's Contributions to Modern Ireland

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Ireland in the 20th Century

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Eamon de Valera dominated Irish politics in the 20th century.¹ But, despite de Valera's electoral success and decades as Taoiseach and President, many describe his policies as failed, isolationist, and reactionary. In contrast with de Valera's traditionalism, his successor as leader of Fianna Fáil and Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, receives praise for his efforts to reform and modernize the Irish economy.² As early as 1969, a popular magazine had declared "one of the great tragedies of modern Ireland is that Lemass did not become Taoiseach immediately after the war."³ While there is no doubt Lemass merits much of the credit for Ireland's development in the sixties, this historical narrative devalues de Valera's crucial contribution to Irish identity and government. Lemass modernized the Irish economy and radically redefined the state for the better, but de Valera's premiership was not the Irish dark age many consider it to be. Despite his shortcomings, de Valera created an Irish identity necessary for the formation of the state and founded a comparatively liberal and democratic political system that has persisted for almost one hundred years.

I. Historical Contempt for 'de Valera's Ireland'

In many historical accounts, the phrase "de Valera's Ireland" usually carries a connotation of sarcasm and derision. For some assessing the island after independence, it "became shorthand for all the shortcomings of twentieth-century Ireland."⁴ Borrowing from James Joyce, one academic makes the expression's subtext clear, characterizing the period as "the Devil Era."⁵ To his critics, de Valera left a legacy of economic stagnation, poverty, and generational emigration and conservative, theocratic politics.

¹ Eamon de Valera was the leader of Fianna Fáil—one of Ireland's two main political parties—from 1926 to 1959; president of the Irish Free State from 1932 to 1937; Taoiseach (or Prime Minister) from 1937 to 1948, 1951 to 1954, and 1957 to 1959; and President of the Republic of Ireland from 1959 to 1973.

² Sean Lemass succeeded de Valera as Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil in 1959.

³ Vincent Browne, "Sean Lemass: A Profile," *Nusight*, December 1969, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://magill.ie/archive/sean-lemass-profile>.

⁴ Jud Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon De Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 4.

⁵ Anthony Roche, "'The Devil Era': The Presence of Éamon de Valera in Three Novels by Kate O'Brien," *Irish University Review* 48, no. 1 (May 2018): 1, accessed November 19, 2018.

By 1984, for economists like Peter Neary, the “economic nationalism” of de Valera, marked by tariffs and limits on foreign investment, “must be judged a failure.”⁶ The high unemployment, poverty, and cyclical emigration of the era have become associated with de Valera, his policies, and ‘his Ireland.’ Most directly impactful today is the Constitution of 1937, which many perceive as de Valera’s project and remains the fundamental law of the Irish Republic.⁷ Its critics brand it illiberal and too Catholic. For novelist John Banville, the Irish society of his 1950s-childhood existed in a “demilitarised totalitarian state.”⁸ A totalitarian regime controlled “by a kind of applied spiritual paralysis maintained by an unofficial federation between the Catholic clergy, the judiciary and the civil service.”⁹ Some historians target the Constitution for this “spiritual paralysis.” Through the Catholic influence on its articles, its prohibition of divorce, and its ban of blasphemy, “Catholic moral law was made state law.”¹⁰

These critiques miss the core of de Valera’s political work and legacy and create a flawed popular perception of his life. It has created an atmosphere where he has lost popularity even among contemporaries in his own party. A survey of Fianna Fáil deputies in 2011 asked them “to name the politician they most admired;” ten of fifteen chose Lemass, and zero chose de Valera.¹¹ An economic assessment removed from the political considerations of the time and a constitutional analysis removed from the contemporary context of Europe paint an incomplete portrait of de Valera’s historical significance.

⁶ Peter Neary, "The Failure of Economic Nationalism," *The Crane Bag* 8, no. 1 (1984): 69, JSTOR.

⁷ The Constitution of 1937 replaced the earlier Constitution of the Irish Free State that had governed Ireland since its independence in 1922.

⁸ John Banville, "The Ireland of De Valera and O'Faoláin," *The Irish Review* 17/18 (1995): 147.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 147

¹⁰ Joseph E. Fallon, "Two States, Two Nations," *World Affairs* 158, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 73.

¹¹ Niamh Puirseil, "Fianna Fáil and the evolution of an ambiguous ideology," *Irish Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (2017): 69.

II. *De Valera's Project of Nationhood*

Nationalism was the dominant political movement of the 20th century, and it created congruence between ‘a people,’ a nation, and its government. Its influence is clear in the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic¹², and its declaration of “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies.”¹³ In the most famous work on the subject, Anderson described “nation-ness [as] the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”¹⁴ The nation relies on a sense of “imagined” kinship, where “in the minds of each [citizen] lives the image of their communion.”¹⁵ It is additionally a community because “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”¹⁶ It is on these grounds that political legitimacy rests in the modern world—a divine right of peoples, not Kings. This imagined community relies on a certain sense of myth, and de Valera made the construction of this identity his political priority.

As such, the focus for de Valera and Fianna Fáil, the party he founded in 1926, was never ideology “but first and foremost the building of a mass political movement through which to take power and ultimately overturn the Treaty settlement of 1922.”¹⁷ To do this required the creation of, at least ideologically for its supporters, “not actually a political party

¹² In 1916, Irish Republicans launched a rebellion against British control in Ireland, known as Easter Rising. Although unsuccessful, the rebels became martyrs and motivated the participants in the Irish War for Independence. Easter Rising remains symbolically important in the popular mythology of the Irish nation.

¹³ Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, "Proclamation of Independence," Department of the Taoiseach, last modified 1916, accessed November 19, 2018.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁷ The Anglo-Irish treaty, signed in 1921, ended the Irish War of Independence. It established the Irish Free State as an independent nation within the British empire—a constitutional relationship similar to Canada. According to the terms of the treaty, the monarch of the United Kingdom would remain the head of the Irish state, members of the new Irish parliaments had to swear an oath of allegiance to the Crown, and Britain would retain control of certain navy ports of strategic value. The treaty was very controversial, and conflict over its ratification led to a civil war. Puirseil, "Fianna Fáil," 51.

but a national movement.”¹⁸ Under de Valera, the organization pursued his policy goals and promoted his uniquely Irish national vision. Concretely, de Valera’s agenda included

aims such as restoring the Irish language as the spoken language of the people and to develop a distinctive national life in accordance with Irish traditions and ideals, establishing as many families as practicable on the land and, to promote rural industrialisation.¹⁹

Judged by this measure, de Valera’s policies are hardly failures and served the important purpose of forming social cohesion and legitimacy in the new state.

III. The Economy, Identity, and the Treaty

As the latter part of that agenda implies, this program dictated economic policy. De Valera and his party’s “economic vision was to establish an autarky based on indigenous industry and agriculture.”²⁰ The primary concern was always the creation of a strong Irish identity rather than a strong economy. It was this attention to identity and autonomy that underlined the ‘economic nationalism’ Neary describes. To his credit, Neary recognizes that for de Valera, “economic nationalism was an instrument of political nationalism, not an end in itself.”²¹ The best example of the interaction between this economic policy and its nationalist, anti-treaty ends is the Anglo-Irish trade war. Shortly after taking power in 1932, de Valera’s Fianna Fáil government ended land annuities to Britain promised in accordance with land acts ratified before the creation of the Irish Free State and Ireland’s quasi independence.²² The British responded with tariffs on Irish agricultural goods, and the Irish government responded with their own tariffs; Westminster recognized de Valera’s intent as

¹⁸ Ibid, 50

¹⁹ Ibid, 54

²⁰ Ibid, 55

²¹ Neary, "The Failure," 69.

²² Kevin O'Rourke, "Burn Everything British but Their Coal: The Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s," *The Journal of Economic History* 51, no. 2 (June 1991): 357.

the “first step toward the eventual demolition of the many constitutional ties still linking the Irish Free State with the United Kingdom.”²³

Neary and others blame these tariffs for “insulat[ing] our industry from foreign competition and discourag[ing] it from seeking export markets.”²⁴ The dispute ended in 1938 with a ten-million-pound payment to the British treasury and British forfeiture of Irish ports retained in the treaty from 1921.²⁵ Subsequent analysis from economists like Kevin O’Rourke have disputed the economic costs of this policy when compared with British trading agreements between other countries and especially given that the “£100-million liability was settled with a £10-million lump-sum payment.”²⁶ Most importantly, though, for de Valera and the future of the Irish state, was the recovery of the ports, “enabling de Valera to remain neutral during the ensuing world war.”²⁷ Regardless of its now mixed economic assessment, de Valera’s trade war provided a clear symbolic break important to the fledgling nation still forming its identity in contrast to its former colonial power and under the political yoke of the original treaty.

IV. *An Irish Constitution*

The next step in Irish independence was more formal political autonomy. The vehicle and symbol for this was what would become the Bunreacht na hÉireann.²⁸ For, de Valera and Fianna Fáil, the original 1922 constitution “was inherently illegitimate no matter how it read.”²⁹ It could not truly be said to be an Irish document, but a compromise between Irish and British negotiators in 1921. The Treaty was, for Irish republicans like de Valera, a

²³ Ibid, 358.

²⁴ Peter Neary, "The Failure of Economic Nationalism," *The Crane Bag* 8, no. 1 (1984): 70, JSTOR.

²⁵ O’Rourke, "Burn Everything," 358.

²⁶ Ibid, 366.

²⁷ Ibid, 358.

²⁸ *The Constitution of Ireland*.

²⁹ John Coakley and Michael Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 6th ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 59.

poisoned document like the shirt of Nessus³⁰; he feared that “just as the robe seared and consumed Hercules, so would the treaty destroy the Irish as something they could not tear from their backs.”³¹ By the 1930s, there was opportunity for change. In contrast to a decade before, “a British gun no longer dominated the whole debate.”³² De Valera initiated the drafting of a new constitution, and, while he was not the principal drafter many credit him as, he formed its team of talented writers, sketched its outline, led it through the Dáil debates, and “had the courage to have the first ever Constitution adopted by referendum.”³³

Some critics overlook the 1937 Constitution’s national and political significance and focus on its perceived Catholicism. These critiques, however, ignore context. A common target for opponents of the originally ratified Constitution is Article 41’s recognition of “the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church.”³⁴ Despite this provision’s historical scrutiny, similar clauses were common then and now in Western Europe. A multitude of Western European constitutions in 1937 created an established church or conferred a variation of the ‘special position’ status to its dominant religion.³⁵ Comparatively, “there was nothing particularly exceptional about Art.44.1.2,” except maybe that “de Valera did not go further.”³⁶ For legal scholars like Hogan, the Constitution has far more virtues than ills:

its clear articulation of the separation of powers; the enhancement of the democratic process through special protections for electoral fairness and the referendum; the recognition of general principles of international law; the improvement in the system

³⁰ In Greek mythology, it is the poisoned shirt that killed Hercules. Although his wife was unaware, it was stained with poison venom from the Hydra. Once Hercules put on the shirt, the pain drove him to build a funeral pyre and commit suicide.

³¹ Mary C. Bromage, "De Valera's Formula for Irish Nationhood," *The Review of Politics* 13, no. 4 (October 1951): 498-499.

³² J. J. Lee, "De Valera's Use of Words: Three Case-Studies," *Radharc* 2 (November 2001): 86, JSTOR.

³³ Gerard Hogan, "De Valera, The Constitution and the Historians," *Irish Jurist* 40 (2005): 319-320.

³⁴ *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41

³⁵ Hogan, "De Valera," 301.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 302.

of constitutional protection and judicial review of legislation and the articulation of important new rights such as equality, life, the person, good name and property rights.

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In addition to these overwhelmingly liberal characteristics, it provided a legal declaration of independence. It was the formal fulfilment of de Valera's "doctrine of Irish sovereignty."³⁸

V. *National Myths*

With the treaty effectively invalidated and a formal establishment of political independence, the only remaining task in the building of an Irish nation was creating a cultural identity—a set of cultural scripts or a national myth. By the time of de Valera's ascent to Taoiseach, Ireland had found its origin myth in the leaders of the Easter Rising and the Proclamation of 1916. But de Valera continued to create a national ethos, not only through his policies, but also in his rhetoric. He most famously described this vision in his often ridiculed 1943 St. Patrick's Day Address. The speech is arguably most famous for the phrase "happy maidens,"³⁹ occasionally misquoted as "comely maidens."⁴⁰ Despite this example of problematic and misogynistic imagery, the speech is de Valera's most successful attempt at articulating a vision for the Irish nation.

The speech is his idea of "the Ireland that we dreamed of."⁴¹ De Valera's preface is important because it establishes his description not as a reality, but as a myth or an ideal—"an image of [the Irish] that differentiated them from the English and allowed them to take pride in themselves as a people."⁴² The speech continues to describe the nation "as rural, Catholic and Gaelic, in direct opposition to the urban, Protestant, English nation that once

³⁷ Ibid, 318-319

³⁸ Bromage, "De Valera's," 495.

³⁹ Eamon de Valera, "The Ireland That We Dreamed Of," speech, March 17, 1943, audio file, 02:50, RTE Archives.

Michele Dowling, "The Ireland That I Would Have': De Valera & the Creation of an Irish National Image," *History Ireland* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 37, JSTOR.

⁴¹ de Valera, "The Ireland," audio file.

⁴² Dowling, "The Ireland," 41.

dominated it.”⁴³ The Ireland de Valera creates is distinctly Irish. Furthermore, he connects the nation to an ancient past and traceable lineage, linking today “to our ancestors fifteen hundred years ago” and more recently to the Young Irelanders of a century before, the creators of the Gaelic League fifty years earlier, and ultimately the Irish Volunteers of Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence.⁴⁴ Rhetorically, de Valera creates an ancient state that, despite its historical imaginations, has only existed as such formally for a couple of decades.

VI. *Conclusion*

Assessment of de Valera’s legacy requires some balance. Much of the contemporary historiography ignores his positive contributions to the political foundation of the state and Irish identity. As Taoiseach, he championed a productive and nonviolent political nationalism that in practice accepted the legitimacy of the Irish Free State and gradually earned Ireland more and more political sovereignty—not through war, but incremental, systemic change. His was a nationalism devoid of the racism and fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—a nationalism that opposed war and advocated for Irish neutrality.⁴⁵ For all the costs of the Anglo-Irish trade war, as *Time Magazine*’s feature of De Valera wrote, the Irish “considered the sacrifice cheap at the price.”⁴⁶ This conclusion is evident from the electoral successes de Valera and his party received both during and after the trade war, governing Ireland for sixteen straight years in the country’s most formative period.⁴⁷

This identity was key in the formation of the modern state because it founded a legitimate and national government—politically through the *Bunreacht na hÉireann* and culturally through Irish identity. Hazony writes in defense of national identity as the only way

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41

⁴⁴ de Valera, "The Ireland," audio file.

⁴⁵ Lee, "De Valera's," 93.

⁴⁶ "Prime Minister of Freedom," *Time*, March 25, 1940, accessed November 19, 2018.

⁴⁷ Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic*, 17.

to create the “powerful mutual loyalties” necessary to form “the foundation for the development of free institutions and individual liberties.”⁴⁸ De Valera helped create the national image on which these mutual loyalties are based today. As Dowling points out, this “image does not need to be real to be effective,” but only that it offers “a picture of what we like to imagine that self to be rather than what that self is.”⁴⁹ De Valera’s image remains relevant in today’s popular imagination and many “continue to promote his rural haven in an attempt to encourage tourists from the industrial heartlands of Europe and North America.”⁵⁰ Lee considers de Valera’s most important legacy the referendum provision of the Constitution that enabled modern Ireland to bury his Ireland “in constitutional terms with the tools that he himself fashioned for the gravediggers.”⁵¹ In a more symbolic sense, but equally importantly, ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ created the conditions for statehood that allowed for its eventual unraveling.

⁴⁸ Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018), 10.

⁴⁹ Dowling, "The Ireland," 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41

⁵¹ Lee, "De Valera's," 88.

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