It could be argued whether a detailed 300-plus page biography of a mid-ranking government advisor such as O'Shiel has value. However this volume goes some way towards filling gaps in the knowledge of the Dáil governments and the initial years of the Cosgrave administration. Such remains the paucity of rigorously researched in-depth biographical studies of the figures of the time that this account is valuable. Professor Sagarra has moulded archival research, family papers and lore and personal knowledge together in a disengaged manner to provide a lively and readable, if at times quite detailed, account of her subject and his times. This is the real importance of this biography, placing O'Shiel in the context of his time and using his career and experiences to explore the zeitgeist of Ireland from the revolutionary decade to the early-1920s.

O'Shiel the person emerges from the text, but, and one senses he would have wanted this, it is the account of his actions and achievements that are of the greatest significance. Who he was – an English- and T.C.D.-educated north of Ireland Sinn Féin Nationalist – is developed in its own right, but it was who he worked with, where he was and what he saw that makes O'Shiel's life relevant. And the little details, such as that he was a bird-spotter and that Arthur Griffith could not knot a tie, add much to the account. As a member of the supporting cast, O'Shiel was well placed to observe and assess what was taking place around him as independent Ireland came to be and took its place amongst the nations.

Overall this biography is a lucid exploration of a political ethos and a dedication to public duty that exemplified the generation who, for better or for worse, made modern Ireland a going concern after the trials of the independence struggle and the civil war. Willingly anonymous in their lifetime and eschewing the limelight in retirement they deserve to be remembered in such a dispassionate yet colourful style.

doi: 10.1017/ihs.2015.13

Michael Kennedy
Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Royal Irish Academy
m.kennedy@ria.ie

Judging W. T. Cosgrave. By Michael Laffan. Pp x, 412. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy. 2014. €30.

Michael Laffan' *Judging W. T. Cosgrave*, the third book in the Royal Irish Academy's acclaimed 'Judging' series, is an illustrated, political biography of independent Ireland's first head of government. Unlike previous subjects, Éamon de Valera and Seán Lemass, W. T. Cosgrave has been a somewhat neglected figure in both the historiography of twentieth-century Ireland and popular memory more generally. According to the author, Cosgrave 'remained for decades one of the forgotten figures of Irish history' despite having presided over the foundation of a resilient democracy that survived the convulsions of the inter-war period. Although he served almost ten years as the Free State's first president of the Executive Council, memory of Cosgrave has faded with more charismatic figures such as de Valera and Michael Collins dominating the historiography. Even Fine Gael, the party that Cosgrave helped to establish in 1933, has a tendency to look towards the lost leaders, Collins and Arthur Griffith, and not the man who was the pro-Treaty parliamentary leader from 1922 to 1944.

Before the publication of this book, Cosgrave had, in contrast to the plethora of works devoted to de Valera, Collins and his own deputy leader Kevin O'Higgins, been the subject of one short biography by Anthony Jordan and a study by Stephen Collins in which he was assessed alongside his son Liam, taoiseach 1973–77. Therefore, this biography fills a significant gap in the historiography of twentieth-century Ireland in which Cosgrave, alone among the state's first five heads of government, had not yet been the focus of a major study. This had been regrettable given Cosgrave's centrality in

https://doi.org/10.1017/ihs.2015.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

both the revolutionary period and the foundation of the state. Laffan was able to access the uncatalogued Cosgrave papers, and uses these to shed new light on aspects of both his early years and subsequent career in public life. What emerges is a vivid portrait of a committed democrat who led the nascent Free State from the devastation of a brutal Civil War in 1922 to the relative 'normalcy' of the 1932 general election and the subsequent transfer of power to the very people his forces had defeated a decade earlier.

After the deaths of the pro-Treaty leaders Griffith and Collins in August 1922, Cosgrave was 'the obvious choice' to assume the leadership (p. 116). His experience of pre-Easter 1916 politics as a reforming member of Dublin Corporation – where he showed concern for the welfare of the city's poorest inhabitants – would prove invaluable (p. 34). As Collins's successor at the head of the provisional government during a time of fratricidal conflict, Cosgrave was thrust into what would prove the greatest challenge of his long political career. While his anti-Treatyite adversaries may have believed that Cosgrave and his colleagues had betrayed republican principles, as Laffan points out in chapter three, the Free State leader had his own impressive résumé in separatist politics. A founding member of both Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers, Cosgrave was involved in both the Howth gun-running of July 1914 and the Easter Rising of 1916 where he saw action at the South Dublin Union. Like de Valera, Cosgrave had his death sentence commuted to life imprisonment before going on to win the Kilkenny by-election for Sinn Féin on his release in 1917. This chapter demonstrates Cosgrave's evolving political style during the revolutionary period. As the Dáil's minister for Local Government, Cosgrave railed against localism, strove for administrative efficiency and insisted that posts should be filled by the best-qualified candidates. These traits would characterise the governments he led in peacetime, 1922–32.

Laffan uses Cosgrave's own papers to reveal that his subject, like many other nationalists, harboured unrealistic hopes that Woodrow Wilson's influence in European affairs could work to Ireland's advantage (p. 61). Similarly, the author's use of this resource sheds new light on Cosgrave's time 'on the run' in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday in November 1920. Arguably, his deft touch saved the Anglo–Irish Treaty in December 1921 when he persuaded de Valera to give the delegation a chance to explain their reasons for signing and then placed his vote with theirs at the crucial cabinet meeting on 8 December. In Laffan's account of the Civil War, Cosgrave is depicted as a ruthless and uncompromising figure who oversaw the harsh measures deemed necessary to bring about a swift victory for the pro-Treaty side. Adopting the dictum 'terror meets terror', Cosgrave stood over his government's executions policy, displaying little 'sentimentality or softness' as republican morale was shaken by the Free State's stern resolve to defeat them (p. 122).

In peacetime, Cosgrave's instincts favoured caution over innovation and the Cumann na nGaedheal governments that he led for just under a decade were characterised by a paternalistic conservatism in both the social and economic spheres. Yet the Cosgrave administration also oversaw a land-purchase programme that cost upwards of £30m and the ambitious Shannon hydro-electric scheme. Laffan gives nuanced consideration to each of these aspects of Cumann na nGaedheal's period of governance and the fact that on explicitly Catholic social mores, Cosgrave had to contend with a de Valera intent on out-bidding him (p. 263).

While primarily a political biography, there are occasions when the intersection of the personal with the political forces the biographer to deal with the bouts of ill-health that dogged Cosgrave for much of his life. Despite being confined to his sick bed during the army crisis Cosgrave remained firmly in control while in subsequent years, illnesses would force him to miss cabinet meetings (p. 194). In 1930, the head of government spent months away from his desk, missing seventeen out of eighteen successive cabinet meetings. When Cosgrave relinquished power in 1932 little did he realise that he would never again occupy the government benches in the Dáil. Twelve frustrating years in opposition followed before he retired from public life in 1944. In retirement Cosgrave shunned the limelight, cut his links with party politics and drifted into the shadows

https://doi.org/10.1017/ihs.2015.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press

where he has largely remained. This meticulously researched biography succeeds in rescuing W. T. Cosgrave from the margins of twentieth-century Irish history and places him firmly at the heart of the historiography. *Judging W. T. Cosgrave* constitutes a major contribution to the historical understanding of independent Ireland's first head of government and the democratic state that he helped to establish and nurture whether in government or opposition.

doi: 10.1017/ihs.2015.14

Mel Farrell
School of History & Archives, University College Dublin
melpfarrell@gmail.com

Afterimage of the revolution: cumann na nGaedheal and Irish politics, 1922–1932, By Jason Knirck. Pp ix, 306. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 2014. $29.95.

Freedom to achieve freedom: the Irish Free State, 1922–1932. By Donal P. Corcoran. Pp 288. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan. 2013. €40.

Long a neglected area of historiography, pro-Treaty politics have proved a rich area of scholarship since the late 1990s with the appearance of books and articles by historians such as Mike Cronin, John M. Regan and Ciara Meehan. The latest addition, Jason Knirck's *Afterimage of the revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish politics, 1922–1932*, offers a stimulating response to the central thesis put forward in Regan's 1999 study *The Irish counter-revolution, 1921–36*. Whereas Regan argued that Cumann na nGaedheal presided over a dedicated counter-revolution against the republicanism of the revolutionary period, Knirck contends that, under the party's stewardship from 1923, the 'language of the revolution continued to exert a dominant influence' as the Cosgrave government built on the revolutionary inheritance. Knirck convincingly argues that labelling Cumann na nGaedheal 'counter-revolutionary' and anti-Treaty Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil 'revolutionary' is useful neither analytically nor in terms of understanding either the revolution itself or the politics of independent Ireland. He also shows that assumptions of post-Treaty divisions conforming neatly to pre-Treaty attitudes have led to a distorted rendering of the revolutionary period as something resembling an internal conflict between radicals and moderates within the movement. Instead, the author wishes to reconnect Cumann na nGaedheal, as the first governing party of independent Ireland, to the revolution which preceded the state's foundation. Drawing on a wide range of sources – official documents, party minute books, newspapers and private collections – Knirck offers a fresh perspective on the politics of the Free State, 1922–32 while showing how Cumann na nGaedheal engaged with the legacy of the Irish revolution.

In particular, Knirck takes issue with the somewhat problematic tendency to conflate consolidating a revolution with actively seeking to counter it – an approach that has been adopted in accounting for post-1921 nationalism's transition from the politics of revolution to statehood. Such an approach, Knirck suggests, inevitably restricts the real Irish revolution to the disparate groups who continued to reject the new state into the 1930s and beyond. In contrast, *Afterimage of the revolution* frames the immediate post-independence period in the context of a continuous Irish revolution that carried on after 1922. This interpretation casts the Cumann na nGaedheal leadership in a new light – presiding over the implementation of the revolutionary programme rather than actively seeking to counter it. Noting that Meehan's 2010 book, *The Cosgrave party*, was written for a different purpose and therefore did not specifically engage with the question of revolution/counter-revolution – instead locating Cumann na nGaedheal within the Irish Parliamentary Party's tradition of constitutional nationalism – Knirck

https://doi.org/10.1017/ihs.2015.14 Published online by Cambridge University Press