

SEÁN LEMASS: DEMOCRATIC DICTATOR. By Bryce Evans. Pp vii, 328, illus. Cork: Collins Press. 2011. €17.99.

Seán Lemass (1900–71) continues to fascinate historians, politicians and the general public. Bryce Evans's comprehensive biography appears just two years after Tom Garvin's *Judging Lemass* (2009) and he feels to need to justify it. However, given the central role played by Lemass in Irish public life for over fifty years, little justification is required for a fresh look at him. Evans's study is iconoclastic by comparison with earlier assessments and paints a darker 'warts and all' picture of his subject. It draws on extensive new research, especially on the Emergency period, and provides new interpretations on a number of key phases in Lemass's life. Evans challenges what he sees as an overly benign assessment of Lemass by his biographers, but at times overreaches himself in making that case. The book is peppered with terms such as 'authoritarian', 'illiberal' and even 'totalitarian' but these concepts are used in such a haphazard way that they turn out to be unhelpful rather than illuminating. Furthermore, the term 'democratic dictator', which is used as a sub-title, is never justified. Despite this reservation, Evans forces the reader to reconsider almost every aspect of Lemass's career and to think again about the existing literature.

Evans qualifies the traditional view of Lemass as a central figure in the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. He suggests that he was an 'active but fringe member of the IRA' (p. 17), claiming that his early political career was enhanced by his brother's murder rather than by his own merit. Indeed, a key theme in this book is that Lemass was a careerist who was both cunning and self-centred, 'waiting to see whether changing horses would pay off' (p. 49). This revisionist tone is maintained throughout and Evans rejects Garvin's view that Lemass had abandoned free trade at an early stage of this career. He also suggests that Lemass was less secular and more clericalist than is generally believed (pp 58, 65). Moreover, he emphasises the anti-democratic nature of the early Fianna Fáil party, maintaining that Lemass shared this 'sceptical attitude towards democracy' (pp 68–9). These are substantive points that deserve serious consideration.

Evans provides a more sceptical assessment of Lemass's tenure as minister for industry and commerce (1932–48) than the conventional one that emphasises his energetic leadership and forward-looking views. Evans claims that he alienated fellow Fianna Fáil ministers by the 'impatient, authoritarian delivery' of his policies (p. 77). The author also spends considerable time and space on Lemass's desire to obtain an office block for his department in Kildare Street. Evans almost reluctantly concedes that 'the macroeconomic changes Lemass was able to secure in this decade appear all the more remarkable' (p. 86), yet disappointingly there is little analysis of this achievement or appreciation of Lemass's contribution.

Evans suggests that Lemass was most authoritarian between 1932 and 1945, and furnishes considerable evidence for his impatience and high-handedness. He notes that Lemass was prepared to regiment or coerce labour and use the state to direct the behaviour of Irish business. During the Emergency, accordingly, Lemass 'finally acquired the dictatorial economic powers he had craved' (p. 113). The author provides considerable details about the centralising aspects of the Department of Supplies, and supplies a critical assessment of that organisation. Where others have seen brilliant improvisation reflecting Lemass's initiative, Evans is more sceptical. He emphasises the coercive use of the state against the black market and the enforcement of rationing, as well as the implementation of compulsory tillage in rural Ireland. It is probably true that Lemass had 'little regard for liberal constraints' (p. 143) during the Emergency, but the literature suggests that he was not unusual in this regard. What Evans misses is the danger that confronted Ireland between 1940 and 1942 and his assessment of this period, though persuasive in many respects, seems one-sided to this reader.

The discussion of the period after 1948 is less assured and his assessment of Lemass as Taoiseach is not always persuasive. He passes over Lemass's attempt to change policy on

Northern Ireland in 1955 and misreads his views on the E.F.T.A. and the E.E.C. He is sceptical about Lemass's relationship with T. K. Whitaker and this might have provided an opportunity to probe deeper. Evans recognises the important economic changes that Lemass implemented, but challenges Garvin's claim that he was also a 'cultural revolutionary'. There is some strength to this criticism, but again there is evidence that Lemass was aware of the potential impact of what he was doing and may even have promoted it.

This book is clearly written and accessible. It provides a critical and wide-ranging assessment of one of the most important politicians in twentieth-century Ireland. However, it remains incomplete as an assessment and raises more questions than it answers. Indeed many of the claims made by Evans can in turn be disputed. What this study shows is that the debate on Lemass and his life is not over and this book will prompt further research and study on this formidable individual.

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THE MINORITY VOICE: HUBERT BUTLER AND SOUTHERN IRISH PROTESTANTISM, 1900–1991.

By Robert Tobin. Pp viii, 302. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012. £65. (Oxford Historical Monographs)

The esteem Butler enjoyed near the last century's end was effected by Lilliput Press. Written from 1930 onwards, essays collected in four volumes won positive reviews, when Ulster and emigration gave little cause for optimism. He had quietly urged sympathetic reason, and recognition of a wider world in which far worse things happened. Neal Ascherson and Joseph Brodsky applauded from afar. Edna Longley welcomed 'an Anglo-Irish resurrection'.

Living at Maidenhall, outside Kilkenny, the Butlers were elderly and frail, subalterns of sub-aristocracy. Two efforts at biography were endorsed, either to fall by the wayside, or pushed towards that convenience. Though not a biographer, Robert Tobin accomplishes much the earlier projects intended. His admirable bibliography and footnotes guide enquirers towards extensive archival resources, including private ones. Butler slipped into the Church of Ireland at a time (1901) when it mimed the Royal Dublin Society at prayer. However, 'A Fragment of Autobiography' (1987) decanted a mother's balanced imprecation – 'Lord, if thou existest . . .'. Oriel's chaplain never quite concedes that his subject was no fully-believing Christian, with consequences for notions of Irish minority, never considers if it were not a religious agnosticism (Oxford-bred) which formed his intellectual position. Tobin aligns Butler with clerics holding that 'Christian values must always take precedence over institutional loyalties' (p. 224).

Of course, Butler did invoke the Protestant minority, through rhetorical cunning and well-tempered affection. When partition upset denominational balances, he recognised the strain imposed on the Church of Ireland. He acknowledged Quakers, Huguenots, and Presbyterians among the new southern minority. He collaborated with Peadar O'Donnell, Seán Ó Faoláin, and Owen Sheehy Skeffington (all Catholics by baptism) who resisted the lust for homogeneity among some leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1938–9 he worked in Vienna assisting Jews to escape. Tobin summarises 'The Kagran Gruppe' generously, but makes no effort to identify anyone – the helpful Mexican diplomat, for example – beyond those named by Butler. What about Mary Campbell, active in the same enterprise? Readers want to know if this is the Mary Campbell they meet elsewhere, wife of an *Irish Democrat* editor.

Alienation at home began with the Cold War. Butler investigated Croatian atrocities or, rather, investigated assistance given in Ireland to the perpetrators. With the Balkan