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Featured reviews

DE VALERA, VOLUME 1: RISE, 1882–1932. By David McCullagh. Pp vi, 536. Dublin: Gill Books. 2017. €24.99.

DE VALERA, VOLUME 2: RULE, 1932–1975. By David McCullagh. Pp vi, 528. Dublin: Gill Books. 2018. €24.99.

David McCullagh has produced an insightful and exhaustive study of the life of Éamon de Valera, arguably the most influential political figure in twentieth-century Ireland. The historiography on de Valera and his times has moved on appreciably since Tim Pat Coogan's *De Valera: long fellow, long shadow* (London, 1993). Coogan's controversial conclusion that 'de Valera did little that was useful and much that was harmful' has been effectively challenged by recent research. Peter Mair's essay, 'De Valera and democracy' (2004), provided a positive appreciation of de Valera as party leader and taoiseach by placing his achievements in a comparative context. Likewise, Diarmaid Ferriter's *Judging Dev* (Dublin, 2007) drew on de Valera's extensive archive to offer an even-handed correction to Coogan's assessment. More recently, Ronan Fanning's *Éamon de Valera: a will to power* (London, 2015) explored the role of power and politics in de Valera's career. Mel Farrell's *Party politics in a new democracy* (London, 2017) illuminates the challenges facing Irish political parties during the 1920s and 1930s.

McCullagh also provides a positive assessment of de Valera, though his study is not uncritical. He identifies various features that contributed to de Valera's success, including 'sincerity, dignity and charm', adding that these are 'all pointless if not harnessed to drive, determination and self-belief' (vol. 1, p. 413). Other factors that contributed were ruthlessness, a refusal to admit he was ever wrong and, perhaps less tangible, a sense of insecurity due to his birth and upbringing. The author also asks whether individuals such as de Valera, Charles de Gaulle or indeed Seán Lemass make history or are shaped by it. One might not endorse a 'great man' view of history while acknowledging that individual agency can make a fundamental difference to the outcome of the historical process. McCullagh's conclusion captures the tension in this view: 'De Valera did more than any other individual to define the parameters of Ireland's development – though there are limits to his influence' (vol. 2, p. 402).

McCullagh offers a balanced discussion of the controversy surrounding de Valera's birth and his parents' marriage. The evidence is mixed and it is difficult to provide a conclusive opinion on the question. The issue haunted de Valera for most of his life, reflecting the deep anxieties of an illiberal age in these matters. If doubts about his legitimacy haunted him, the making of de Valera can be located in his determination to escape the circumstances of his early life. His mother sent him back to Ireland to be raised in relative poverty by her kin. Despite his inauspicious origins, de Valera rose above constraints that might have inhibited many others. By his early thirties he was professor of mathematics at Carysfort Training College, active in the Gaelic League and married with two children.

One strength of this study is that McCullagh critically engages with key periods in de Valera's political career and the controversies surrounding some of these moments. He is good at challenging both admirers and critics of de Valera, citing evidence to sustain his critique. For instance he dismisses the widely held view that de Valera was having an affair with his secretary Kathleen O'Connell, citing the good relations between O'Connell and Sinéad de Valera. He is highly critical of de Valera's defence of his ownership of the *Irish Press*, highlighting omissions and self-serving arguments. In other cases de Valera's self-belief

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bordered on the delusional; when he 'took the IRB oath but satisfied himself that he wasn't *really* taking it' (vol 1, p. 77). This was something he returned to again in 1927.

McCullagh leads the reader through the early years of de Valera's life, interrogating his actions during the 1916 Rising. He examines in detail his time in prison, his leadership of the political and military wings of the republican movement in 1917, and the overwhelming success for Sinn Féin at the elections in 1918. One of McCullagh's conclusions is that 'he did not have command thrust upon him: he seized it by elbowing rivals out of the way. Having tasted leadership during the Rising, de Valera discovered both that he was good at it and that he liked it' (vol. 1, pp 103–4). This insight is all the more important when the author examines the period from 1921 to 1924. There is still no clear explanation why de Valera did not go to London for the negotiations that led to the Treaty. McCullagh implies that de Valera was so confident of his dominance over his colleagues in Dublin and London that he believed he could veto the outcome. He clearly over-reached himself and lost control of the London delegation and some of his supporters in Dublin. This also helps to explain de Valera's extremism during the debates on the Treaty and during the Civil War. McCullagh asks if de Valera was prepared to risk war over the difference between dominion status and external association, concluding that on the evidence the answer is yes.

One question that emerges from the period 1916–23 is when is armed rebellion justified? De Valera had few doubts about the legitimacy of violence throughout this period, even when it led to civil war. Indeed, it can be argued that without that violence he would not have assumed his dominant position in the republican movement. Despite this, McCullagh believes that a civil war would have occurred whether de Valera supported it or not, but 'he was certainly providing encouragement for those who were' (vol. 1, p. 288).

Though defeated in the Civil War, de Valera still led a movement that attracted over 25 per cent of the votes in the 1923 election. In this context it was never inevitable that republicans would come to terms with the Irish Free State and work within the system. It is difficult to judge when de Valera (and his supporters) accepted the legitimacy of the Irish state. Was it when Fianna Fáil was established in 1926 or when the party was forced to take the oath in 1927 to enter the Dáil? It is possible that this only occurred when de Valera formed his first government in 1932; that up to that point the party remained a semi-loyal anti-system party. It was always possible that de Valera would refuse to take the oath and lead an anti-constitutional movement against the government with incalculable consequences. It is often forgotten that Ireland was one of only two newly independent states to survive as democracies by 1939.

De Valera's achievements are associated with his time in government from 1932 to 1948, rather than with the period between 1916 and 1924. These achievements were considerable and undermine Coogan's ungenerous assessment, as the author's discussion demonstrates on a number of occasions. De Valera consolidated Irish democracy during the 1930s, when democratic governance was being undermined throughout Europe. He defeated threats to democracy from the I.R.A. and the Blueshirts, and maintained democratic institutions intact, despite fears that he wanted a dictatorship. Furthermore Fianna Fáil's political success established the foundations of a political system and party competition that maintains its centrality to the present. Ireland was a more democratic and republican society by 1939 than it had been when de Valera assumed office in 1932.

De Valera's greatest achievement was the introduction of an 'impeccably democratic constitution' in 1937 (vol. 2, p. 113). He drafted a document that healed the wounds of the Civil War, reflected the political culture of Catholic-nationalist Ireland and ring-fenced the constitution from direct political interference. In a break from the British model, the new constitution took power away from the Dáil, providing for a referendum in the event of change. The role of the Supreme Court in this context was also a major contribution to political stability. Of considerable importance was his unwillingness to establish the Catholic church as the state religion.

A further achievement was the dismantling of the Treaty settlement without provoking military intervention by the British government. De Valera was fortunate that appeasement was the foundation stone of Chamberlain's diplomatic strategy. He had a keen eye for foreign policy and took the opportunity to extend Ireland's sovereignty. This was fully achieved with

the return of the Treaty ports as part of a wide-ranging agreement between the two states that ended the Economic War in 1938. What McCullagh shows in detail is that the U.K. government accepted that, de facto if not *de jure*, Ireland was a separate sovereign state (if not quite a republic) by 1938. This also allowed de Valera to declare Éire neutral during the Second World War and maintain that position despite pressure from the U.K. and the United States. This also demonstrated that those who signed the Treaty were correct in their assumption that the agreement provided the means to fully achieve Irish sovereignty, something de Valera would never admit. McCullagh suggests that this implied that de Valera was wrong to oppose the Treaty (vol. 2, p. 30).

The other major achievement was the redirection of the Irish economy during the 1930s. Opinion on this is more mixed. De Valera and Fianna Fáil have often been criticised for heavy-handed protectionism and state intervention. Nevertheless, McCullagh emphasises the progressive aspects of Fianna Fáil's social and economic policies, in particular its housing programme, the reform of social welfare and the modernisation of the health system. It was a cautious progressiveness which did not extend to redistribution and consequently did not seriously impact on Irish inequalities. While the author challenges the claim that the 1932 budget was Keynesian, he also offers a revisionist take on de Valera's 1943 'comely maidens' broadcast. He argues that de Valera was advocating sharing the nation's wealth 'to ensure a minimum for everyone, the better off would have to accept a lower standard of living' (vol. 2, pp 228–9). This places Fianna Fáil at the progressive end of the political spectrum in Ireland and might be compared with the reforms associated with the New Deal in the United States.

Irish politics and Fianna Fáil were more inward-looking after 1945. Irish neutrality, though widely popular and successful, reinforced these tendencies and left Ireland unprepared for post-war change in Europe. McCullagh notes that discussion of the post-Emergency period has often been neglected by biographers, though he does not add anything new here. It is arguable that de Valera's legacy would have been more secure had he retired in 1948. Because he did not, he has been blamed for the dismal conditions that enveloped Ireland during the 1950s. While this is too harsh, McCullagh is surely correct that de Valera stayed on for too long, became increasingly conservative and was a victim of Fianna Fáil's earlier success. It proved more difficult to change because the policies had been relatively successful. The most telling example of this is de Valera's refusal to consider the innovative suggestions on Northern Ireland proposed by Lemass in 1955. Perhaps de Valera's greatest failure was his refusal to acknowledge that unionists considered themselves a distinct community with no attachment to the emotional, historical or cultural values of the Irish nation.

Though de Valera died in 1975 his influence continued have an impact on Irish society for over twenty years. The political controversies of the 1980s would have been very different without his legacy. Fianna Fáil in particular defended that legacy on issues as diverse as Northern Ireland, neutrality, abortion and divorce. In the short run this was successful but, as McCullagh concludes, de Valera's Ireland 'now belongs to history' (vol. 2, p. 412). The institutional arrangements put in place in 1937 have not only stood the test of time but proved to be flexible enough to accommodate a very different Ireland.

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Brian Girvin
School of Political and Social Sciences, University of Glasgow
Brian.Girvin@glasgow.ac.uk