

objections to ‘continental abuses’, how scrupulous were they when it came to Irish political crime? And were Irish or Irish-American dynamitards made subject to dubious judicial proceedings and particularly harsh treatment in British prisons, as many Irish nationalists believed? Home Rule M.P.s, particularly Parnellites, made much of these controversies in the 1890s. Doubtless, the activities of the British state can be analysed in ways that tells us something fresh about the late nineteenth century world, but the approach now needed is less that of exposé and instead more of an engagement with the difficulties faced by the liberal state under fire. It might be that the best new evidence is not to be winkled out of much combed-over police and intelligence files but from the great volume of material generated by the strangely neglected Special Commission into ‘Parnellism and Crime’. This, in itself, a grotesque abuse of state power by the sitting Tory government, is where a genuinely fresh insight into the subterranean dimensions of late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism is most likely to be found.

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KEVIN O'SHIEL: TYRONE NATIONALIST AND IRISH STATE-BUILDER. By Eda Sagarra.  
Pp xvi, 334. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2013. €65.

Amongst government and private papers dating from the early years of the Irish Free State one regularly finds the often lengthy memoranda of Kevin O'Shiel (1891–1970). He was one of a group of ‘back room boys’ advising ministers and senior civil servants in the early Cosgrave years. His brief covered a wide range of constitutional, legal, political and international relations matters, including the 1922 Constitution, Ireland's membership of the League of Nations and the vexed question of Northern Ireland and the Boundary Commission.

O'Shiel lived in interesting times and left a lengthy 1,100-page account of his activities in the revolutionary years to 1921. He was not shy in putting pen to paper. But then he had already lived a full life by the date his personal memoir concluded. Age and memories of the trials of partition and civil war made the task of continuing difficult to the point of impossibility.

Eda Sagarra uses this autobiographical material effectively, augmenting it with detailed research. She brings a unique personal insight to her account as she is O'Shiel's daughter. The result covers the eight decades of O'Shiel's life, though the focus is on 1917 to 1923 with chapters covering his activities during the rise of Sinn Féin and the 1918 general election, involvement in the Dáil Éireann courts, the establishment of the Irish Free State and the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau. A final chapter looks at O'Shiel's life and career after 1923 as a land commissioner. O'Shiel's Tyrone background is emphasised; he was one of a group of northern nationalists including Ernest Blythe, Seán Lester and Patrick McGilligan who built the Irish Free State only to see their birthplaces remain in Northern Ireland. However O'Shiel did not emerge full-formed in 1917 and his ‘formation’ and ‘transformation’ in Tyrone and Dublin into a Sinn Féin supporter are covered in two early chapters. These remind the reader of the influences and outlooks that created independent Ireland's first generation of bureaucrats and the nature of the generational shift in outlook from Irish Parliamentary Party to Sinn Féin.

From the concluding sentences of the introduction it is clear that Sagarra is aware that her blood relationship with her subject imposes special obligations not to sentimentalise. She explains that in writing this biography she in fact met her father again as a stranger. The result is not a vanity project, but a rigorous account of a man and his times. Perhaps the one missing component is a complete critical assessment by way of a comprehensive conclusion. The text stops as O'Shiel stops: on his death on 12 July 1970.

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.

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

Michael Laffan's *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