

Éamon de Valera (DEV)

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Éamon de Valera was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1882. After the death of his Spanish father he was sent to live with his mother's family in Limerick. He graduated from the Royal University of Ireland in 1904 and became a mathematics teacher. In 1912 he was appointed lecturer and head of the department of mathematics and physics in St. Patrick's College.

Dev' was an ardent supporter of the Irish language revival movement and also became a member of Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers in 1913. After the 1916 Easter Rebellion, he became the senior surviving rebel leader when his death was commuted because of his American birth.

He was sentenced to life imprisonment but was released under a general amnesty in 1917. De Valera's imprisonment massively enhanced his standing among revolutionary nationalists. Age and education (he was older and better educated than most fellow prisoners), military seniority, and schoolmasterly authority contributed to his emergence as a leader. So, too, did his self-sufficiency, intelligence, and capacity for independent thought, communication skills, and his readiness to confront prison authorities.

That same year, 1917, he was elected as a member of Parliament and President of Sinn Fein. He was arrested again in 1918 but escaped from prison and went to the United States.

In the US, he had 3 objectives.

- (a) To seek official recognition of the Republic.
- (b) To dissuade the US government from pledging to maintain Ireland as an integral part of the UK.
- (c) Raise fund for Irish Independence (nearly 6 million).

Dev was back in Ireland for two years of armed conflict, roadside ambushes, assassinations, etc... So, in the summer of 1921 Prime Minister David Lloyd George wrote to Eamon who at this point was the Leader of the Executive Council and asked if they could sit down to discuss the matter.

Dev showed up and was not happy to learn that it was already decided by the English that Ireland would be granted dominion status and that six counties in the North of Ireland were to stay with England. In the end this was no more than the old home rule without Ulster that England had been willing to grant John Redmond in 1912. They disagreed about the wording of the proposed oath of Allegiance. Lloyd George identified the British King as the ultimate arbiter of Irish affairs where de Valera's version positioned the King as mere figurehead, leaving control of Ireland to the Irish. Lloyd George about Dev: Talking with de Valera was like pouring sand in your hand.... you don't get anywhere.

Lloyd George told de Valera he could "put a soldier in Ireland for every man, woman and child" if the IRA did not immediately agree to stop fighting. De Valera responded "how long are you going to keep them there?" (An American delegation to the Treaty of Versailles "PM Lloyd George is one slippery eel.)

Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins went to London and accepted the same offer that was turned down by Dev a year earlier. Despite De Valera's protest the Republican Parliament, Dail Eireann, approved the treaty by a small majority in January 1922. We know that he opposed and repudiated the final treaty because it excluded Northern Ireland and required office holders to swear allegiance to the British crown. He resigned from the Dail Eireann in January 1922. The civil war followed.

After the civil war de Valera led the Republican opposition to the pro-treaty government of William T. Cosgrave. In 1926 he broke with the extreme Republicans and founded a constitutional opposition party, Fianna Fail, which entered the Dail in 1927. Fianna Fail (FEE-ANN-uh FOIL) won the 1932 election, and Dev formed a government which lasted for 16 years.

Ironically, for de Valera to repeal the oath he had to take it. Abolishing the oath as an issue in the Fianna Fail platform in 1932 and by 1933 it was repealed. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one of the biggest social, political, and economic issues in Ireland revolved around land ownership. Beginning in 1870, a series of new laws allowed Irish tenant farmers to purchase land from landlords. Many of these purchases were backed by loans from the British government. As part of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Ireland agreed to continue repayment of these loans. That is, until 1932 when de Valera decided to cease repayment.

For de Valera this was part of a larger economic plan that sought to establish a self-sufficient economy in Ireland. This turned out to be a disaster. The Irish imposed high tariffs on imports and the British responded in kind. The Irish were already poor, but this intensified their poverty in the cities and well as the countryside. The trade war between Britain and Ireland lasted from 1932 – 1938 had dire consequences on the Irish economy. Yet, despite the hardship it brought to the country, de Valera and Fianna Fail stunned their opponents by remaining in power during the entire conflict. The agreement made in 1938 ended the economic war and the British occupation of Irish Naval bases. But memories of the poverty caused by the trade war caused some Irish to dismiss de Valera and his legacy.

As prime minister, his government also extended social services, introduced a constitution in 1937 which made the Free State a Republic in all but name.

He kept Ireland neutral during WW2, refusing to let the British use southern Irish ports and vigorously protesting Allied military activity in Northern Ireland. He helped Britain during the war by refusing Germany to use Irish territory. His decision to remain neutral during WW2 was looked upon with disdain by the British and Americans. In fact, the American Minister, David Gray, was hostile to de Valera. But his reasons were threefold:

- a. it was the supreme expression of national sovereignty,
- b. it was the only feasible policy while partition lasted,
- c. he believed that small states should resolve that they would not become tools of any great power, and they will resist with whatever strength that may possess every attempt to force them into a war against their will.

(St. Patrick's Day message to the U.S. reminded Americans to study George Washington's declaration of neutrality in 1793 and his letter to James Monroe in 1796). In May 1945, Churchill made a victory speech which resulted in a sharp attack on de Valera. He suggested that if necessary Britain would have come close quarters with Ireland.... suggesting an invasion of Ireland for Britain's defense in case Germany uses Ireland as a base.

The Irish people waited three days to hear Dev's response. "Given the bloodstained record between England and this country, could he not find in his heart the generosity to acknowledge that there is a small nation that stood alone not for one year or two, but for several hundred years against aggression?"

He was defeated in the election of 1948 but returned as Taoiseach in (1951 – 54) with the independent support and had an absolute majority (1957 – 59). Hampered by failing vision, in 1959 he moved to the less demanding office of the President of the Republic to which he was reelected in 1966. He retired in 1973.

The real criticism of de Valera was not his vision but his failure to do anything practical to achieve it. Ireland looked the same when he left office as it did when he was first elected. Instead of exploiting for common good the policies he advocated, he presided over depopulation of a poverty-stricken rural Ireland.

I think it is fitting to reiterate the obvious: Éamon de Valera is the most significant figure in the political history of Ireland in the 20th century. This is a statement of incontrovertible historical fact. I am not putting down other people's heroes, i.e. a disparagement of Pearse's idealism, Connolly's revolutionary fire, Collins's swashbuckling pragmatism.

If there was no other reason for de Valera's importance, he was at the center of political life in Ireland for forty-three years, not including the fourteen-year period as President. We have here a span of political power and influence virtually unparalleled in contemporary Europe and Irish history.

De Valera made the assertion of *independence* and *dignity* on behalf of his people. In that service to Ireland lay his greatest achievement.

Éamon de Valera

Prime minister – Taoiseach

<u>Term of Office</u>	<u>Party</u>
1. 1 April 1919 - 9 January 1922	Sinn Féin
2. 9 March 1932 - 18 February 1948	Fianna Fáil
3. 13 June 1951 - 2 June 1954	Fianna Fáil
4. 20 March 1957 - 23 June 1959	Fianna Fáil

President of Ireland

<u>Term of Office</u>	<u>Party</u>
1. 25 June 1959 - 24 June 1973	Fianna Fáil