

Irish History of the 1920s and 1930s

Seán O'Donnell reviews recent historical writing on two very influential decades after the foundation of the Irish state



Introduction

The period in Irish history from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War II can be set, for the purpose of teaching, into two modules of the Leaving Certificate syllabus, the first containing the political and social aspects of the Cumann na nGaedheal period in government from 1922 to 1932 and the second, that of Fianna Fáil from 1932 to 1939. This setting can equally suit the proposed new syllabus. Purists may argue against the division of something which is a continuous past into artificial periods but practical experience in the classroom suggests that the effective history teacher is not necessarily so pure of mind.

Teachers Attitudes

A shade of hesitation at times occupies teachers approaching this section of the course. It may arise from a sense that students find it a dull period compared to the action-packed previous decade in Ireland, or from a sense that young people hanker for a colourful and larger than life character such as Collins, Bismarck, Hitler or Mussolini who are central to other sections. Hesitation may also be due to the teacher's own feelings on a period so recent which was very politically divisive and which can still evoke passion. Such difficulties can present the teacher with a challenge which if approached professionally can become an advantage.

Just as the teacher in front of a difficult class must be all the more prepared, so too should the teacher approaching a seemingly difficult period in history. Essential to this preparation is the teacher's own knowledge of the subject and the organisation of this knowledge. A well-informed and well-organised teacher will like the subject and will become enthusiastic about it. This enthusiasm will readily transmit itself to the student.

Having become well informed on the period it is then the task of the teacher to present the work in an organised manner. Experience shows that learning is much more efficient if students can perceive that the details of what they learn are related parts of a whole. Grouping events can then be a useful method in this regard. A suggested grouping for the period

under discussion might include law and order, the economy, foreign policy, the I.R.A. and Blueshirts, the constitution and the 1938 Anglo-Irish agreement. The teacher may not necessarily give equal prominence to each group and should feel free in the selection of topics and be influenced by the ability and maturity of the students and by the degree of interest which each topic generates.

The new government

When studying sources of information, teachers have their own preferences but few will have studied the history of modern Ireland without reference to J.J. Lee's *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* or to R.F. Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. Basil Chubb's *The government and politics of Ireland* has for long been a rich resource. Lee argues that despite the instability exposed by the Civil War the Free State government began its work with many advantages. Ireland was a relatively modernised society and its standard of living was about average for western Europe which was about two thirds that of Britain. Foster says that the dominant pre-occupation of the new government in 1922 was self-definition against Britain, cultural and political. Both government rhetoric and the constitution itself continually emphasised that the roots of legitimacy lay in popular sovereignty and allegiance to the Treaty. Dermot Keogh takes a fresh look at this period and devotes two chapters of his history of Ireland in the twentieth century to it in which he traces the establishment and development of the new state in great detail. Tom Garvin examines the birth of the state and sets it in its European historical context. He argues that militant republicanism always lacked popular democratic legitimacy. Ronan Fanning's *The Irish Department of Finance 1922-58* now has a welcome companion in Mary Daly's lengthy history of the Department of Local Government from the foundation of the state until 1973 which is based on recently-deposited archival material and which covers matters previously not touched by historians.



de Valera in Cobh in 1938 for the official handover by the British government of the Cork Harbour forts (Picture That)

Leaders

While some students may bemoan the absence of a colour-

ful character like Collins they may find interest in the less florid careers of Cosgrave, O'Higgins and Mulcahy who were dominant up to 1932 and in De Valera who played the leading role afterwards. The responsibility which circumstances placed on the earlier three was immense and the tension between them palpable. The story of O'Higgins has been well told by Terence de Vere White and the recent publication of the family memoirs of both O'Higgins and Mulcahy have increased the interest in both characters with the addition of the human dimension.



Elegance at Tramore Races in the 1930s (Picture That Again)

In his verdict on Cosgrave Lee argues that the achievement of his government remains a historic one. It inherited a ship of state which *"however firmly built was buffeted by hostile winds, manned by a partly mutinous crew and with many disaffected passengers."* And Cosgrave would do the ship of state one final service, he says, in the manner in which he quietly left the bridge and handed over the wheel to the rival captain. Foster observes how De Valera with judicious pragmatism brought his party to power and enabled the reconstruction of Anglo Irish relations into the form of "external association" climaxing the policy of Irish neutrality during the Second World War. De Valera has attracted more biographers than any other Irish political figure of the twentieth century, some of them not great, but John Bowman's *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917-1973* has been described by The Economist as *"a work of superb and exhaustive research"*

From Law & Order to Foreign Policy

The formation of the Garda Síochána was a first step in establishing law and order after the Civil War and Liam McNiffe's history tells of the influence of the R.I.C. on the new force, the decision to have an unarmed police force, the Broy Harriers, the attempt to make the force bilingual, involvement in sport and the struggle to win improved pay and allowances. The army mutiny of 1924 has been described by Maryann Gialanella Valuilis in her *Almost a rebellion: the Irish army mutiny of 1924*. The economy of the 1920s and 1930s is put in a wider context in Kieran A. Kennedy's work, especially in his chapter on industrial development.

Foreign policy consisted mostly of dealings with Britain and the League of Nations. The former is dealt with by D.W. Harkness in *The restless dominion: the Irish Free State in the British Commonwealth of Nations 1921-1931* while the latter is covered by Michael Kennedy who relates how Ireland was given a chance to exercise some influence on a world stage when it joined the League. In the 1930s it became an effective advocate within that body for minorities. Kennedy argues that Ireland's neutrality in the Second World War cost her much of the international goodwill that she had built up in the League. In his study on cross-border relations Kennedy reveals that there was a lot more activity between the two states between 1922 and 1939 than was previously thought. This is interesting when studied alongside David Fitzpatrick's work which provides a series of insights into the similarities and differences between nationalism and unionism.

Blueshirts and IRA

The Blueshirts are the subject of a new study by Mike Cronin which is the first since Maurice Manning's work was published more than thirty years ago. The difference between the two is that Cronin has consulted recently released government records and private papers. Manning reveals interesting insights on the same subject in the early chapters of his biography of James Dillon.

Unseann Mac Eoin's work on the I.R.A. in these years includes interviews with many of those actively involved in the movement. The 1937 constitution and the Anglo-Irish agreement of the following year are treated by all De Valera's biographers but Deirdre McMahon's *Republicans and imperialists: Anglo-Irish relations in the 1930s* is especially useful.

Social History

Social history of the 1920s and 1930s in Ireland is an area which is often not given the attention it deserves by teachers. It is an area which is important especially in preparation for the research topic on the present syllabus and which will hopefully have an even more prominent place in the new syllabus. Social history offers very wide and exciting choices to the teacher and student with an abundance of recent research in the area. Joost Augustejn's work contains eight essays on topics as varied as the reading patterns of the 1930s, the Irish language revival, Fianna Fáil's rural building programme, the public health pioneer Dorothy Price, the 1929 Catholic Emancipation centenary celebrations, the impact of the encyclical Quadragesimo Anno in Ireland, the Irish Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and the formation of the volunteer army reserve.

Jacinta Prunty's work is a useful prelude to any study of urban housing in twentieth century Dublin, recording how that city was a much better place in 1925 than in 1800. Streets had been paved and drained, public health improved, the toll of typhus and other fevers contained and much of the bad housing had been banished. The work of Elizabeth Malcolm and Greta Jones in thirteen essays examines medical institutions, diseases and medical practitioners in Ireland.

The development of the labour and trade union movement has for a long time been recorded in various articles in that splendid historical journal *Saothar*. In his study of the Pioneer and Total Abstinence Society Diarmaid Ferriter claims that the organisation had 250,000 members in the 1920s and that it had double that number by 1950 and had become an international movement with a large membership in Australasia and in parts of Africa. Enda Watters outlines the contribution of one religious congregation to the Irish missionary movement which blossomed between 1900 and 1940 and which involved thousands of Irish men and women in many parts of the world.

Women's History

The pioneering work of Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha Ó Corráin is an essential introduction to the study of Irish women's history. Maria Luddy's more recent work is a useful

source book and its extensive bibliography will be a great help to teachers. The sixteen essays written in honour of Margaret MacCurtain and edited by Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd examine the relationship between women, history and the state from a range of perspectives and has been a major contribution to the writing of women's history. Mary Daly's pamphlet provides a survey of women's work from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century and is the latest in a series to which she has substantially contributed already. She notes that after 1922 the rate of female participation in the workforce expanded in Northern Ireland while in the Republic it declined or remained static until the 1980s.

Bernadette Whelan has edited a collection of articles which examines all aspects of women's work while Caitríona Clear's study outlines how, during the first four decades of Irish independence, women of the house, especially in a rural context, became an identifiable sector within Irish society. The work of Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy on female activists in Irish political life in the twentieth century recounts the lives and work of trade unionists, Louie Bennett, Helena Molony and Mary Galway and political activists, Kathleen Lynn, Rosamond Jacob, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins. Margaret Ward's biography of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington has been highly acclaimed. Volume seven of *Women's Studies Review* is so interesting that it will send the reader, new to this area of study, in search of the six earlier volumes.

Local History

Raymond Gillespie and Myrtle Hill have edited a series of essays on the practicalities of writing local history and on the general principles to be followed, with a focus on people more than places and suggesting types of hitherto neglected evidence. The study of townlands has been treated in publications edited by W.H. Crawford, R.H. Foy, Paul Connell, Denis A. Cronin and Brian Ó Dálaigh.

The country homes of Irish landlords, traditionally known as "big houses", attracted both curiosity and contempt but were always of interest to historians. By the 1920s many of these were partially closed off, sold, burned or completely abandoned. This transformation on the Irish landscape is recorded in the work of Terence Dooley. The Dublin publishers, Geography Publications, have been responsible for a splendid series of books on Irish counties. The series was initiated in 1985 with the work on Tipperary which consisted of nineteen interdisciplinary essays on the history of that county by noted historians. Since then several other Irish counties have been treated in the series using a similar format and maintaining the same high standard of scholarship. Very many counties have also their own historical journals, usually published annually, which should occupy a prominent place in the school library.

Towns

In his study of Clonmel, this writer suggests that the study of towns has been a relatively neglected aspect of Irish history, partly because in the past the vast majority of the population was rurally based and partly because of a traditional perception that town and city life was in some way less a part of the Irish heritage. Anngret Simms comments that in the past Irish towns have contributed very little towards symbolising our identity and that the political leaders of the first generation after independence, evoked an image of Irish society which was almost exclusively rural. The work of Anngret Simms and William

Nolan, goes a long way towards mending this neglect. It includes a guide to state repositories with a survey of map-related sources, official records and literary sources. It also includes a bibliography of publications printed between 1969 and 1993 on Irish towns in the period 1500 to 1988.

Conclusion

Teaching the period of Irish history from 1922 to 1939 may not be as difficult as it first appears. With a copious recently published bibliography together with extensive audio-visual material available it can become a joy to teach. It is now up to the teacher "to get up and go!"

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