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## From “Criminal Adventurer” to “the Most Important Irishman of Our Time”: the *Irish Times* and Eamon de Valera, 1916-1973

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**Abstract.** Founded in 1859 as the voice of the Protestant and Unionist Ascendancy of Dublin, the *Irish Times* has become, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the country’s most respected daily newspaper. As such, it has been a privileged observer of Eamon de Valera’s extraordinarily long career based on his vision of a Gaelic, rural, Catholic and independent Ireland. Because of the essential divergence in their ideals concerning the Irish nation, the *Irish Times* and de Valera can hardly be expected to have shared many affinities. Over the years, however, an analysis of the reactions and opinions expressed by the newspaper in its editorials reveals an evolution in its perception of the nationalist leader. After firmly denouncing de Valera’s part in the Civil War and his attitude towards the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the *Irish Times*’ perception of de Valera changed progressively once the leader was in power, particularly from the early 1950s onwards, as a result of De Valera’s attitude, combined with the newspaper’s own evolution, the changes taking place in the country and a feeling of disappointment with the pro-Treaty parties.

**Key Words.** Eamon de Valera, Nationalism, Unionism, Irish newspapers, the *Irish Times*, Fianna Fáil.

**Resumen.** Fundado en 1859 como portavoz de la Ascendencia protestante y unionista de Dublín, el *Irish Times* es considerada en la actualidad la publicación diaria más respectada del país. Como tal, ha sido observadora privilegiada de la dilatada carrera de Eamon de Valera, centrada en la visión de una Irlanda independiente, gaélica, rural y católica. Como era de esperar a causa de la rotunda divergencia de ideales con respecto a la nación irlandesa, el *Irish Times* y de Valera apenas compartían intereses. Sin embargo, un análisis de las reacciones y opiniones expresadas en los editoriales del periódico a lo largo de varios años, muestra una evolución en la valoración del líder nacionalista. Tras haber denunciado duramente la participación de de Valera en la Guerra Civil y su posición frente al Tratado Anglo-Irlandés la visión que el *Irish Times* da de de Valera cambia progresivamente una vez éste llega al poder, particularmente a partir de inicios de la década de los 1950. Ello se debe tanto a la actitud del político como a la evolución del propio periódico, a la transformación del país y a un desencanto con los partidos que habían apoyado el Tratado.

**Palabras clave.** Eamon de Valera, nacionalismo, unionismo, prensa irlandesa, *Irish Times*, Fianna Fáil.

On 30 August 1975, following the death of Eamon de Valera, the *Irish Times* summed up the Irish leader’s life and career in an article

suitably entitled “The controversial giant of modern Ireland”:

Mr. de Valera had many careers, far exceeding

Shakespeare's 'Seven Ages of Man'. First, the military Commandant, the national leader of the freedom struggle, the President of Ireland's first free assembly and President of the Irish Republic in its military and diplomatic struggle against Britain, then the defeated political leader engaged in civil war politics against the first Irish government. Finally, President of the Executive of the Irish Free State and Taoiseach of a sovereign Republic for more than twenty years, and ultimately its President.

On the same day, the newspaper paid the nationalist leader a tribute adapted to the solemnity of the occasion: "In one respect at least, there will be no disagreement about de Valera: he was a great man. [...] In a large measure, his monument is the Republic of Ireland today". But while recognizing in its front-page editorial that "his attachment to parliamentary democracy is beyond all question", that "a good deal of credit for the very survival of parliamentary democracy in this part of Ireland belongs to him" and that "political Ireland, as we know it today, owes an incalculable debt to the memory of this great man", the newspaper reminded its readers of some of the deceased's faults, such as the fact that "Mr. de Valera ruled his own party (and the country when he judged appropriate) with a rod of iron" and that "the national leader often triumphed over the democrat".

These extracts reveal the *Irish Times'* ambiguous feeling towards Eamon de Valera, which is hardly surprising coming from a newspaper founded over a century earlier with the avowed ambition to give voice to the Protestant and Unionist Ascendancy of Dublin. Despite its evolution over the years, and particularly after the foundation of the Irish Free state in 1922, the *Irish Times* may be expected to have been the first opponent of a leader widely regarded as the symbol of an essentially Catholic, Gaelic and independent Ireland. This essential divergence in the aspiration that each defended for the same country is precisely the starting point of this essay, which has for objective to analyze how Eamon de Valera was perceived by the *Irish Times* throughout the former's extraordinary long public life, from 1917 to 1973.

Due to the evolution of both the politician and the newspaper, as well as of the country in which they lived, one may hardly expect to evidence a single, constant perspective on the part of the *Irish Times* as far as its perception

of de Valera is concerned. On the contrary, it is essential to try to assess its evolution and fluctuations over the years while considering the particular situation of the politician and the newspaper at each of the periods studied, as well as the historical and political context of the time. This necessity led to the choice of an analysis of the contents of the *Irish Times'* articles during each of the distinct periods of Eamon de Valera's public life: from the Easter Rising to the Civil War (1916-1923), between the beginning of his dedication to parliamentary politics and the end of his sixteen consecutive years in power (1923-1948) and from the proclamation of the Irish Republic to the end of his two terms as President of the Irish Republic (1948-1973). At the same time, special attention was given to key events in the history and evolution of the newspaper itself over the same period, in order to understand its own nature and development. All in all, a total of over one hundred and fifty articles have been considered (mostly editorials) in an attempt to define the *Irish Times'* representation of de Valera over the years.

## 1. The revolutionary leader: 1916-1923

### 1.1 "A Great fiasco"<sup>1</sup>

The first public action in which Eamon de Valera took part was the 1916 Easter Rising, which was first mentioned in the *Irish Times* on Tuesday, 25 April in a tone that left little doubt concerning the position of the newspaper: "An attempt has been made to overthrow the constitutional government of Ireland. [...] Of course, this desperate episode in Irish history can only have one end, and the loyal public will await as calmly and confidently as may be. [...] The ordeal is severe but it will be short". Throughout its coverage of the event, the newspaper's tone regarding the rising and its leaders is, not surprisingly, unambiguously hostile, as can be gathered from its editorial on 28 April 1916, following the leaders' surrender:

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1. "Few people heard the beginning of the official declaration of an Irish Republic. Fewer stayed to the end. [...] Like the revolution itself, the proclamation was a great fiasco" (the *Irish Times*, 6 May 1916). Unless mentioned otherwise, all the dates indicated refer to the *Irish Times'* editorial on that day.

So ends the criminal adventure of the men who declared that they were 'striking in full confidence of victory', and told their dupes that they would be 'supported by gallant allies in Europe'. The gallant ally's only gift to them was an Irish renegade whom it wanted to lose. Ireland has been saved from shame and ruin, and the whole Empire from a serious danger. [...] The Dublin Insurrection of 1916 will pass into History with the equally unsuccessful insurrections of the past. [...] The story of last week in Dublin is a record of crime, horror and destruction, shot with many gleams of the highest valour and devotion.

Such a firm condemnation is hardly surprising from a newspaper which defined itself, at the time of its foundation in 1859, as "a loyal Irishman, [...] proud to share in the destinies of the only first-rate power in Europe that has known how to combine social order with individual freedom" (29 March 1859) and still considered, in May 1914, the Home Rule Bill as "a thoroughly bad bill, calamitous and anti-national" (27 May 1914).

The *Irish Times*' hostility is all the less surprising since it reflects the unanimous reaction of Irish daily newspapers, including the nationalist *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Independent* and *Cork Examiner* (Lee 1990: 29-35). But while these condemned the rising because it was seen as a stab in the back to John Redmond's moderate nationalism (Lee 1990: 28), the insurrection represented for the unionist *Irish Times* an unforgivably treacherous attack on the sacred union encouraged by the nationalists themselves. Indeed, Southern unionists rejoiced to see, in the middle of the first World War, "Irish unionists and nationalists [...] fight shoulder to shoulder, share the same baptism of blood, the same suffering and glory in the same holy cause" (17 September 1914). The *Irish Times* therefore considered that "Irish treachery has won its due reward" and only found some comfort in the fact that "Irish soldiers should have largely helped to crush the seditious outbreak of a minority" (2 May 1916).

Following the military failure of the rising and the surrender of its leaders, the *Irish Times* was quick in calling for "a stern policy of repression and punishment" in order to "protect the highest interests of the Irish capital and of Ireland as a whole" (2 May) and to "remove the whole malignant growth" (1 May). It also

urged the authorities to "utterly eliminate [...] all risk of renewal of the shame and loss of the recent outbreak" (6 May). Yet, the newspaper was far from being the only one to demand strong repression and blood (O'Toole 1999: 87-88) with Murphy's *Irish Independent*, for example, strongly urging the British authorities not to waver in their determination and to spare none of the leaders (Coogan 1999: 75; O'Brien 2001: 3). On the whole, the 1916 Rising marked a transition for Southern unionists by convincing them of the inevitability of what they feared most: the achievement of Ireland's independence and her secession from the Commonwealth. As for Eamon de Valera, after being sentenced to death, like more prominent leaders, his own sentence was soon commuted to penal servitude for life and he would finally be released in June 1917 to resume the political fight only a few weeks later.

### 1.1 "Ireland's greatest opportunity"<sup>2</sup>

The first mention of Eamon de Valera's name in the *Irish Times*' editorials can be found on 5 July 1917, shortly after his release from prison and only a few days before the East Clare by-election. On that occasion, after informing its readers that "one of the late prisoners is a candidate for the late Major Redmond's seat in East Clare" and condemning "Mr. de Valera and his friends' [...] doctrines of revolution and unrest", the newspaper explained: "Mr. de Valera and some of his friends are [...] prepared to make Ireland independent at any cost. They glory in their share in the late rebellion and, while they do not say in so many words that they are prepared to lead another rebellion at some favourable moment, they imply that readiness in almost every one of their speeches" (5 July 1917).

Following Sinn Féin's victory in the first post-war general election of December 1918 and the subsequent setting up of an illegal Irish parliament, the *Irish Times* stated that "today, a large number of Irish nationalists hope, and a still larger number fear, that in the near future an Irish Republic may come to birth from the grotesque union of British folly and American sentiment" (10 May 1919). Progressively,

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2. "This is Ireland's greatest, and perhaps last, opportunity" (14 December 1921).

however, the newspaper would come to resign itself to Home Rule as the lesser of two evils, especially after the Government of Ireland Act which, in December 1920, effectively set up two parliaments for Ireland, in Belfast and Dublin (Lee 1990: 47). Despite its loyalty towards Britain, the *Irish Times* accused London of leniency for accepting to “treat with men who, for four years, have insulted, defied and injured the British Empire by every means in their power” (14 December 1920) while considering that “if Ireland is to have peace, she must make it for herself, and must prove herself worthy of it. No act of Parliament can help her as long as she chooses to remain a slave to the tyranny of crime” (21 December 1920).

The Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed by the Irish delegation and the British government in December 1921, represents a turning point in the history of the *Irish Times*. On the one hand, the newspaper, like the whole of the Southern unionist community, increasingly distinguished itself from the unionists of the North of Ireland who were willing to avoid the inclusion in an independent state at all costs. On the other hand, it would from then on defend the cause of Home Rule as the only means of remaining within the British Empire. Although confessing that the Southern loyalists’ “ideal [...] was a well-administered Act of Union” (21 December 1921) and that “for Southern loyalists, Ireland does not exist, and will never exist, apart from the British Empire” (7 December 1921), it showed its willingness to conform itself to the new situation: “Nobody will welcome more gladly the Treaty than the loyalists of Southern Ireland” (7 December 1921). In this new state of things, the *Irish Times* logically concentrated its hostility on the man who refused the Anglo-Irish Treaty and wanted to go on fighting for what the newspaper condemned as “the chimera of absolute independence” (20 December 1920): Eamon de Valera.

### 1.2 “The Cromwellian tactics of de Valera and his friends”<sup>3</sup>

In December 1921, after the Treaty was signed and as it became increasingly clear that de Valera would oppose it, the *Irish Times*

already showed without ambiguity on which side it stood: “The pursuit of absolute independence was always hopeless but [...] its renewal will be the most hopeless adventure for which a people ever sacrificed their peace and the blood of their young men” (20 December 1921). Accordingly, the newspaper encouraged its readers to vote in favour of the Treaty: “The country will decide for itself between the sane realism of Mrss. Griffith and Collins and the finishing idealism of Mrss. de Valera and Childers” (20 December 1921). From that time onwards, the former President of Dáil Éireann would become the newspaper’s principal target, not only because of his position toward the Treaty (“a tragic misjudgment”, according to the newspaper), but due to his attitude throughout the ratifying process, which the *Irish Times* saw growing reasons to denounce as dictatorial. On the very day de Valera resigned as President of Dáil Éireann, the newspaper wrote:

Mr. de Valera, like the drumming guns, has no doubt. One sentence in his speech illustrates his quite simple psychology: ‘Whenever I wanted to know what the Irish people wanted, I had only to examine my own heart’. [...] If Mr. de Valera is so sure of his knowledge of the people’s mind, he cannot object to put that object to the test at a moment when every expression of the popular will seems to belie his confidence. [...] Rejection of the Treaty would mean not only another period of unrest and misery for this country, but the end of all our hopes for a united Ireland. No man or body of men has the right to force that baleful doom upon the Irish people (7 January 1922).

This accusation of “professing to know the people’s minds better than the people themselves know it” (17 April 1922) would be a constant feature in the *Irish Times*’ treatment of de Valera, especially at times of crisis. At the time, and as it became increasingly clear that de Valera would not conform himself to the popular verdict,<sup>4</sup> the newspaper repeatedly challenged him to do so, for example on 9 January (“If he is a true patriot, he will bow to the national decision”) and 12 April 1922 (“if he is a real democrat, he will accept the people’s verdict”). After the beginning of the

3. *Irish Times*’ headline, 10 July 1922.

4. The Anglo-Irish Treaty was ratified by the Dáil by 64 votes to 57 on 7 January 1922. In June, 92 pro-Treaty candidates were elected, against 36 Republicans, in the general election.

Civil War between pro and anti-Treaty troops in April 1922, the *Irish Times* compared de Valera to “the men who are firing on the Irish troops and are filling thousand of Irish homes with misery and sorrow” while considering that “his political cause is hopeless” (13 June 1922).

The harshness of the *Irish Times*’ attacks on de Valera contrasts with the growing support of Michael Collins in its editorials.<sup>5</sup> In this matter as in others, the newspaper continued to express a profound resentment towards de Valera: over twenty-five years later, it reminded its readers that “the greatest opportunity of Irish unity was allowed to slip in 1922, when Mr. de Valera headed the revolt against the Anglo-Irish Treaty” (28 January 1948). On the whole, de Valera’s attitude over the Anglo-Irish Treaty and his subsequent part in the Civil War constitute the *Irish Times*’ main resentment, amongst many other causes of disagreement throughout the leader’s long political career.

## 2. The politician: 1923-1948

### 2.1. “Gunmen and Communists vote for Fianna Fáil!”<sup>6</sup>: 1923-1932

In the early 1920s, besides having to find its place in a new state altogether quite different from the one it had dreamed of, the *Irish Times* was going through what may be considered an identity crisis, both commercially and ideologically, as Fleming explains:

Ten years after the Treaty, after the collapse of the gentry’s special position, after the disappearance of the British troops which had formed a large proportion of its subscribers, after the evidence that a new and intelligent middle-class was beginning to sprout among the Catholics, after the proof that the British were gone for good, it still clung to its old attitudes.

5. For example, the *Irish Times*’ editorial dedicated to Michael Collins’s death, on 23 August 1923: “The Irish nation will be shocked beyond measure at this awful news. General Collins stood for stable government and the restoration of civilised conditions to our distracted country. [...] His courage and sincerity rallied around him all the best and sanest elements in Irish life. His death is a disaster for Ireland. [...] That he should have met his tragic end at Irish hands is the darkest feature of this national calamity”.

6. Cumann na nGaedhael advertisement on the *Irish Times*’ front page on 12 and 16 February 1932.

It could not, of course, ignore what was going on around it. [...] It agreed that, on the whole, the Southern Protestants had been treated very decently. It hoped very much that Mr. Cosgrave and his young men would [...] not push things too far as to forget the essential links which bound Ireland to the Empire. [...] This was an attitude which could not possibly go on for much longer, and already it was something of a mystery how the *Irish Times* managed to survive at all (1990: 161).

The very survival of the *Irish Times* through the first decade of the Free State was partly due to changes within the newspaper itself. Taking over from Algernon Lockyer as editor in 1907,<sup>7</sup> John Healy, an austere character with a long journalistic experience<sup>8</sup> as well as a staunch Conservative, is sometimes presented as the last symbol of the *Irish Times*’ unionist tradition (Fleming 1990: 160). But besides having managed to keep the newspaper alive, his part in the evolution of the *Irish Times* is important, as Conor Brady, his successor at the end of the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> reminds:

John Healy is a man who is largely forgotten about. People remember more Smyllie, because of his lively character, but Healy was in many ways heroic between 1907 and 1934, considering the changes that took place between these two dates, from Queen Victoria to Eamon de Valera! In that time, Healy brought the *Irish Times* from being the paper of a Protestant middle-class to being a paper which was also respectable for Catholic middle-class people.

As for de Valera, following his release from prison in July 1924, he resumed his political activity as President of Sinn Féin, until finding himself isolated on the issue of the oath which prevented this party’s members of Parliament

7. John Healy, a Drogheda-born school teacher, was the fifth editor in the history of the *Irish Times*, after John Wheeler, Frederick Shaw, Robert Scott and Algernon Lockyer.

8. John Healy was the London *Times*’ correspondent in Dublin, as well as a journalist for the unionist publications *Evening Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Church of Ireland Times*, before becoming editor of the *Irish Times*.

9. Conor Brady was editor of the *Irish Times* between 1986 and 2003, when Geraldine Kennedy took over. This quote is an extract from an interview to the author in December 2000, and available in Jean Mercereau, *Evolution et singularités d’un journal de référence irlandais: l’Irish Times 1859-1999*, PhD thesis (2002), Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3, pp. 517-524.

to take their seats in Dáil Éireann, in spite of 27.6% of votes in the 1923 general election (Foster 1988: 525-526). He consequently founded his own party, Fianna Fáil, in March 1926 (O'Brien 2001: 10-12). Not surprisingly, on the very first election in which de Valera's newly founded party presented candidates, the *Irish Times* did not leave any doubt as to which side it expected its readers to vote for: "A vote for the government's candidate in their seats will be a vote for security, progress and financial solvency. Abstention from the polls will be, in effect, a vote for bankruptcy and the dissolution of the State" (17 August 1927).

A few days later, the *Irish Times* reiterated its opinion of de Valera and of his ambitions for the country: "Mr. de Valera's declared aim is the destruction of the Free State's Constitution. The man still dares to pass for a moral arbiter" (27 August). Again, the newspaper made it clear that it hadn't forgotten, let alone forgiven, de Valera's attitude when it reminded, on 31 August 1927: "In 1922, when Ireland asked for peace, Mr. de Valera gave her war. [...] Peace in Mr. de Valera's mouth is only an empty formula". But although Cosgrave eventually managed to remain in power thanks to the votes of the independent candidates and of the farmers, Sinn Féin, with 44 seats (against Cosgrave's 47), was beginning to represent a real threat. This situation may explain the newspaper's particularly hostile tone towards Fianna Fáil through the 1932 campaign, in which de Valera was for the first time in a position to reach power democratically, with the help of the *Irish Press* founded in 1931 to defend his view of an independent, rural, Gaelic and Catholic Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

According to the *Irish Times*, what was then at stake went far beyond the mere question of maintaining Ireland's position within the

Commonwealth and was summed up as a choice "between security and peril, between peace and disorder, between progress and decay" (16 February 1932). For the newspaper, "not only the Treaty, but the personal fortunes of every Free State's citizen, the State's place in the Empire, and the brilliant prospect of economic benefits within that Empire will be imperilled if Mr. de Valera ousts Mr. Cosgrave" (16 February 1932). Thus, beyond the question of secession from the Empire, the *Irish Times* condemned Fianna Fáil's economic policy, and warned against "Mr. de Valera's programme of ever mounting taxation, swift commercial decline, cruel unemployment and financial doom" (16 January 1933).

In spite of this energetic campaign against de Valera and Fianna Fáil, the *Irish Times* would progressively show less animosity towards the Republican leader after he had become Taoiseach. In other words, after being presented for many years by the *Irish Times* as a potential dictator, de Valera was often perceived in quite a different way once in power, a change which may be explained by the fact that, as White puts it, "in the 1930s, the Protestants began to discover that de Valera in office was a very different animal from the one that had seemed so dangerous in opposition" (1975: 103).

### 1.3 "A very different animal": 1932-1937

The *Irish Times*' first reaction to de Valera's arrival to power shows its resignation to the situation and its commitment to the rules of democracy: "A free democracy has put him in this position, and must take the consequences" (28 January 1932). Again in January 1933, when de Valera and Fianna Fáil were on the eve of their first overall majority, the newspaper expressed its good will in these terms: "Today, Mr. de Valera is on the eve of office, and he must have a fair chance to redeem his promises, which embrace work for all and the creation of a self-contained state that shall be at once Christian and prosperous. We add with pleasure that Mr. de Valera's tone and his newspaper's tone, in this hour of their triumph, are beyond reproach" (23 January 1933). As years went by, de Valera's attitude in power tended to appease his opponents' fears about his style of leadership. On the eve of the 1937 general election, while acknowledging that "in many ways President de Valera's government has confounded its

10. Launched by Eamon de Valera with funds coming mostly from the United States, the *Irish Press* stated its ambition in its first editorial in these terms: "Our ideal, culturally, is an Irish Ireland, aware of its own greatness, sure of itself, conscious of the spiritual forces which have formed it into a distinct people having its own language and customs and a traditionally Christian philosophy of life" (editorial, 5 September 1931). After years of popular success and high sales, its polemical demise in 1995 was seen as the end of an era (O'Brien 2001).

former critics, including ourselves”, the newspaper emphasized the fundamental differences between their positions by adding:

On the other hand, [...] the Fianna Fáil Party has pledged itself to secede from the Commonwealth at the first favourable opportunity. The major issue, therefore, is clear cut. A vote for the Cosgrave party means a vote for the Commonwealth. A vote for Fianna Fáil means a vote against it. [...] In these circumstances, we urge all our readers to go to the polls tomorrow and to vote in all case for the Cosgrave candidates (30 June 1937).

Again, by the end of the economic war with Britain, the *Irish Times* first reminded its readers that “Fianna Fáil stands for the economic war and all that this idiotic conflict means” (1 July 1937) before conceding, one year later, that “whatever may have been [Mr. de Valera’s] conduct in the past, what matters now is that he has made an exceedingly good agreement with Great Britain” (17 June 1938). But despite the *Irish Times*’ growing good will as well as the politician’s own evolution, another characteristic of de Valera’s kept the newspaper as distrustful as ever towards the Republican leader.

The accusation of showing little respect for the people’s will became even more constant following the 1937 Constitution, which the newspaper “regarded as a real danger of dictatorship” (13 May 1937). On the whole, one may note from the newspaper a tendency to associate de Valera with historical figures hardly renowned for their democratic commitment, such as Hitler,<sup>11</sup> Mussolini, Cromwell, the Bourbons,<sup>12</sup> Roman Emperors, the Tsar of All-the-Russias,<sup>13</sup> Agamem-

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11. “We believe that Mr. de Valera has no conscious to act as a dictator, that he is honestly convinced that he is a democrat; but [...] he also thinks that he is the only man who can decide whether or not the press is undermining the authority of the State. Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini are probably just as sincere as Mr. de Valera in this respect” (9 June 1937).

12. “Mr. de Valera, like the Bourbons, learns nothing and forgets nothing” (10 January 1922).

13. “Mussolini and Hitler, at least, have been honest enough to abandon even the forms of democracy. President de Valera poses as a democrat *pur sang*; he acts as if he were the Tsar of All-the-Russias” (3 November 1934).

non<sup>14</sup>... These repeated accusations of dictatorial ambitions were mostly made over two issues which kept provoking scathing attacks from the newspaper over the years: de Valera’s efforts to revive the Irish language as a pillar of Irish identity and his attitude towards Northern Ireland and Irish unity.

#### 1.4 “A one-man dictatorship”<sup>15</sup>: 1938-1945

On the eve of the 1944 general election, the *Irish Times* resumed its usual accusation of de Valera as a potential dictator:

Mr. de Valera holds firmly by the view that anybody who ventures to criticize his policy [...] must, in the nature of things, be guilty of high treason. [...] He cannot conceive the idea of a responsible government save his own [...] Let’s once more state our position. We are opposed to Fianna Fáil – in other words, to Mr. de Valera – because it has refused to accept the verdict of the majority in Dail Eireann. [...] Tomorrow the electors will have an opportunity to put a further curb on the Taoiseach’s *egoismo sacro*. [...] Even a ‘mixum gatherum’ Cabinet would be preferable to a government completely under the thumb of a man who does not understand the meaning of the word “compromise”, and is ready, at any moment, to go into the sulks if anybody should dare to cast the slightest doubt upon his political infallibility (29 May 1944).

By means of Article 8 of the 1937 Constitution, de Valera made the Gaelic language the official language of the Irish State, presenting it as an essential part of Irish nationality in an equation between language and Nation which the *Irish Times* had always refused to recognise.<sup>16</sup> This conviction may explain the numerous attacks on policies which tried to impose the use of the Irish language by the population, and which the newspaper branded as “humbug” (21 January 1948). On the issue of language, as on others, the

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14. “There were strong men before Agamemnon, there will be statesmen after Mr. de Valera” (31 January 1948).

15. “There were strong men before Agamemnon, there will be statesmen after Mr. de Valera” (31 January 1948).

16. “The possession of a national language distinct from that of all other nations means nothing: if evidence is needed, it is furnished by the USA” (18 March 1943).

*Irish Times* repeatedly condemned de Valera's tendency to give little importance to the people's will, particularly whenever it considered that more serious issues were at stake. In March 1943, for instance, it wrote that "for men and women who are crying aloud for food, de Valera demands an additional effort to learn a language which is foreign to nine tenths of them" (18 March 1943). The tone would be even harsher a year later: "The Emperor is alleged to have played the fiddle, or its first century equivalent, while Rome was burning. While events in Europe are rushing towards their terrific and world-shaking climax, Mr. Eamon de Valera continues to talk about the Irish language" (12 September 1944).

De Valera's responsibility in the partition of the island is generally regarded as the most negative aspect of his legacy (Bowman 1986: 36-38). On various occasions, the *Irish Times* expressed its conviction that both the Civil War and the 1937 Constitution represented the main obstacle to the reunification of the island, as it did following its ratification of the latter: "What of the North? Does Mr. de Valera really think that Ireland will be any closer to national unity this evening than she was twenty-four hours ago? When the Treaty was signed, on December 6th, 1921, there was some small chance of a united Ireland. December 29th, 1937, will mark the forfeiture even of that small chance" (29 December 1937). Ten years later, the newspaper still remembered Valera's original sin and its consequences for the division of the island: "The greatest opportunity of Irish unity was allowed to slip in 1922, when Mr. de Valera headed the revolt against the Anglo-Irish Treat[y]" (28 January 1948). The following year, the newspaper and its then editor, Smyllie, made another scathing attack on de Valera, openly doubting even his own commitment to the issue of reunification: "We all long for the day when Irish unity will be re-established but we wonder if, from Mr. de Valera's point of view, the sudden incorporation of the six counties in a united Ireland would be an altogether unmixed blessing" (24 April 1938). Although not always expressed in such sarcastic terms, de Valera's share of responsibility in the division of Ireland probably remained the most serious matter of disagreement between the leader and the *Irish Times* which considered, in its balance of the former's career following his death, that "many of the things that Mr. de

Valera did during his lifetime [...] heightened the suspicions of the Northern Unionists, by whom he was consistently misunderstood" (30 August 1975).

Among the many critiques against de Valera in the years following the Constitution, the leader's only redeeming point clearly seems to be his decision to declare neutrality during World War II (Ferriter 2007: 253).<sup>17</sup> Even before the outbreak of the war, and despite having openly supported Fine Gael<sup>18</sup> in the June 1938 general election, the *Irish Times* felt that "Eire's defence will be safe in his hands; and for this reason, if for none other, we confess that we are glad that he has been returned to power" (21 June 1938). Accordingly, after the decision was announced, it expressed its satisfaction: "Eire is a tiny nation, whose sole interest is in peace. [...] Mr. de Valera has proclaimed a policy of strict neutrality. In all the circumstances, it is the only policy that the Irish government could pursue" (4 September 1939). But once the war was over, the newspaper was quick in resuming its usual attacks, first by complaining of the strict censorship which had been imposed during the war years,<sup>19</sup> and then by raising the usual threat of "political dictatorship" during the campaign for the 1948 general election.<sup>20</sup>

Over the next few years, however, a series of events would gradually change the positions of the newspaper.

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17. "Mr. de Valera's policy of neutrality, firmly adhered to, in spite of threats and cajolery at various times by Britain, Germany and the United States, is by many people regarded as the most excellent achievement of his long career" (30 August 1975).

18. The then Fine Gael leader, James Dillon, was the only Dublin politician of the time to oppose Ireland's neutrality (Browne 1986: 204).

19. "We have been forced to live and work in conditions of unspeakable humiliation, being compelled to submit to the autocrats of Dublin Castle every line that we proposed to print, from the leading article down to the humblest pre-paid advertisement" (12 May 1945).

20. For example on 14 January ("We believe just as firmly as Mr. de Valera in the value of stable government, but we differ from him in his apparent belief that nobody but himself can provide it") or 24 January 1948 ("The idea of a 'strong' government is a snare and a delusion. In fact, it is a euphemism for political dictatorship").

### 3. The statesman: 1948-1973

#### 3.1 “Fine Gael’s vicious and demanding mistress”<sup>21</sup>: 1948-1951

Following John Healy’s death in 1934, the *Irish Times* new editor, Robert Smyllie, would bring his own contribution to the newspaper’s evolution to such an extent that many observers consider that, for the following two decades, “the *Irish Times* was Smyllie” (Inglis 1962: 48). Besides his somewhat eccentric personality (Inglis 1990: 93), Smyllie is often considered the most important editor in the history of the *Irish Times* because of the way he actually transformed the newspaper’s identity. As Fintan O’Toole put it, “Smyllie managed to transform the paper from a vestige of the old regime into an integral part of Irish culture” (O’Toole 1999: 158). Although a staunch Unionist himself, Smyllie put the *Irish Times* before his own personal feelings (Inglis 1962: 54) for the sake of the newspaper’s survival, as Fleming explains:

In this still changing atmosphere, there was evidently an urgent need for some newer and more modern policy on the *Irish Times*. [...] It was Smyllie’s main achievement that he succeeded in making this change. His own personal sympathies, no doubt, were for the old regime. [...] But he was hard-headed enough to see that a less nostalgic line was the only way in which to broaden the paper’s appeal so as to bring in intelligent Catholic readers as well as the old, diminishing group of Protestants. That, in any case, was the commonsense thing to do. (1990: 162-163).

At the time of Smyllie’s death, in 1954, the *Irish Times* had begun an evolution that would allow it not only to guarantee its survival but also to leave behind its reputation and to be increasingly seen as a non-partisan paper. In this respect, the years between 1948 and 1954 represent a crucial period for the *Irish Times*, as the evolution of its attitude towards both Fine Gael and Eamon de Valera’s Fianna Fáil illustrates.

Although the *Irish Times* went on giving open support to the Cumann na nGaedhael/Fine Gael candidates until the 1951 general election, this support would progressively

weaken until May 1954 when, for the first (and last) time, the *Irish Times* supported Fianna Fáil led by de Valera in a general election, albeit in a far from enthusiastic tone: “We have pronounced ourselves in favour of Fianna Fáil. This is not because we love Fianna Fáil better, but because we love Fine Gael less” (18 May 1954”). In other words, the fact that the *Irish Times*, after thirty years of faithful support to the pro-Treaty parties, came to support a Fianna Fáil party still led by Eamon de Valera, may have been caused more by a growing disappointment with the Fine Gael party and its allies than by reasons more directly related to the Republican leader’s attitude and evolution.

The *Irish Times* was never as natural an ally of Cumann na nGaedhael as newspapers traditionally advocating a moderate and parliamentary nationalism, and its support to the pro-Treaty party owed more to the newspaper’s fear of a worse evil than to any real affinity. But between the 1930s and the 1950s, a series of disappointing attitudes and decisions from the main pro-Treaty party and its successive allies contributed to jeopardize the newspaper’s support. First of all, shortly after de Valera and Fianna Fáil arrived in office, an important event made the *Irish Times* think twice about its support to its most reliable ally: the alliance between Cumann na nGaedhael (O’Toole 1999: 158-159) and several other parties, including the Army Comrade Association (the “Blueshirts”), which would cost Cosgrave’s Party the newspaper’s support (Gray 1991: 62).

Another factor which probably contributed to make the *Irish Times* take some distance from Fine Gael is the Spanish Civil War. On this issue, the *Irish Times*’s position was radically opposed to the one defended by the Catholic Church, Fine Gael or nationalist newspapers such as the *Irish Independent* and the *Cork Examiner*, who all insisted that the Irish government should support Franco’s nationalist troops (McGarry 1999: 157). At the time, the *Irish Times*, strongly influenced by its new editor, Smyllie (Fleming 1990: 169), was unequivocally opposed to any idea of intervention, considering, from the very beginning of the conflict, that “there can be no question of intervention on one side or the other” (29 July 1936). According to the newspaper, “the suggestion that the civil war is a clear-cut conflict between good and evil,

21. “The *Irish Times* is the mistress of Fine Gael, and mistresses can be both vicious and demanding”, remark by Michael O’Moráin, Minister of Gaeltacht, reported by Keogh (1994: 289).

between light and darkness, between religion and anti-Christ, is grotesquely untrue” (19 December 1936). For the first time, the newspaper shared Fianna Fáil’s (and the *Irish Press*’s) views on an important issue, and consequently expressed its satisfaction at de Valera’s capacity to resist pressure even when it came from the Catholic authorities.

### 3.2 1951-1959: “At least the voter knows where he stands for”<sup>22</sup>

The coalition government between Fine Gael, Clann na Poblachta and the Labour Party, supported, despite reserves about Clann na Poblachta’s leader Seán McBride, by the *Irish Times* during the February 1948 campaign,<sup>23</sup> may have represented the most bitter disappointment for the newspaper. On the one hand, it was a Fine Gael Taoiseach, John Costello, who announced his decision to proclaim the Irish Republic and leave the Commonwealth in September 1948 (Browne, 1986: 129-134). This decision was, not surprisingly, far from welcome by the *Irish Times* not so much because of its own commitment to an imperial Ireland,<sup>24</sup> but because it foresaw the damage that an Irish Republic would do to the possibility of a united Ireland: “Apart from the religious issue – which is vitally important – two things continue to stand in the way of Irish unity: one is the ‘Republic’, and the other the Irish language” (the *Irish Times*, 20 April 1949). The most severe blow, in the newspaper’s opinion, may have been the fact that the proclamation of the Republic came from the

22. “The Fianna Fáil programme of austere conservatism has not given real satisfaction to anybody, but at least, it is a stated programme, and the voter knows approximately where he stands for” (18 May 1954).

23. In spite of its opposition to Sean McBride, the Clann na Poblachta leader, whose policy it considered “highly dangerous” (17 January 1948), the *Irish Times* gave full support to the coalition, probably more as a means of getting rid of de Valera and Fianna Fáil than out of a real commitment to the values defended by any of the coalition parties.

24. “Let us be quite frank: we have always been opposed to the idea of an Irish republic. In particular, we have been, and still are, opposed to secession from Commonwealth” (20 April 1949).

party to which it had given its support during the campaign, convinced that “the only party in the twenty-six counties that seems to be willing to work sincerely inside the Commonwealth is Fine Gael” (28 January 1948). Consequently, the newspaper expressed its bitter disappointment in these terms: “The most unhappy element in the present situation is the fact that Fine Gael, the party that supported the Commonwealth against Fianna Fáil, should have seen fit to make such a sudden and startling volte-face” (20 April 1949).

On the other hand, Noel Browne’s famous Mother and Child Scheme, designed to reform Ireland’s public health system, raised a huge polemic and was violently attacked by the Catholic authorities (Lee 1990: 315-319). On the days following Browne’s resignation, the *Irish Times*’ editorials did not hide its indignation to see the authorities giving in to the Catholic Church: besides regretting that, “not for the first time in Irish history, progress is thwarted” (12 April 1951), it delivered a scathing attack on Costello’s attitude:

The most serious revelation is that the Roman Catholic Church would seem to be the effective government of this country. In the circumstances, may we appeal to Mr. Costello and his colleagues to admit the futility of their pitiful efforts to abolish the border [...]? It seems that the merits of a theocratic Twenty-six Counties outweigh those of a normally democratic Thirty-two. Has the government made its choice? (12 April 1951).

This new outburst of indignation probably marked the final blow to the *Irish Times*’ support of Fine Gael and led it to turn to the only credible alternative, Fianna Fáil, particularly after de Valera’s election as president opened the way to a much more respectable leader in the *Irish Times*’ eyes, Seán Lemass.<sup>25</sup>

A few years later, with de Valera back in office for the last time, the newspaper again strongly condemned the influence of the Catholic Church on society during the Protestant boycott in Fethard-on-Sea in June

25. “If Mr. de Valera is the architect of modern Ireland, then Mr. Lemass is indisputably the engineer, the contractor and the foreman rolled into one” (25 July 1953)

1957;<sup>26</sup> this time, however, the newspaper rejoiced to see the Taoiseach strong enough to resist pressure: “We welcome Mr. de Valera’s attitude to the boycott of Protestants in Fethard-on-Sea. [...] He speaks for all honourable men in saying that it is unjust and cruel to confound the innocent with the guilty” (5 July 1957). Considering the *Irish Times*’ usual tone towards de Valera in the past, the simple fact of the newspaper presenting the Republican leader as a model of “honorable man” says a lot about its evolution. Although some aspects of the leader’s action, particularly those related to his ideal nation of a Catholic, Gaelic, rural and Republican Ireland, would go on being constantly rejected by the newspaper, sometimes with a particularly violent tone, the progressive reconciliation between de Valera and the *Irish Times* would logically encourage the newspaper to support the former Taoiseach’s election as President of the Irish Republic.

### 3.3 1959-1973: “The most important Irishman of our time”

The *Irish Times*’s support for de Valera’s candidacy for the Presidency is the logical outcome of the evolution of the newspaper’s perception of the Republican leader. On that occasion, the newspaper clearly supported the former Taoiseach, and even criticized Fine Gael for presenting a candidate against him:

For months we have urged our readers to vote for Mr. de Valera as President. He may not be the perfect man for Arus na Uachtarain; it is conceivable that there are still thousands of people in this country who loathe him. Nevertheless, he remains the most important Irishman of our time, and Fine Gael did wrong, even for political reasons, to present a candidate against him (17 June 1959).

Following the election, the newspaper logically expressed its satisfaction at the outcome:

It is fit and proper that Eamon de Valera should have been elevated to the supreme Office of the State. In the opinion of this newspaper, which has grown old along with him, he has sinned grievously more than once: in His view, our sins

are, no doubt, even more scarlet. He remains, in our eyes – and, as last week’s results suggest, in those of many Irishmen who do not share his political views – a Great man, a “father-figure”, a person who not merely, for right or for wrong, has epitomised the Irish struggle for national independence, but also has, in sharper or in vaguer fashion, set an example to the national movements of a great part of the modern world (24 June 1959).

Considering the way the *Irish Times* perceived de Valera until the late 1940s, seeing the nationalist leader defined as “an example to the national movements for a great part of the modern world” a decade later may be seen as a symbol of the evolution both of the politician and of the newspaper. Indeed, this situation cannot be attributed exclusively to the changes taking place amid Irish society but can also be explained by the evolution of the newspaper itself, particularly, in this case, under Douglas Gageby’s editorship. A former *Irish Press* journalist, Gageby first joined the *Irish Times* as managing editor in 1959 and was the newspaper’s editor first from 1963 to 1974 and again between 1977 and 1986. Gageby and his deputy editor, Donald Fowley, are usually held responsible for the transformation of the *Irish Times* from an old-fashioned, albeit respectable, institution, into a truly modern and profitable enterprise. Throughout his two decades as editor, Gageby greatly improved the quality of the newspaper, in terms of contents as well as technology, in a way that “helped it to catch the mood of a changing Ireland”<sup>27</sup> and to set the foundations for the commercial success of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>28</sup>

In August 2010, thirty-five years after Eamon de Valera’s death, Stephen Collins, in the *Irish Times*, summed up his legacy, as opposed to Michael Collins’s, in this way:

In recent times, Michael Collins has become the poster boy of Irish history. He is widely regarded in the popular mind as the lost leader whose assassination, on August 22nd, 1922, left the running of the newly independent State to dull politicians in dark suits who presided over decades of failure. The romance and tragedy of

26. In June 1957, in Fethard-on-Sea, Co. Wexford, after the Anglican wife of a Catholic man chose to raise her children according to Protestant rules, the Catholic population, supported by the authorities, organized [a] boycott of the local Protestant minority.

27. Extract from Conor Brady’s interview (Mercereau 2002: 523).

28. The circulation of the *Irish Times* reached 82,000 in 1980, 94,000 in 1990 and 116,000 in 2000 (source: Joint National Readership Research).

Collins, a man cut down in his prime, stands in stark contrast to the career of his great rival, Eamon de Valera, who dominated Irish politics for more than half a century but has now fallen completely out of public favour (“Sharing Collins’s legacy of democracy”, 21 August 2010).

Indeed, what de Valera himself foresaw in 1966 has since proved particularly accurate: “It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time history will record the greatness of Michael Collins, and it will be recorded at my expense” (Coogan 1991: 432). Far from being closed, the debate between supporters who saw him as some sort of “national saviour” and detractors who considered that “Ireland would have been better off had the British implemented their death penalty on him” (Davis 2006: 65) has recently been reheated by initiatives such as the “judging de Valera” project or “Ireland’s greatest”, both shown on Irish television.<sup>29</sup>

As part of Irish society, and as a commercial enterprise as well as an intellectual institution, the *Irish Times* has inevitably had to evolve throughout its history, including as far as its representation of Eamon de Valera is concerned. In particular, as Irish nationalists reduced Irish identity to criteria which it didn’t share, such as the Catholic religion, the Gaelic language or the commitment to an Irish Republic, the newspaper went through difficult times both commercially and ideologically. Progressively, however, especially from the

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29. The “judging de Valera” project was followed by a book suitably subtitled *A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Ferriter 2007). In October 2010, de Valera’s name was omitted from the shortlist of *Ireland Greatest*, a series on public television which eventually chose John Hume, Joseph Connolly, Michael Collins, Mary Robinson and Bono as “the five greatest Irish men or women who’ve ever lived”. A polemical list given the number of important Irish personalities forgotten, such as O’Connell, Davitt, Parnell, Joyce, Yeats... See “Historians unimpressed by RTE greatest shortlist” in the *Irish Times*, 7 August 2010.

1960s onwards, the newspaper began to appear both as Ireland’s newspaper of record and as a commercial success in an Ireland more and more different from the one idealized by Eamon de Valera. Unlike the *Irish Press*, which would progressively decline over the same period,<sup>30</sup> the *Irish Times* began to attract a wider audience, as its circulation confirms: from 33,000 at the time of de Valera’s election as President in 1959, its sales had raised to 69,000 by the time of his death in 1975. By then, the former voice of the Protestant and Unionist community had become the newspaper of reference of a still predominantly Catholic and nationalist country.

The media in general, of course, have their importance in the general perception of public figures. In Ireland as elsewhere, newspapers in particular traditionally hold a great importance in the formation of public opinion. Their actual effects may be difficult to define with any degree of precision but, as Hirsch and Gordon once put it, “much more important is the broad influence over the climate of opinion, an influence which sets the boundaries and, to a large extent, the agenda of political action. (Hirsch & Gordon 1975: 35). As this essay has tried to demonstrate, the *Irish Times* has, throughout the nearly sixty years of de Valera’s public life, played a part that is all the more interesting because of its unique voice which can’t be limited to systematically partisan positions but has evolved and fluctuated according to the leader’s action, the national context and its own identity as “an independent newspaper [...] free from any form of party political, commercial, religious or other sectional control”.<sup>31</sup>

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30. From 131,844 in 1956, its sales slowly decreased until reaching 38,848 in 1994. The *Irish Press* eventually closed in May 1995, along with the other titles of the Irish Press group: The Evening Press and The Sunday Press.

31. Extract from the “Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Irish Times trust Limited”, 1974, p.4, 2, (d), (ii), A.

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