



CHEERS AND JEERS FOR IRELAND

ÉAMON DE VALERA'S ALABAMA EXPERIENCE

In June, 1919, Éamon de Valera, a political leader intent on strengthening support for Irish independence, came to the United States to lobby for his vision. While in Alabama, he found both those willing to advance his cause and those who vehemently opposed him.

By MARK HOLAN

Born in New York City to an Irish mother and a Spanish father and raised in Ireland, Éamon de Valera was a towering figure in the politics of twentieth-century Ireland. Narrowly escaping execution following the 1916 Easter Rising, and twice imprisoned in England, he survived to lead the War of Independence that resulted in the partition of Ireland and the creation of the Irish Free State, now the Republic of Ireland, serving several terms as head of state. (Library of Congress)



De Valera, who was living in Ireland at the time, decided to come back to the United States, where he was born, to advocate for Irish independence, and he arrived as the improbable leader of the Irish republican cause.

IN 1919, THE UNITED STATES EMERGED FROM World War I as a new global power of considerable influence, and among those seeking American support were people who favored an independent Ireland. Irish separatists urged America to assist their struggle for independence from centuries of British rule. They reminded Pres. Woodrow Wilson of his own words about the right to self-determination for small nations. Despite an activist Irish diaspora and some strong support in Congress, Wilson ignored the plea as he tried to build his League of Nations. “The Irish question,” he and others said, was a domestic matter for war ally Britain.

Éamon de Valera, who was living in Ireland at the time, decided to come back to the United States, where he was born, to advocate for Irish independence in person, and he arrived as the improbable leader of the Irish republican cause. Though he would become the most consequential political leader of twentieth-century Ireland, before he solidified that position, he experienced a challenging trip to the United States—including some time in Alabama—to rally support for his cause. While in Alabama, de Valera found friends but also foes. During his week-long visit, de Valera connected with Irish Catholics in Mobile to gain their support. Audiences there and in Montgomery hailed him as president of the Irish Republic, a title and country not officially recognized by the US government or the British Empire, including pro-union Protestants in Ireland. But he also survived a deadly train wreck near Bay Minette and killer tornadoes in the region. And when Alabama’s governor and a veterans group tried



to run him out of Birmingham on political and religious grounds, he withstood hecklers inside the Jefferson Theater and delivered a passionate speech on why America should support Irish independence.

BORN IN 1882 TO AN IMMIGRANT COUPLE IN NEW YORK City—an Irish mother (née Coll) and Spanish father—Éamon de Valera’s surname and US citizenship confounded typical Irish genealogy. When his father died, his mother sent her two-year-old son to Ireland with an uncle to live with relatives in County Limerick. Educated at Blackrock College—a Catholic boys’ school in Dublin—and the Royal University of Ireland, de Valera became a mathematics teacher.



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Éamon de Valera photographed around the time he made his trip to the United States. (Library of Congress)* ABOVE: *De Valera first came to prominence as a leader of the Easter Rising, the first violent insurrection against British rule in more than a century. The rebels set up street barricades like this one in Dublin. (Wikimedia Commons)*





ABOVE: *The Easter Rising left widespread destruction in Dublin. The rebel leaders used the General Post Office (above on the left) as their headquarters; it was gutted by fire during the conflict. RIGHT: De Valera addressing a crowd in County Clare. He was elected as the member of parliament for East Clare in 1917 and would represent the constituency until 1959. He was also elected president of Sinn Féin due to the deaths of most of the other rebel leaders. (Both Wikimedia Commons)*

He also embraced the Irish language, along with the cultural revival and concurrent political independence movements, which had each gained separate yet synergistic momentum since the late nineteenth century. In 1916, on Easter week, he led a battalion of Irish rebels in a failed uprising against the British government and was captured. A military court ordered his execution, then changed the sentence to life imprisonment. The outcome, long attributed to his being an American citizen at a time when Britain wanted the United States to join the war, had as much to do with luck.

Amnesty freed him to run for a parliamentary seat opened by the incumbent's death in the war. De Valera's landslide victory on the separatist *Sinn Féin* (Irish for "We Ourselves") platform helped him become the party leader, but allega-



In 1916, on Easter week, he led a battalion of Irish rebels in a failed uprising against the British government and was captured. A military court ordered his execution, then changed the sentence to life imprisonment.

tions of plotting with German agents landed him back in prison. From behind bars, he and other *Sinn Féin* candidates won the majority of Irish seats in the postwar British general election. The winners on the outside refused to take their seats in the British Parliament, declared independence, and established their own government, *Dáil Éireann* (Assembly of Ireland), in Dublin. Guerrilla warfare began in Irish cities and villages.

De Valera lay low following his surreptitious arrival in New York City, not making his first public appearance until June 23 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel with national leaders of the Friends of Irish Freedom. He soon found himself at odds with two of them, Daniel Cohalan and John Devoy (below, to the left and right of de Valera), over control of the money to be raised from a proposed bond drive. (Library of Congress)



De Valera and two other Irish rebels soon escaped from their English prison cells. Spirited across the Irish Sea to Dublin, he remained in hiding but gave interviews to American journalists who were blindfolded and taken on high-speed, winding drives before being presented to him in heavily curtained rooms. When separatists decided de Valera could have more impact through direct lobbying in America, supporters helped him stow away aboard the *S.S. Lapland*, which delivered him to New York City on June 11, 1919. Under cover of darkness, US sympathizers smuggled the seasick de Valera off board and back into the city of his birth.

He soon began giving public interviews and holding rallies before tens of thousands of supporters from coast to coast. His supporters Americanized his Irish title *Priomh Aire*, leader of *Dáil Éireann*, to president of the Irish



In a letter read aloud to supporters, de Valera predicted Ireland would be recognized as a free republic by the saint's next feast day. To help meet that goal, his US travels promoted a bond drive to raise money for Dáil Éireann.

Republic for easier understanding. The US government declined to arrest or extradite him, in part due to the strength of the Irish-American electorate. A *Sinn Féin* colleague later boasted that “the mysterious ease with which he had eluded the British added to the popular interest in him.... Nothing was lacking to make him a popular hero. And America was eager to see him and to do him homage.”



immigrants. Nearly 60 percent of the million-plus Irish in America lived in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Of Alabama's Irish, just over one quarter lived in Birmingham (230), about the same as Atlanta (208) but only one-seventh as many as New Orleans (1,534) and Louisville, Kentucky (1,576). The Irish of Mobile and Montgomery were not detailed in the census because the city populations were

DE VALERA'S ALABAMA VISIT WAS announced, fittingly, at a 1920 St. Patrick's Day event at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Montgomery. A large number of Irish immigrants and others not of Irish descent gathered at the celebration hosted by the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), an Irish Catholic fraternal group, including members of other civic clubs and women's societies. In a letter read aloud to supporters, de Valera predicted Ireland would be recognized as a free republic by the saint's next feast day. To help meet that goal, his US travels promoted a bond drive to raise money for *Dáil Éireann*.

The 1920 US Census counted about 800 native Irish among Alabama's 2.3 million residents—twice as many as neighboring Mississippi and five other states, each with fewer than 1,000 Irish

A membership certificate for the Ancient Order of Hibernians. The Montgomery chapter hosted the event that announced the impending visit of de Valera to Alabama. The fraternal organization was a strong supporter of the nationalist Friends of Irish Freedom, which had supported the Easter Rising. (Library of Congress)





Two Catholic officials from Mobile were active members of the Friends of Irish Freedom. Bishop Edward P. Allen (above) attended the 1919 Friends convention in Philadelphia; Rev. Thomas J. Eaton (right) served as a national officer of the Friends. (Both Archives of the Archdiocese of Mobile)

below 100,000, but these immigrants are well-recorded as being present in Mobile from before the Civil War.

About three dozen Alabama residents belonged to the Friends of Irish Freedom, a New York-based, pro-independence group founded in 1916. In February 1919, the Friends staged a convention in Philadelphia to support the newly established *Dáil Éireann* and make the American case for Irish independence. Catholic bishop of Mobile Edward P. Allen, the Massachusetts-born son of Irish immigrants, attended the meeting, which also helped set the stage for de Valera's US arrival four months later.

Three Alabamians were national officers for the Friends. The first, Rev. Thomas J. Eaton of Mobile, was an 1899 Irish immigrant and pastor of St. Mary Catholic Church. The

AOH elected him chaplain of the state chapter at its September 1919 convention in Mobile, which also adopted a resolution calling on President Wilson and Congress "to favor in common justice the cause of Ireland." Another national officer, Mrs. R. G. (Ella) Morgan of Montgomery, was the Alabama-born daughter of Irish immigrants. As state president of the AOH's Ladies Auxiliary, she attended the group's August 1919 national convention in San Francisco. And Rev. Patrick Turner of Montgomery, a 1904 Irish immigrant and assistant pastor at St. Peter Catholic Church, was a former US military chaplain who delivered an address on "Ireland in the World War" for the 1920 St. Patrick's Day event.

Mobile real estate agent Frank J. Thompson, the Kentucky-born son of southern parents, led de Valera's bond drive in Alabama. In late February, he quietly secured "a general letter of endorsement" from Bishop Allen, whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction at the time included the entire state. Thompson assured the prelate, "[The letter will be used] to stimulate and encourage our workers throughout the state...in order that 'Our People' may know that this



Groups adopted resolutions declaring de Valera a traitor. Some recounted how Irish rebels sought assistance from Germany during their 1916 uprising and created a domestic distraction for Britain as it fought on the continent.

movement meets with your approval and encouragement.” Thompson also promised the bishop that the letter would not be released to the press, a discretion that soon proved prescient. Bishop Allen replied that he was anxious: “The campaign should be a great success . . . Is it not our duty, then, not only to sympathize with Ireland in her battle for self-determination but also to aid her from our abundance to bring this about?” He enclosed a \$100 subscription, equivalent to about \$1,400 today.

In Ireland, Catholics generally favored Irish independence, while Protestants, particularly those concentrated in the northeast province of Ulster, tended to support continued union with Great Britain. In America, the offspring of Irish parents typically inherited these same strong feelings about “the old sod.” By 1920, however, Irish independence was no longer an Irish-only issue.

In Alabama, as in other parts of America, people with no Irish heritage also voiced strong opinions based on their religious identity, experiences during the war, or views on domestic and foreign politics. Historian Jessica Cosi has noted that de Valera’s tour to the Deep South was not designed to appeal to the small Irish-born American population living in the area but was instead “conceived as an important moment to reinforce de Valera’s broader appeal to Americans ‘at large,’ while simultaneously recognizing the great potential of the region in terms of political and cultural influence.” Cosi explains, “His message, therefore, was not directed to the Irish regional population per se, but to the ‘American Southerners’ which incorporated, among others, descendants of both early Irish Protestant and Catholic immigrants.”

DE VALERA’S FIRST STOP IN ALABAMA wasn’t scheduled and could have cost him his life. His southbound train to New Orleans collided head on with another Louisville and



Nashville locomotive during a pre-dawn thunderstorm on April 16, 1920. Three people died in the crash. De Valera arrived in the Crescent City nine hours later, uninjured, having only “got wet a little,” he said.

The next night in Birmingham, some 400 members of American Legion Post No. 1 adopted a resolution calling on Alabama Gov. Thomas E. Kilby (1919–1923) to declare de Valera a persona non grata. Protests had mounted for weeks as the Birmingham City Commission, Birmingham-Bessemer Methodist Pastors Association, and Junior Order of American Mechanics passed similar resolutions. Fewer than ten legion members opposed the motion after “a spirited debate” in which both sides “grew warm in their contentions.” Maj. Michael Kelly of the 165th Infantry Regiment of New York



- 18 † Dom. 2. post Pascha. *Alb.* De ea. sd. Off. dom. ut in psalt. Temp. Pasch. et per loc. Ad L. c. de Cruce. Ad Prim. prec. dom. In M. Gl., 2. or. *Concede*, 3. or. Eccl. vel Pro Papa, Cr. Praef. Pasch. — Vp. dom., d. de Cruce. Cp. de Dom., prec.
- Hodie in dioec. Petrical.: 3. eccl. pro Eccl., 2. or. *Deus omnium fidel.* ob anniv. Praeconi- zationis Revmi Joannis B. Ep.
- 19 Fer. 2. *Alb. Nig.* De ea. Off. fer. ut in psalt. Temp. Pasch. et pr. loc., Te Deum. Ad L. c. de Cruce. Ad Prim. prec. dom. M. de Dom. praec., Gl., 2. or. *Concede*, 3. or. Eccl. (sine Cr.). Praef. Pasch. *Ite Missa est* in fine. — Vp. fer. (e psalt. et pr. loc.), c. de Cruce. Ad Cp. prec.
- 20 Fer. 3. *Alb. Nig.* De ea. Off. et M. ut heri. — Vp. sol. de seq., siue c. Cp. de Dom. In archid. Novae Aurel.: Memoria pii obitus Revmi Jacobi Huberti Blenk Archiep. Cras prohib. M. Exequialis.
- 21 Fer. 4. *Alb.* SOLEMNITAS S. JOSEPH, Sponsi B. M. V. d. 1. cl. cum Oct. comm. Off. sol. Ad L. c. S. Anselmi. M. pr. (c. S. Anselmi in M. priv. tantum), omit. imp., Cr. Praef. S. Joseph—In 2. Vp. sol. c. seq. tant. Cp. de Dom.
- 22 Fer. 5. *Rub. Nig.* Ss. Soteris et Caji, Pp. et Mm., sd. Ad L. c. Oct. In M. 2. or. Oct., 3. or. *Concede*, Cr. Praef. S. Joseph.

Ap. 18. Confirmed at 9.30 A.M. 39 in the Ch. of St. Francis X. Lou- murville, of whom 4 were converts. Preacher

At 2. o'c P. M. confirm- ed 103 in St. Mary's Ch. Mobile, of whom 24 were converts.

At 4 P. M. listened to Mr. E. de Valera explaining the Irish situation. He called at the house in the evening

Ap. 21 Reception of two Sisters of Mercy, Mobile

OPPOSITE PAGE: Alabama Gov. Thomas E. Kilby had been elected partly due to his anti-Catholic views and policies. Organizations such as the American Legion demanded he take action to keep de Valera out of Alabama. Kilby ultimately declined, stating it was "outside the provenance of the governor." (Alabama Department of Archives and History) ABOVE: An entry made by Bishop Edward Allen in his Ordo, in which he kept as a sort of diary, for April 18, 1920. At 4 p.m. that afternoon, he chronicled having attended a lecture by Éamon de Valera and that de Valera visited the Bishop's House in the evening. (Archives of the Archdiocese of Mobile)

deployed to Birmingham to counter allegations of de Valera being disloyal during the war and spoke for the minority.

This wasn't the first time the American Legion, a patriotic veterans organization chartered a year earlier by Congress, lashed out against de Valera and Irish separatists. In October 1919, the Pennsylvania chapter passed a resolution that insisted the Irish leader "was an American and should have

served in the army or navy and that he should not be accepted or recognized by any city of the United States." A month later, American Legion posts, church groups, and British societies denounced him before his arrival in Los Angeles.

Similar protests dogged de Valera from the start of his southern tour, which included stops in Jacksonville, Florida, and New Orleans. Groups adopted resolutions declaring him a traitor. Some recounted how Irish rebels sought assistance from Germany during their 1916 uprising and created a domestic distraction for Britain as it fought on the continent. Now, after the war, "The Irish question is solely a question of the domestic affairs of the British Empire, a former comrade in arms," the Birmingham resolution stated.

As Birmingham loomed, de Valera made his way from New Orleans to Mobile for events on Sunday, April 18. At six feet, one inch tall and nicknamed the "Long Fellow," the thirty-seven-year-old visitor couldn't be missed in a crowded reception, certainly not on a stage. "President De Valera is a tall, scholarly person, suggesting the years of professorial

work which he has seen rather than his service as a soldier,” the *Mobile Register* wrote in a particularly vivid description:

He wears the convention black, which adds to the impression of height and slenderness. His conversation is flavored with the speech of the Dublin college man, and there are occasional usages and phrases which strike the American oddly. The new president is at all times grave and dignified, rarely giving way to a bit of the expected Celtic humor. He shows more plainly his Spanish than his Irish lineage, having the dark hair and the pronounced features of the Romance peoples.

The Mobile visit featured a decidedly Catholic itinerary. De Valera paid his respects to Bishop Allen. He called at the Convent of Mercy, “where many of the sisters are natives of Ireland,” the *Register* reported. And he stopped at St. Mary’s rectory—“famous as the home of Father [Abram Joseph] Ryan,” the late pro-Confederate son of Irish immigrants and so-called “Poet-Priest of the South”—where he was welcomed by Father Thomas Eaton, a Friends of Irish Freedom national board member.

At the Jesuit Spring Hill College, an ROTC unit greeted de Valera before the school conferred on him an honorary doctorate of law. His speech “emphasized Ireland’s need of support, and stated that he was sure to find that support among the broad minded American people,” *The Springhillian* student newspaper reported. Though his talk was short, the enthusiastic applause made it “evident that his words deeply impressed his audience.”

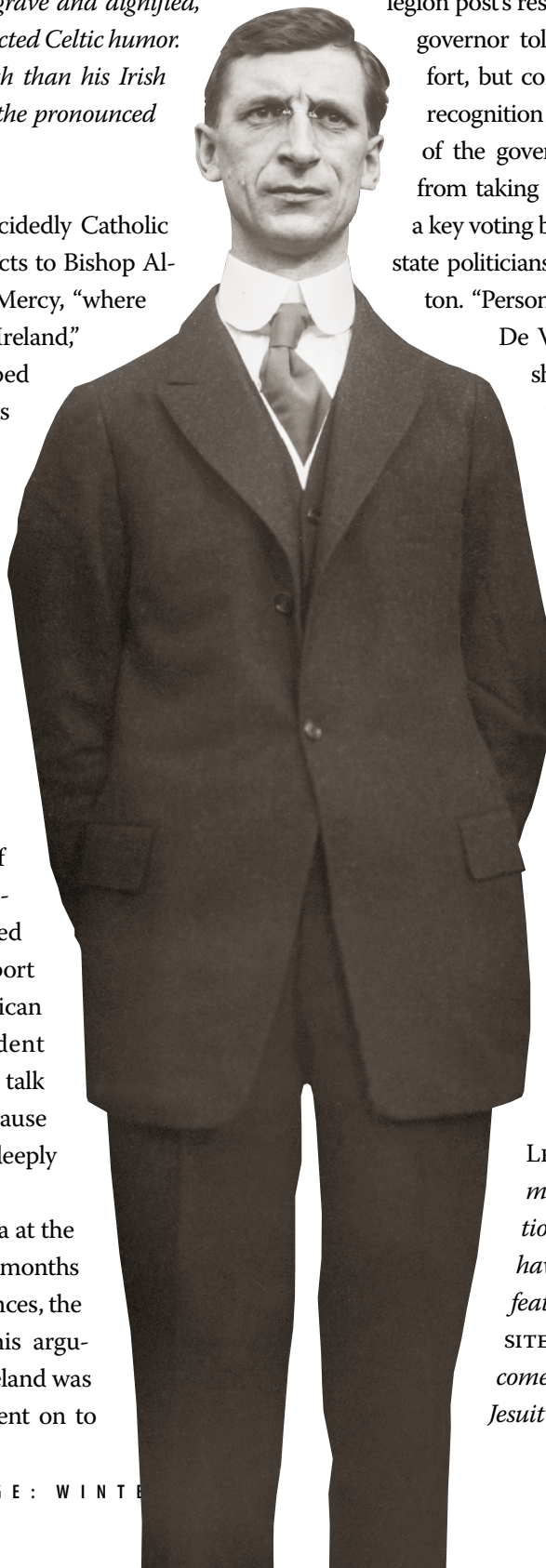
Thompson introduced de Valera at the Lyric Theater in Mobile. With ten months of experience addressing US audiences, the headliner confidently delivered his argument that US failure to support Ireland was “contrary to Americanism.” He went on to

say, “[It is] contrary to the principles in which you were conceived and born as a nation, contrary to all your democratic institutions and to everything you said during the war. It is contrary to find that in this country official action in the matter of the Irish claims is contrary to all expressed sentiment of the people.”

The next day, a delegation from Birmingham delivered the legion post’s resolution to Kilby in Montgomery. The governor told the group he supported their effort, but conferring or withholding such official recognition was “entirely outside the provenance of the governor.” Then, having excused himself from taking action and trying to avoid offending a key voting bloc, he did what governors and other state politicians still do today: he blamed Washington. “Personally, I believe that this pilgrimage of

De Valera and his *Sinn Féin* propaganda should have long ago received the attention of the State Department at Washington, and were I directing official of that department I would unhesitatingly order the deportation of Éamon de Valera without delay,” Kilby declared in a statement. He suggested that some “patriotic Americans” were “seriously misled” in their “zeal for a cause which involves the internal affairs of a friendly nation.”

De Valera had defenders, however. Father James E. Coyle, the Irish-born pastor of St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Birmingham, described the American Legion as “a misled bunch of men” and the Birmingham City Commission as “peanut politicians.” American-



LEFT: *This photograph of de Valera matches the Mobile Register’s description of his “height and slenderness... having the dark hair and pronounced features of the Romance peoples. OPPOSITE PAGE: De Valera was warmly welcomed at Mobile’s Spring Hill College, a Jesuit school. (Both Library of Congress)*

At the Jesuit Spring Hill College, an ROTC unit greeted de Valera before the school conferred on him an honorary doctorate of law. His speech “emphasized Ireland’s need of support.”

born John W. O’Neill, an Irish activist in the city, said the Legion “has gone off half-cocked, led by men who in many cases saw no actual service at all.”

The *Birmingham News* also published an extended defense from de Valera’s publicity man, Charles P. Sweeney. “As one who is an American above everything else, and who had the good fortune to serve this country both at home and abroad during the war, I would not be found among the admirers of Dr. de Valera were it true, as charged, that he or his friends harmed or offended American soldiers or sailors,” he wrote. And Thompson directly countered the governor’s statement from Mobile: “The time is coming, whether Governor Kilby realizes it or not, when the same moral law that governs man shall govern nations and when robber nations, like the burglarious individual, will have to realize the truth of the principle and be governed by it. [Kilby should] familiarize himself more thoroughly with the attributes of a real American and the history of our country, before he attempts to catalogue or classify those who sympathize with the aspirations of the Irish people.”



But religious intolerance more than American patriotism or the status of postwar US-British relations animated the opposition to de Valera’s Birmingham appearance. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) hatred of Catholics, driven by the Ku Klux Klan, also prevailed, author David B. Franklin explained. He noted that Kilby was elected in 1918 by “out anti-Catholicizing” his opponents in the same way that George Wallace decades later won the governor’s office by “out-segregating” his rivals. “The real threats to WASP supremacy were not African-Americans but Catholics, unconfined as they were by Jim Crow laws,” Franklin wrote. “The Irish-American population in particular was an insidious threat, [because unlike Blacks] that ethnic group mixed so freely with the WASP majority in all situations except religion.”

Major Kelly from New York suggested that cunning British agents introduced anti-Catholicism into the public debate as a wedge. US Senate candidate L. B. Musgrove tried to leverage de Valera’s religion in his own unsuccessful bid against incumbent Oscar Underwood. An anti-Catholic whisper campaign likely dwarfed anything said on the public record.



In 1963, he welcomed the first Catholic US president, Irish-American John F. Kennedy, to Ireland. Five months later, he attended Kennedy's funeral in Washington. De Valera remained in office until 1973.

De Valera and *Sinn Féin* were sensitive to the religion issue long before arriving in Birmingham. In Ireland and America, in speeches and pamphlets, they sought to downplay the centuries-old enmity between Catholics and Protestants. Freedom and nationalism, Irish republicans insisted, transcended religious affiliations. When a delegation of pro-unionist Protestant preachers arrived in America from Belfast to speak against Irish independence, *Sinn Féin* countered by inviting Scots-Irish Presbyterian minister James Alexander Hamilton Irwin of Antrim County to join de Valera's tour.

Irwin missed de Valera's events in Mobile due to being "indisposed" in New Orleans. "I am here," he said at Birmingham's Jefferson Theater, "to advocate a cause that is based purely on the principles of truth, liberty and freedom, and to refute with all of the power God has given me, the charge that this is a religious movement."

Pockets of the audience heckled Irwin and de Valera; they "openly expressed opinions of disapproval, cat calls, hisses, etc., such as 'bring on the monkey,' 'hurrah for England,' and 'you're a bunch of slackers,'" the *Birmingham News* reported. "At times it looked as if these remarks would precipitate trouble, but police officers were on the job in both numbers and efficiency."

In what Franklin calls "astute political skill" and biographer David McCullough describes as an "appeal to local prejudice," de Valera concluded his speech by declaring Ireland "the only white nation on earth still in the bonds of political slavery." An Irish emissary at the 1919 Paris peace conference had proffered a similar argument for Ireland's entitlement to sovereignty in terms of racial privilege, without success.

THE NEXT NIGHT IN MONTGOMERY, DE VALERA RETURNED to his usual script: America as the shining example of seeking liberty from Britain, President Wilson's promise of self-determination, and *Sinn Féin's* December 1918 election success. The audience cheered, as in Mobile. From the state capital, he made stops in Macon and Atlanta, detoured briefly to Chicago, then returned to the South for more events in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. He survived unin-



jured from another train crash, his second in two weeks, on the Georgia Railroad.

The Birmingham controversy received only minimal newspaper coverage in Ireland, primarily a Reuters report that did not mention religion. The "American Tornado" that killed dozens of people in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama the same week received as much attention.

De Valera's publicist Charles P. Sweeny wrote an article for The Nation about the murder of Father James E. Coyle, pastor of St. Paul's Catholic Church in Birmingham. Coyle been a supporter of de Valera during his visit to Alabama. He was shot to death by a Methodist minister for performing a marriage ceremony between the minister's daughter and a Puerto Rican immigrant. (Birmingham Public Library Archives)



Sweeney, the publicity man, had not addressed the religion issue in his statement before the Birmingham visit. After the southern tour ended, he targeted the intolerance in a partisan roundup published in Irish weeklies in New York City and Philadelphia. Sweeney wrote:

They exerted every effort to inspire religious maniacs to violence, they stirred up the old ignorant superstitions regarding the Catholic church: they painted the spokesman of the Irish people [de Valera] as an agent of the Pope, they misled posts of the American Legion into believing vicious falsehoods as to De Valera and his associates; they even went so far as to send religio-military fakirs in British uniforms to the territory to libel and slander the Irish people. They caused open violence to be threatened in one desperate effort to frighten De Valera and a small Irish contingent in Birmingham, Ala. But the President of the Irish Republic kept every engagement, and at every meeting there was such unbound enthusiasm for his cause that fright confused the enemies of Irish freedom, not its friends.

In November, Sweeney wrote a broadside about anti-Catholic bigotry in the South for *The Nation*. He followed it with another piece for the magazine about the August 1921 sectarian murder of Father Coyle by a former Methodist minister. Curiously, Sweeney did not reference de Valera's visit to Birmingham in either of these stories, perhaps due to his own or an editor's check on his role as a de Valera insider.

De Valera attended the 1920 Republican and Democratic presidential nominating conventions to lobby the major US political parties to adopt a pro-Irish independence plank. The effort failed at both events due to his feud with the Friends of Irish Freedom over the proposal's wording and control of the \$5 million raised through the bond drive. Shortly before Christmas, de Valera stowed aboard another liner and returned home, where British authorities soon dropped their quest to arrest him.



As president of Ireland and chancellor of the National University of Ireland, Éamon de Valera, on the right signing a document, presented an honorary doctor of laws degree to Pres. John F. Kennedy at Dublin Castle during Kennedy's 1963 visit to Ireland. (Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston)

Negotiations between *Sinn Féin* and the British government resulted in a July 1921 truce. Simultaneously, six predominantly Protestant counties in Ulster were partitioned into Northern Ireland in an arrangement that maintained the union with Britain, a separation that remains to this day. In December 1921, de Valera and his supporters refused to accept a treaty that created the Irish Free State, a more independent status than before the war but one that fell short of the full republic they had sought. A civil war ensued, with de Valera and the anti-Treatyites on the losing side.

While out of power, he formed a new political party and started a newspaper—partially financed with money from the 1920 bond drive—to promote his views. He returned to government leadership in 1932, helped write the national constitution approved in 1937, and steered the country to republic status in 1949. In 1963, he welcomed the first Catholic US president, Irish-American John F. Kennedy, to Ireland. Five months later, he attended Kennedy's funeral in Washington. De Valera remained in office until 1973. He died two years later at age ninety-two. ah



IRISH LEADER'S 1920 MOBILE VISIT REMEMBERED FIFTY-TWO YEARS LATER

By MARK HOLAN

NOT MANY PEOPLE COULD SAY THEIR GRAND father welcomed a foreign revolutionary to America early in the visitor's rise to power. Fewer, if any, could say they received a letter more than fifty years later from that same historical figure, who was then in the role of his country's elected leader. However, Mobile's Dorothy W. Reed was such a person.

On July 27, 1972, Reed mailed a handwritten letter to Éamon de Valera, who had been president of Ireland since

1959. He previously served multiple terms as *taoiseach*, or prime minister, dating from 1932, and was a leader in Ireland's War of Independence from 1919 to 1921. Reed's grandfather, real estate agent Frank J. Thompson, hosted de Valera's April 1920 visit to Mobile and defended the Irishman against calls for his deportation made by Alabama's governor and several groups in Birmingham. Reed was five at the time. "I remember my mother telling me how thrilled & proud she was to serve at a reception in your honor," she wrote to de Valera.



In 1972, Dorothy Reed wrote a letter to Éamon de Valera, the president of Ireland. Reed was the granddaughter of Frank J. Thompson, host to de Valera during his Alabama visit. She received a reply from de Valera's secretary. (Library of Congress)

In 1920, the *Mobile Register* reported that “a committee of women drawn from the patriotic societies and various churches of the city” hosted a reception for de Valera at the Battle House Hotel. The groups included the local chapter

of the Friends of Irish Freedom, Alabama Auxiliary League of American Penwomen, Colonial Dames, Travelers' Aid, Daughters of the American Revolution, United Daughters of the Confederacy, and Council of Jewish Women.

In her 1972 letter, Reed recounted a recent conversation with her mother's brother, Paul, about the 1920 visit. She wrote that her uncle recalled that de Valera, in a private visit with the Thompson family, revealed a leg injury “which still wasn't healed.” The September 15, 1972, reply to Reed from de Valera's personal secretary suggests the injury might have occurred a few days earlier, when the New Orleans-bound train carrying the visitor wrecked near Bay Minette.

At the time of the reply, de Valera was a month shy of his ninetieth birthday. “The condition of his eyesight is such that everything has to be read to him,” the secretary explained. De Valera died in August 1975, two years after leaving office. Reed's letter and de Valera's reply are held among the Irish leader's papers at University College Dublin.

Reed, who was fifty-seven years old at the time of her letter, wrote of making three consecutive trips to Ireland in June. “I fell in love with it & it's truly heaven on earth, with its overwhelming beauty of mountains, lakes, etc.,” she wrote. “Ireland, its freedom & its people have always been dear to my heart & I pray I'll live long enough to see Ireland a free and united Ireland.”

Northern Ireland was partitioned from the rest of the island in 1921, a division that remains today. Reed penned her letter six months after Bloody Sunday, when British soldiers shot twenty-six unarmed protesters in Derry, killing fourteen—an early event in the thirty years of sectarian violence known as the Troubles.

Reed closed her letter to de Valera, “May God bless and keep you well is the wish of Frank Thompson's granddaughter.” Thompson had died in 1926. Newspaper obituaries in Mobile and Huntsville, where he lived earlier, did not mention his role in de Valera's visit but said he “was well known for his energy and for his interest in all public questions.”

De Valera's secretary wrote to Reed that the Irish president “remarked that were it not for such friends as your grandfather, Frank Thompson, Ireland would not enjoy the freedom she enjoys today in this part of the country,” meaning the independent Republic of Ireland. “[Please] remember him [de Valera] to any friends that remain there who worked with him when he was in Mobile in 1920.”

Reed died in 2000 and was buried at St. Mary's Catholic Church, one of de Valera's stops in 1920.