

When an Irish Rebel Had His Portrait Drawn in Louisville

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By Mark Holan, guest contributor

Irish leader Eamon de Valera arrived in Louisville on Oct. 10, 1919, during a U.S. tour to raise money and political support for his country's war of independence from Britain. Caricaturist Wyncie King sketched the rebel politician at the Seelbach Hotel.^[1]

One of the pencil drawings appeared in the next day's *Louisville Herald*, where King was working at the time. The caption remarked on the "flowing mane, the bulging brow, the scowl" of de Valera, and also described him as "a six-cylinder shillalah-heaver."^[2]

The image (below) is among 81 of King's sketches and watercolor caricatures held by The Filson Historical Society. It is unclear whether King's watercolor of de Valera has ever been published. King (1884-1961) left the *Herald* in 1921 for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, then later joined the *Saturday Evening Post*. More of his images of other famous people can be seen in the Filson's image gallery.^[3]

In an odd coincidence, de Valera shared something in common with William M. Higgins, a member of the city's official welcoming committee and founding publisher of the Louisville-based *Kentucky Irish American* newspaper. Both Irishmen were actually natives of New York State.^[4]

De Valera was born in 1882 in New York City to an Irish immigrant mother. When her Spanish husband died two years later, she sent their son to Ireland to be raised by relatives. He began his career as a mathematics professor before switching to revolutionary politics.

Higgins was born in 1852 in Syracuse, the son of recent immigrants fleeing Ireland's Great Famine. He moved to Louisville in the 1870s and worked as a pressman at the *Courier-Journal* and *Times* newspapers. He may have attended the Feb. 19, 1880, Louisville speech of Charles Stewart Parnell, Ireland's "uncrowned king," who struggled unsuccessfully against British rule.

Proud of his Irish roots and his American birth, Higgins symbolically launched the *Irish American* on July 4, 1898. His newspaper editorialized that Louisville's enthusiastic reception for de Valera demonstrated the "feelings of the American people who know and appreciate the blessings of freedom with the people of Ireland who are striving to obtain the same boon."^[5]

What de Valera thought about Louisville is unknown. His top aide, Harry Boland, wrote in his diary: “Dark and bloody soil, lovely women, fast horses, strong whiskey.”^[6]

De Valera remained in America through December 1920. The war in Ireland resulted in the island’s partition into the 26-county Irish Free State, which later became today’s Republic of Ireland; and the six-county Northern Ireland, which remains part of Britain. De Valera held political party or government leadership positions through 1973.

Higgins died in 1925, age 72, in his newsroom. The *Irish American* ceased publishing in 1968. Digitized archives are available through the [Kentucky Digital Library](#) and the [Library of Congress](#).

^[1] Visit date based on contemporary news accounts. Seelbach location based on [Filson’s online description](#) of the holding, by Jennie Cole, dated Dec. 8, 2014.

^[2] Oct. 11, 1919, *Herald* news clipping with King drawing provided by Carissa Miller, Library Assistant Kentucky History Room, Louisville Free Public Library, at author’s request, Jan. 30, 2019.

^[3] Filson online image gallery.

^[4] Details about Higgins based on my research and sourced in my blog post: ‘[Irish American’ publisher’s Irish-American story](#), published Jan. 17, 2019.

^[5] *Kentucky Irish American* (Louisville, Ky.), Oct. 18, 1919, p. 2.

^[6] Passage from Boland’s diary as cited by David McCullagh in *De Valera, Rise 1882-1932*, (Gill Books, New York, 2017) p. 169.

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