Woolner on Whelan, 'De Valera and Roosevelt: Irish and American Diplomacy in Times of Crisis, 1932–1939'

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In the introduction to De Valera and Roosevelt: Irish and American Diplomacy in Times of Crisis, 1932–1939, Bernadette Whelan states that the purpose of her work is to examine “the process and operation of the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the Irish Free State/Eire” in the 1930s (p. 22). She also insists—in spite of the title—that the book is not a comparative study of the United States and Ireland or the respective leaders Franklin Roosevelt and Éamon de Valera but an examination of how foreign policy was used to promote national aims.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, Whelan tries to distinguish her work from other studies of Irish-American political relations in the 1930s. For instance, Whelan is not concerned with the continuing settlement of Irish Americans or the activities of militant Irish nationalists in the US, nor the context to the outbreak of the Second World War—although all three of these topics come up at various points in the book. Instead, the work seeks to provide a balanced examination of both sides of the US-Irish relationship during this important era.

Whelan is correct in her assertion that this work distinguishes itself from other studies of Irish-American political relations in the 1930s.[1] It provides the reader with a detailed examination of individuals, offices, and processes by which the Roosevelt and de Valera administrations sought to establish closer ties between the two nations. She also attempts to provide an even-handed look at the activities and aims of both the Irish and American diplomatic officers stationed on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, there is no question that this study focuses more attention on the Irish side of this equation than on the American. At first glance, this imbalance might be interpreted as a mark against the work. But given the youth and inexperience of the Irish Free State and the attendant inexperience of de Valera, who was first elected Taoiseach (prime minister) in 1932, the tendency of the work to focus on the foreign policy concerns of Ireland is in fact one of its main strengths. Having said this, the work also provides a glimpse at how the newly elected Roosevelt administration dealt with one of its more complex foreign policy questions: how to handle the somewhat uncertain place that Ireland held within the British Commonwealth.

To accomplish her goals, Whelan divides the book into two main sections. Part 1, “Soft Diplomacy and the Diplomat,” examines the institutionalization or normalization of relations between Ireland and the United States through the use of what Joseph Nye defines as “soft or public” power. Part 2, “New
Regimes Settle In," focuses on "foreign policy formulation and implementation by the respective foreign services and envoys” (p. 24).

Given that Roosevelt has been aptly described as “a protestant patrician in a Catholic party,” one might assume that Ireland and Irish Americans would be able to exercise significant influence over FDR and American foreign and domestic policy during the difficult years of the 1930s.[2] But as Whelan aptly demonstrates, in spite of de Valera’s personal conviction that the ethnographic makeup of the American population would naturally result in the establishment of a “special relationship” between Ireland and the United States, no such development developed. Indeed, notwithstanding the Irish government’s best efforts to add “content” to the social and cultural links that existed between Ireland and America, it soon became apparent to all of the Irish officials sent to Washington to advance Dublin’s political and economic agenda that the only “special relationship” to emerge during this fraught period was between London and Washington.

As Whelan notes, this placed Irish diplomats in the United States in a difficult position, for they had to operate “not only with limited resources but also under the shadow of the British embassy and under de Valera’s mistaken belief in the importance of Irish concerns to a Democratic administration” (p. 358). What’s more, the primacy of the Anglo-American relationship—which was not without its difficulties—made it impossible for Irish officials to take advantage of the very real tensions that existed between London and Washington over such issues as US isolationism and opposition to collective security. A key element in this lack of leverage stemmed from what Whelan describes as the generational composition of Irish America, “most of whom put America first and were consumed by economic survival, while radical Irish America was weaker in size and influence than at any other time in US politics” (p. 358).

The net result of these factors was that the ability of de Valera’s government to push forward on a range of issues, from the negotiation of a US-Irish trade agreement to the purchase of weapons on the eve of the Second World War, proved unsuccessful. On the other hand, through the exercise of what Whelan calls “soft diplomacy,” US-Irish relations achieved a degree of normalcy during this period, which, given Ireland’s somewhat ambiguous place within the context of the British Commonwealth, certainly merit’s historical attention. Here, what is perhaps most significant is the even-handed American reaction to de Valera’s successful revision of the 1922 Irish Constitution, an effort that was in harmony with his government’s policy to work toward a united and independent republic and that resulted in the adoption of a new constitution in 1937. De Valera sought to advance these aims through such measures as the removal of references to the British monarch in internal affairs, the elimination of the British office of governor-general, the adoption of Irish as the country’s official language, and the distinctions drawn in the document between the “nation”—incorporating the whole of the island of Ireland—and the “state,” which, referenced the jurisdiction of the Dublin government over southern Ireland, “pending reintegration of the national territory” (p. 247).

The contradictions in the 1937 constitution—which one American official described as a formula for both “eating your cake and having it”—certainly bewildered some US diplomats.[3] But de Valera’s determination to avoid violence and to use this somewhat piecemeal and practical approach toward achieving a unified Ireland came as a relief to FDR and other senior officials within the Roosevelt administration, particularly in light of the British government’s reported willingness to accept the idea of a “domestic republic” within the Commonwealth. As FDR put it a year or so later, he regarded
the Irish prime minister as “a wise and prudent man who would not ask anybody to try to do impossible tasks even in relation to partition” (p. 263).

Viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear that even with the outsized presence of Irish Americans in US democratic politics, US relations with Ireland in the 1930s and ‘40s were most often seen through the prism of London. It is this aspect of the work that offers perhaps the most significant revelation about US foreign policy, for it reinforces the evidence of the growing tendency of FDR and his military advisors to see the existence of the British Commonwealth—in spite of their own well-documented hostility to the whole notion of empire and the equally strong isolationist sentiment among much of the American public—as vital to American security.

Overall, the work suffers a bit from the author’s tendency to provide the reader with perhaps more detail than is necessary concerning the individuals and processes involved in the normalization of US-Irish diplomacy. But the larger picture that emerges from this detailed and well-researched analysis renders this an important book, which has much to say about the development of US-Irish relations in one of the most important decades of the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, John Tully Day’s Ireland and Irish-Americans 1932-1945: The Search for Identity (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), a work that is focused on the Irish American experience but which reinforces Whelan’s assertion that the presence of large numbers of Irish Americans in the ranks of the Democratic Party had little influence in US foreign policy; and T. Ryle Dwyer’s Irish Neutrality and the USA, 1939-47 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillian, 1977), a work that, unlike Whelan’s, tends to overstate the importance of Ireland as a factor in American foreign relations.


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