

The Cosgrave Party: A History of Cumann na nGaedheal, 1923-33

Review Number:

1120

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 September, 2011

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ISBN:

9781904890652

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

325pp.

Publisher:

Royal Irish Academy

Place of Publication:

Dublin

Reviewer:

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Ciara Meehan's *The Cosgrave Party* is the first monograph devoted solely to the Cumann na nGaedheal party, and as such is an important addition to the literature. Its novel focus on electioneering, in particular, should make this book noteworthy to historians of the Irish revolution, and to those interested in 20th-century Irish history more broadly. Meehan starts from the premise that Cumann na nGaedheal has yet to receive its just due from historians, who have 'largely neglected' the party (p. xi), or focused excessively on its failures and decline. As a result the party 'has remained something of an enigma' (p. xi). To correct this neglect, Meehan 'seeks to evaluate the party and locate its place in Irish history' (p. xi). The result will be a 'more balanced judgement than has previously been offered' (p. xvi), acknowledging the party's failures, while giving more attention to its successes than previous analyses.

The Cosgrave Party's core argument is that Cumann na nGaedheal was active, dynamic and productive, in contrast to the passive and listless party often found in textbooks and monographs. Meehan lauds the party for continuing an Irish tradition of 'moderate nationalism' (p. xi) – which later in the book is rendered 'constitutional nationalism' (p. 91) – through its commitment to solving problems through legislative change, rather than physical struggle. The record of its achievements, as cataloged in *The Cosgrave Party*, includes the preservation of Irish democracy, the promotion of Irish pride at home and abroad, the winning of Irish sovereignty through the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and the aggressive countering of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil in Free State elections.

Meehan does not paper over Cumann na nGaedheal's evident problems, but argues they were largely caused by the unusual circumstances surrounding its creation. Unlike most political parties, which are created in order to win power, Cumann na nGaedheal came into existence after the state, and was built by men who

were already in power. This led to the party often being considered by its leaders as an afterthought and an irritant, full of job-seekers and whiners who failed to appreciate necessarily difficult post-revolutionary compromises. Party rank-and-file, on the other hand, frequently complained that leaders ignored grass-roots input and concerns. The ‘distance between the grass roots and the TDs’ played a role in weakening the party organization, a development which had a ‘lasting impact’ (p. 14).

The government seemed unconcerned about this distance, although cabinet ministers repeatedly assured party members and TDs that their voices would be heard more in the future. The motive for this disinterest, according to Meehan, was that the leaders of Cumann na nGaedheal genuinely put the interests of the state before those of their own party. Having first been government ministers, these men failed to transform themselves into party leaders. This led to a number of instances in which party leaders recklessly pursued unpopular policies perceived to be in the nation’s best interest. Kevin O’Higgins’ repeated forays against the liquor trade are the best examples of this phenomenon, but Meehan also similarly categorizes the repeated cuts to pensions, the futile prosecution of the *Irish Press*, the Mayo librarian case, and the ban on female married teachers. Meehan concludes that the party was often the ‘author of its own misfortune’, (p. 181) although she finds virtue in this demonstration of fidelity to a much-stated but infrequently-followed dictum that Irish politicians should act for national, rather than party, reasons.

Despite these setbacks and frailties, the party remained dynamic. Provocatively, Meehan primarily seeks evidence for this assertion in the period 1927–32, precisely those years that the majority of historians find most indicative of Cumann na nGaedheal’s listlessness. While admitting the potential inherent in O’Higgins, Meehan denies that his 1927 assassination sent the party into a fatal tailspin, claiming instead that the assassination, and the subsequent entrance of Fianna Fáil into the Dáil, actually galvanized Cumann na nGaedheal. With the elimination of Cumann na nGaedheal’s artificial Dáil majority, the party could no longer afford its previously haphazard electioneering. The party did move to the ‘right’ after 1927, although Meehan is not exactly clear what she means by this designation, at times equating this with the loss of the ‘Irish-Ireland’ faction from Cumann na nGaedheal, and at times referring to the incorporation of former Unionists and wealthy businessmen. This shift to the right, however imprecisely defined, did not mean that Cumann na nGaedheal became backward-looking, traditional, or hidebound, as the party remained, in Meehan’s view, active and productive under the post-O’Higgins leadership of men equally high-minded and dedicated to the state.

There is a lot to like about this book. First and foremost, Meehan’s focus on Cumann na nGaedheal electioneering is original and path-breaking. An analysis of elections reveals the party’s ‘professional side’, and its combativeness. As Meehan notes, ‘when the party’s position was threatened, it would respond to the challenge’ (p. 82). For example, Cumann na nGaedheal was the first Irish party to hire an advertising agency to produce election propaganda. Work done by the firm O’Kennedy-Brindley for the September 1927 campaign resulted in electoral gains for Cumann na nGaedheal and an international advertising award for O’Kennedy-Brindley. The electoral innovations continued, as Cumann na nGaedheal was the first party to use an airplane, dropping party leaflets over North Dublin during a 1929 by-election. The party fought vigorous campaigns in 1932 and 1933, culminating in the 1933 deployment of a traveling talking film of Cosgrave to smaller towns where the ex-President could not himself visit. Cumann na nGaedheal also more aggressively attempted to play the green card in the 1932 election, and, for the first time, focused more on future goals than past achievements in the campaign of 1933. Throughout, Meehan sharply argues that Cumann na nGaedheal did not just collapse under the assault of a finely-honed Fianna Fáil election machine. She sees the positioning of an active and vigorous Fianna Fáil against a listless and moribund Cumann na nGaedheal as too simplistic, and instead asserts that Cumann na nGaedheal’s election campaigns were professional and clever, and that while the message may have lagged a bit – particularly in 1932 when the electorate rejected the party’s Treaty-centered and backward-looking approach – different media were used skillfully to the party’s advantage. She also frequently reminds readers that Cumann na nGaedheal lost most of its former voters to other Treatyite parties, rather than to Fianna Fáil. Nevertheless, Meehan admits that, at least in 1933, ‘Fianna Fáil’s organizational efficiency ultimately trumped Cumann na nGaedheal’s electioneering ingenuity’ (p. 206). Other than two sudden forays into quantitative analysis – which might

best have been left for a separate article, as they added little to the qualitative analysis – Meehan’s work on Cumann na nGaedheal’s electioneering is very impressive, and undermines the standard view that the party was wasting away by the late 1920s.

Meehan also devotes a significant amount of space to what she terms the party’s ‘identity-building and image projection’ (p. 44). In these sections, she details the strong international push for full Irish sovereignty, pursued at the League of Nations and through bilateral and inter-Commonwealth initiatives. She concludes that Cosgrave’s government ‘had achieved a strong and impressive record in international affairs’ (p. 157). There also is a well-done section analyzing Cosgrave’s 1928 trip to North America. *The Cosgrave Party* also focuses on image-building within Ireland, briefly discussing such initiatives as the Shannon Scheme, the creation of the 2RN broadcasting station, and O’Higgins’ attempts to control the liquor trade. It would have been helpful if Meehan had summed up the ‘image’ of Ireland that Cumann na nGaedheal wanted to present, as often these initiatives appear disconnected, but the book nevertheless highlights the broad range of nation-building activities sponsored by Cumann na nGaedheal.

Finally, Meehan’s work takes Cosgrave seriously as a political actor, something that many other books on the period have failed to do, as they have often depicted Cosgrave as a cipher who ceded initiative to stronger colleagues. The title of the book neatly illustrates Meehan’s approach, as she portrays Cumann na nGaedheal as much more under the sway of Cosgrave than previously thought. Meehan devotes six pages to an analysis of Cosgrave’s leadership style (pp. 16–22), and asserts that he never relinquished control over his Cabinet, even during his much-maligned absence during the Army crisis of 1924. Cosgrave apparently made a number of key decisions alone, including his savvy decision to call a snap election in September 1927. Throughout his career, Cosgrave also inspired a fair amount of loyalty and devotion from party members.

Even with this welcome attention to Cosgrave, Meehan struggles to answer two of the most important questions about him: why he stayed in power and where he stood on many of the major issues facing the regime. As to the former, Meehan credits Cosgrave’s strengths, including his experience in the Dublin Corporation and his successful record as Dáil Minister for Local Government. Following Brian Farrell in characterizing him as a ‘chairman’ rather than a ‘chief’, Meehan praises Cosgrave’s ‘careful judgment in not allying himself to any one group’ (p. 19). Despite a reputation for absence in times of crisis, Cosgrave was always in control of events: ‘when necessary, Cosgrave asserted his authority’ (p. 19). As a result, Cosgrave retained the respect of his Cabinet colleagues and of the party at large, with even Kevin O’Higgins apparently disavowing any ambition toward party leadership. Meehan repeats the oft-stated view that Cosgrave’s role was that of a ‘mediator between the various groups in his party’ (p. 19) and she sees the Cabinet as divided into ‘Irish-Ireland’ and ‘Imperial’ factions, with Cosgrave apparently able to keep these disparate groups pointed toward a common goal.

The problem with this characterization – and Meehan is certainly not its first proponent – is that it lacks much evidence. Other than a story about the Oath told in later life by Ernest Blythe – that Cosgrave initially feigned refusal to take the Oath so as to make inroads with those in the party hostile to the Oath, and convince them to enter the Dáil – there is not much direct evidence of Cosgrave’s mediating any particular disputes. The Army Mutiny certainly did not end with his mediation, as people on both sides of the dispute ended up angrily resigning. Mergers with the Farmers’ Party repeatedly failed, as did the initial outreach to the National League and talks of cooperation with the Labour Party in the wake of O’Higgins’ murder. In fact, the party generally had more defections than Fianna Fáil, and also frequently failed to reach agreement with outside entities. So if Cosgrave was a particularly strong mediator, some evidence needs to be adduced. Part of the reason it is difficult to foreground Cosgrave’s arbitration skills is that it is not entirely clear where he stood on most of the key issues facing the regime. He appears to have been a stern supporter of law and order, at least in the Dáil, but there were reports that he privately opposed some of the 1922 executions. What Cosgrave himself thought was a desired, or at least acceptable, outcome of the Army crisis is not clear, nor is his position on free trade, the most divisive issue within the party in its last years. Meehan asserts that free-trader J. J. Walsh probably opposed Cosgrave on tariff policy, citing Liam de Roiste’s diary, but there is little direct evidence of Cosgrave’s personal views on economic policy. As a result, Meehan is left with the notion that Cosgrave remained in power simply for lack of a better alternative, which, while somewhat

unsatisfying, is probably as good as explanation as anyone else has offered.

The Cosgrave Party is particularly impressive in its treatment of electioneering, the attention it gives to Cosgrave, and in its wide-ranging evaluation of Cumann na nGaedheal's state- and image-building endeavors. These alone make the book worth reading, and a strong contribution to an under-studied subject. However, the book also suffers from some shortcomings, none of which detract fatally from its overall merit. The first such shortcoming is structural. *The Cosgrave Party* is broadly chronological in organization, but within each chapter, the organization and scope are often unclear. A discussion of female TDs is rather jarringly inserted at the end of a section on the party's formation. A long discussion on finance is interjected in the midst of a section on 'social and moral consciousness'. While there is a connection between financial policy and the government's social and moral agenda, that connection is not clearly stated in the text. As far as the subjects covered, the bulk of the book is devoted to analysis of electoral issues, with other subjects peculiarly glossed over. For example, the Army Mutiny of 1924 – which Meehan oddly refers to as a 'relatively minor' split – is given less space than the defection of J. J. Walsh in 1927, and slightly more space than the creation of a Dublin radio station. At times, Meehan asserts that the book is about the party, not the state, which is her ostensible reason for passing lightly over the Mutiny, as she did not want to discuss 'the internal workings of a military dispute', but rather only the 'political implications for Cumann na nGaedheal' (p. 39). The problem is that this criterion is not applied consistently, as the party and the state are confused, or at least conflated, throughout the book. As one example, it is not immediately clear how the creation of the radio station affected the party, as opposed to the state. It seems as if Meehan's interest was really in Cumann na nGaedheal electioneering, and concentrating on the party's election strategies would have made for a more tightly-focused and clearly-argued book. As it stands, the book seems at times to be an amalgam of a thesis-driven work on electioneering and an encyclopedic (and far less detailed) compendium of other government activities, a factor which leads to some awkward transitions and jumps.

Of greater concern is the book's almost complete lack of engagement with the existing historiography on the 1920s. Meehan refers to John Regan's *The Irish Counter-Revolution* as 'the only existing study,' but other than a perfunctory dismissal of Regan's book as having 'a narrow focus on Cumann na nGaedheal's role in consolidating the Irish revolution', there is not much substantial discussion of existing works (p. xv). References to secondary sources are scattered throughout the chapters, but generally without engagement with their methodologies or broader arguments. Meehan's contention that little has been done on Cumann na nGaedheal appears to rest on a statement from a Fine Gael Senator in 2003. Similarly, her statement that most historians have seen Cumann na nGaedheal as disappointing and declining by the late 1920s only references John Murphy's 1975 textbook. Tom Garvin's *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy*, to give just one example, is not discussed at all. While the lack of a standard historiographical discussion may reflect editorial concerns over space, the omission is still disarming, and the book would have been substantially richer with more interaction with the existing historiography.

This is perhaps most obvious regarding Meehan's claim that Cumann na nGaedheal continued the Irish tradition of constitutional or moderate nationalism. To put it bluntly, this is a loaded assertion, and needed much more argumentative and historiographical explication in *The Cosgrave Party*. For one, 'moderate' and/or 'constitutional' nationalism are never really defined in the Irish context. At times it seems as if Meehan means that Cumann na nGaedheal mimicked the Irish party, and at other times, she seems to mean that moderate nationalism reflected a commitment to parliamentary methods and a renunciation of violence. Meehan also admits that most Cumann na nGaedheal leaders came from Sinn Féin, but there is no real explanation given for their transformation into 'moderates' once they achieved power. There is a brief reference to how the 'financial burden of destruction' from the revolution and the civil war 'compromised any possibility of making the lofty aspirations of Sinn Féin's revolution a reality', but that argument is never really developed (p. 8). John McCarthy has argued, at least in the case of O'Higgins, that the actual experience of being in power tended to moderate more youthful, revolutionary impulses. That argument would have dovetailed nicely with Meehan's emphasis on the fact that state formation preceded party formation, but, again, it is not developed in *The Cosgrave Party*. So the reader is left with the sudden transformation of Sinn Féiners into IPP-style nationalists, with little explanation of how this took place. In

addition, there is a significant body of scholarship – primarily by John Regan – that queries the limits of Cumann na nGaedheal’s constitutionalism, and other scholarship that delineates significant continuities between Cumann na nGaedheal and the revolutionary period. None of that work is really referenced here. More historiographical discussion could have helped to undergird Meehan’s arguments about constitutional nationalism.

In sum, this is a great addition to the literature on the 1920s. While there are some structural and argumentative issues that handicap the book a bit, and the book may have benefited by focusing more narrowly on elections, these concerns should not detract from the many significant contributions this book makes to the field. This should be standard reading for historians of the 1920s, and *The Cosgrave Party* opens up new interpretations and avenues of research for those interested in Cumann na nGaedheal.

The author accepts this review and does not wish to comment further.

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