

Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-Made Hero

Review Number:

583

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 March, 2007

Author:

Fearghal McGarry

ISBN:

9780199276554

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

476pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199276554.do>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

John Regan

Fearghal McGarry's much anticipated biography of general Eoin O'Duffy is an impressive piece of research, and its illuminating detail traces O'Duffy's rise from minor local government official to ruthless guerrilla fighter. This was followed by a rapid ascent as Michael Collins' protégé through the ranks of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and its secret controlling body the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). O'Duffy experienced tumultuous post-independence years as police commissioner in the twenties. Later, in the thirties, he was leader of the major opposition party Fine Gael/United Ireland, and of various failed fascistic organizations (National Guard, League of Youth, National Corporate Party). His career ended in ignominy. After resigning as the Fine Gael's leader, he presided over the Irish Blueshirts' decline, and later led a self-styled 'crusade' to Spain where he soldiered under Franco's command in 1937. On his return to Ireland O'Duffy drank himself into an early grave in 1944. Among commentators there is a tendency to diminish the general's later career. But pre-Spain, as Fearghal McGarry notes, he was a serious player on the Irish political scene.

McGarry's first book, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), provides the background for the later chapters here, and he makes good use of O'Duffy's private papers. On the whole this book is further testament to the increasingly sophisticated approach to modern biography of twentieth-century Irish nationalist revolutionaries, and as such it deserves to sit beside other offerings from Tom Garvin's collective approach to Richard English's thematic study of Ernie O'Malley, and more conventional approaches offered by David Fitzpatrick on Harry Boland, and Peter Hart on Michael Collins. Arguably, it also shares some of the interpretative problems present in that body of work.

When crisis loomed in the early Free State, the authorities sent for O'Duffy. He spearheaded the military defence of the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty in the civil war against former comrades in the IRA. When the new police force collapsed in August 1922, the government turned to O'Duffy to take it in hand. Again, in 1924, when mutiny threatened the army, the government made O'Duffy their first soldier. And when, in 1933, many believed Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fail government would bring an end to democratic politics, it was the irascible O'Duffy (by then leader of 30,000 Blueshirts) that the opposition parties called on to lead them. At the outset of his public life he seemed to possess remarkable gifts of leadership, which seemed to desert him in later years. The picture remains one of inconsistency, disjuncture, and change. Fearghal McGarry wrestles with this, bringing to bear an enviable prose style to this biography which effortlessly drives forward its narrative. It is the underlying structure of that narrative I wish to address in this review.

From the mid-1970s a new public history of Irish independence emerged simultaneously within the Irish state and academia. In response to the war in Northern Ireland (c. 1969–97), and alongside a modernizing southern Irish society, the new public history focused on the achievements of the 1922 state. This contrasted sharply with traditional republican aspirations for a united Ireland encapsulated in earlier alternative public histories. Dorothy Macardle's *The Irish Republic* (London, 1937) remains the classic of the former approach. After Fianna Fail's accession to power in 1932, narratives of republican struggle dominated both official and public culture in the twenty-six counties. Such histories stressed the betrayal of republican principle that the 1921 Anglo-Irish 'treaty' settlement represented, and the continuation of the 'struggle' toward unification. Emphasizing the constitutionality of the state formation process, the new history's aim was to distinguish state-formation violence in the period 1918–23 from that of the contemporary and unmandated Provisional IRA. It also attempted to reconcile nationalism in the south with the established 1922 state as opposed to the thirty-two-county revolutionary republic. The tensions between these competing public histories, as well as the distortions resulting from them, have provided a context for history writing in Ireland for the last four decades. Whether or not the new history represented a 'war historiography' is a moot point, but no Irish historian can assume events emanating in Northern Ireland have been incidental to their work, and more particularly the historicization of the revolutionary period, 1912–39. A biography of Eoin O'Duffy, Ulsterman, IRA leader, state-builder, and fascist has to negotiate its way through the old and the new histories, and, it might be suggested, their attendant mythologies.

Orthodox approaches favoured by the community of professional Irish historians dichotomize the post-1922 period in independent Ireland around the issue of democracy. Accordingly the dominant, but by no means uniform, interpretation, is that the Irish Free State's founders (Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith, William T. Cosgrave, et al.) were essentially constitutionalists, and sometimes they are collectively identified as democrats. Conversely, the anti-treatyite republicans have been stereotyped as non-democratic wreckers of the new state. O'Duffy, as democrat turned fascist, sits uneasily within this overly neat order. Therein lies one of several problems for the historian. What do we do with General O'Duffy? Explain him away as a bad apple in an otherwise healthy barrel of treatyite democrats? Or do we argue he later went wrong, having previously served the state well?

Complicating all of this, a biography of O'Duffy is also in some measure a biography of the independent state. At once this might appear to simplify the biographer's task by providing an established frame around which that life may be reconstructed: cultural nationalist revival (1900–10); paramilitarization (1912–21); civil war (north and south 1922–3); state building (1922–33); and opposition to Fianna Fail (after 1932). But this approach, it is suggested here, presents as many interpretative problems as solutions. And not least

among these is the 1922 nation-state's centrality in a historiography distorted by southern Irish nationalism in which the Irish nation equates with the southern state.

Fearghal McGarry purports to challenge much that is orthodox. Critiquing Jeffrey Prager's *State Building and Democracy in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1986), and Tom Garvin's *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996) he comments, 'O'Duffy's short-lived cameo on the Irish political stage [1920–37] undermines the interpretation of the Civil War [1922–3] as a conflict between a rational constitutional tradition within nationalist politics and elitist republicanism' (p. 269). This interpretation is now accepted by many, and, perhaps, is not quite as original as its presentation might suggest. Singling out political scientists for criticism (in which the present reviewer has also been found guilty) ignores the work of much of the senior historical profession who have increasingly endorsed the democrats (treatyites) and dictators (anti-treatyites) model. Later, Fearghal McGarry writes, 'O'Duffy's extremism was not fully embraced by Fine Gael [1933–4], its brief flirtation with fascism blemished an otherwise impressive commitment to democratic values dating back to 1922' (p. 269). This, perhaps, suggests an overly-confident belief in the constitutional credentials of the state's founders.

In the pre-treaty autumn of 1921, Eamon de Valera's revolutionary Dail government attempted to renegotiate its relationship with the IRA by issuing new commissions under its authority. This was a further attempt to bring the military under civil control ahead of settlement with Britain and the Empire. The resulting clash, on 25 November 1921, between the staff officers of IRA general headquarters and the civilian government's authority prefigured later civil-military conflicts leading eventually to the civil war in June 1922. O'Duffy and de Valera ended the meeting shouting across a conference room at one another. The staff officers left the confrontation unbowed before the civilian government. Fearghal McGarry describes this as a 'nasty row', but the defiance of governmental authority was, as de Valera claimed at the time, tantamount to mutiny. O'Duffy may have spoken loudest, but he did not speak alone. The IRA cadre marching out with him formed the treatyite army's elite in 1922, and was led by Collins. Its relationship to civil authority remained unresolved, complex, and poisonous to any assumption that power would in future reside with the civilians rather than the soldiers.

Fearghal McGarry invests the treatyite regime in 1922 with unqualified legitimacy. His civil war polarizes combatants into legitimate and illegitimate, and therefore regulars (the Free State's treatyite army) and their antonymic adversaries, the 'Irregulars' (the anti-treatyite IRA). Is there ever any justification for using the pejorative language of a civil war in historical writing? If Fearghal McGarry employs the language of the civil war's winners, it may be because his is still essentially a winners' history. The British use of coercion and threat of re-intervention, critical to understanding anti-treatyite responses in 1922, is acknowledged but underplayed (p. 96). The general election results of 1922–3, which emboldened treatyite claims to be democracy's defenders, are not analysed in the context of a contested historiography. Authoritarianism and aspirations to dictatorship in 1922 are exclusively ascribed to the anti-treatyites. Given O'Duffy's supposed journey from defending democracy in 1922, to backing fascism in 1933, one might expect more meaningful engagement on these issues, and the contradictions they suggest. Instead O'Duffy's life is made to conform to orthodoxy, with a nod here and there to its challengers.

Within the dominant orthodoxy it remains problematic to acknowledge that the southern state began life covertly at war with Northern Ireland. The northern IRA's offensive of May 1922, formed part of that conflict, and McGarry tells us it 'was directed by O'Duffy with the knowledge of Collins but not the cabinet' (p. 102). But who can know what the government ministers knew about such matters at any given time? While it is accepted that Collins sent arms to the north, it is also important in any interpretation arguing for constitutional development to maintain the civilian government's innocence in this area (1). The assertion that the cabinet was ignorant of such affairs (including General Richard Mulcahy, Dail minister of defence?) provides an instance of the constitutional narrative over-riding the evidence. Fearghal McGarry himself notes, 'on 22 April ... O'Duffy publicly accused [Liam] Lynch's [anti-treatyite] 1st southern division of retaining Thompson machine guns intended for the northern IRA' (p. 98). The account appeared in the *Irish Independent* on 26 April, proving invaluable information for the British army (who had originally supplied the guns to Collins to defend the treaty), and, one may safely wager, Collins' fellow

ministers. That the civilian government were comfortable with this situation is unlikely, but given the dominance of Collins and the military within the treatyite regime it would seem they were in no position to take action. The onset of civil war two months later exaggerated that unequal relationship.

Fearghal McGarry describes de Valera's 1922 republican government established during the civil war as a 'notional' entity (p. 172). Clearly the anti-treatyites could not gather resources to rival the early Free State's 'real' government. But the anti-treatyite government, and the legitimacy underpinning it, was far from 'notional' to de Valera's supporters who fought their civil war in defence of its republican legitimacy. In the August 1923 general election it should be recalled de Valera's 'notional' government was endorsed by nearly 290,000 votes or 26 per cent of the poll. To dismiss the republican consensus underpinning the opposition to the state is suggestive of an impartial or perhaps even a stateist approach.

Nowhere is Fearghal McGarry's legitimizing narrative better exemplified than when writing on the treatyites formation of a 'war council' on 12 July 1922 (consisting of Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy, and Eoin O'Duffy). McGarry comments that, '[r]epublicans like [Harry] Boland depicted the war council, a little richly, as a dictatorial clique rather than a convenient rationalization of treatyite military authority' (p. 106). On this the reviewer declares particular interest having written on the subject, and having come to somewhat different conclusions in *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921–36* (Dublin, 1999).

During July–August 1922, the military gained control of civil, military, and, through the treatyite dominated Irish Republican Brotherhood's agency, extra-constitutional powers within the treatyite regime. The IRB was a secret oath-bound organization headed by Collins with O'Duffy, which claimed in 1922 be the true government of the Irish republic. In 1999 I concluded, '[between July and September 1922] [t]he absence of any legislative body meant that the [treatyite] Provisional Government was not accountable to any other institution and in the circumstances this granted Collins in theory if not in practice dictatorial powers' (2). Among Collins' last decisions, taken on 21 August, was his instruction Parliament should not meet. This ran against the wishes of the ministers. That decision may well have amounted to the agency, and not just the structure, of a military government. In either case the argument that a treatyite dictatorship of some order was in place before Collins' death, on 22 August 1922, should not be dismissed out of hand. Not, that is, without first addressing the interpretation, and the supporting evidence.

Eoin O'Duffy: Self-Made Hero is an attempt at a consensual historical interpretation, weaving the strands of a contested historiography into an orthodox interpretation. On grittier issues Fearghal McGarry ignores that which is problematic. Despite recognizing many senior treatyite politicians' authoritarian tendencies, most particularly in the period surrounding the communist 'red scare' of 1931–4, O'Duffy is still presented as exceptional in his political leanings. That such a central figure should be quite so ideologically peripheral has always been suspect. Such an approach, however, serves to mitigate a much stronger authoritarian tradition within treatyite and broader Irish political culture than is commonly accepted.

O'Duffy's ascent to political leadership during de Valera's second year in power, 1933, was specific to a moment of crisis. The treatyites genuinely feared de Valera would suppress the opposition parties. In the emergency following, O'Duffy's lead, and the protection the Blueshirts' afforded, seemed of vital necessity to the continuation of parliamentary rule. Much as the treatyites had revered Collins and tolerated the IRB in 1922, they accepted once again a leader disdainful of parliamentary democracy backed in 1933 by a band of shirted paramilitaries. When, in September 1933, the opposition parties asked O'Duffy to lead a Fine Gael and Blueshirt combination, none who had worked with him for twelve years or more could have doubted his temperament or outlook. In fairness to Fearghal McGarry, he accepts some of this, but the relationship between the revolutionaries and concepts of parliamentary democracy were far more complex than he allows.

General O'Duffy's authoritarianism may look out of sorts in the thirties, but only when a deterministic constitutional interpretation is applied to the broad period of state formation. For those unconvinced by this, O'Duffy's cherished place among the treatyites represents the constant presence of authoritarianism connecting Collin's de facto dictatorship of 1922 to the possibility of a similar outcome in the 1930s. That understood, O'Duffy begins to appear both more consistent, and as a historical figure more plausible, at the

beginning and the end of his political life than hitherto has been presented. Throughout, he remained a tactical democrat, endorsing majorities when they suited his interests. Thirty years ago, in a seminal paper responding to the influence of violence in Northern Ireland on state formation historiography, Ronan Fanning wrote:

Now, when academic historians question the myths of the old, ‘official history’ ... they find they are no longer crying in the wilderness, but rather they are part of a larger and louder chorus—a sort of Irish intellectual establishment. And, while the passing of the old myths must afford them satisfaction, the growing consensus affirming the strength of the democratic tradition in Irish politics must make them ponder whether new myths are not being conjured up in place of old (3).

The historiography in which McGarry, as with so many of the emergent generation of modern Irish historians, places his faith is leavened with a good deal of the mythology against which Fanning warned with such prescience.

Fearghal McGarry has gone some way to humanizing and properly contextualizing O’Duffy. He treats with sensitivity his subject’s homosexuality and, equally, his struggle with alcoholism. If this biography follows too closely the constitutional narrative of the state, this may in part be explained by an over-reliance on selected secondary sources, which is a common problem for the biographer. Nevertheless, this is an elegant and accomplished piece of research, and while some may not agree with all of its assumptions and propositions, one cannot fail other than to be impressed by the hand crafting them.

Notes

1. For the original interpretation reconciling the claim, ‘[i]t was only after the Treaty that he [Michael Collins] clearly became a constitutionalist’ with Collins’s non-disclosure of his northern policy to cabinet ministers in 1922 see, T. D. Williams, ‘The Irish Republican Brotherhood’ in *Secret Societies in Ireland*, ed. T. D. Williams (Dublin, 1973), p. 148 (first broadcast as part of the Thomas Davis lecture series on Radio Telefis Eireann, 10 January 1971). This might be interpreted as one of the earliest assertions of the new public history responding to the onset of violence in Northern Ireland in 1969. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921–36* (Dublin, 1999), p. 80. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Fanning, ‘Leadership and transition from the politics of revolution to the politics of party: the example of Ireland 1914–1939’ in *Reports—Fourteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences*, 3 vols (New York, 1977), iii. 1741–68, at 1743. Originally delivered 27 August 1975, at San Francisco. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/583#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3975>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>