

Jack Lynch: A Biography

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Harold Macmillan once said that what he feared most was 'events'. Jack Lynch was one of those politicians who was ambushed by 'events'. Before 1969, he seemed to have a talent for avoiding the arrogance and mud that normally congeal on those who climb the greasy pole, and projecting himself as gentle, decent, moderate, honest, and dutiful. Born in Cork city in 1917, into a relatively comfortable working-class family, he worked as a law clerk and was called to the bar in 1945. Sparkling success in Cork hurling and football made him a prized asset in Ireland's intensely localist political culture, and he was courted by parties of conservative and radical proclivities. He opted for Fianna Fáil. Elected to Dáil Éireann in 1948, he rose steadily in the pecking order. His image as one who embraced power with reluctance was consolidated in 1966 when he agreed to run for Taoiseach to save the party an unprecedented contest for the leadership, between George Colley and Charles J. Haughey. The future looked settled. Lynch's predecessor, Seán Lemass, had deftly abandoned Fianna Fáil's traditional autarkic and irredentist policies, revitalized the economy, set Ireland on course for accession to the European Economic Community, and opened cordial relations with the Northern Ireland government. Then the North erupted in August 1969. Lynch's reputation would forever hang on attitudes towards his response, and his handling of the aftershocks, from the dismissal of Haughey from the cabinet and the 'arms trial' in 1970 to Haughey's come-back as Taoiseach in 1979. He would also be confronted with post-war Europe's first recessions in the 1970s.

Dermot Keogh's is the third biography of Lynch, following two shorter, more interpretive, and more critical volumes which appeared in 2001, Bruce Arnold's *Jack Lynch: Hero in Crisis* (1), and T. Ryle Dwyer's *Nice Fellow: A Biography of Jack Lynch*. (2) It shares with Arnold a forthright concern to vindicate Lynch, but is also virtually an official biography, written by a self-styled 'insider' with the help of Lynch's widow, Máirín. Keogh nails his colours to the mast in the preface. A journalist with the pro-Fianna Fáil paper, the *Irish Press*,

from 1970 to 1976, and a 'strong opponent of the necrophilia of the Provisional IRA', he was deeply unhappy with the paper's anti-partitionism and admired Lynch's 'constitutional line' (p. xii). After 1979, he feared that Lynch was 'being systematically airbrushed out of modern Irish history by Charles Haughey and his entourage' (p. xii). As the preface suggests, there are two salient problems in attempting an objective assessment of Lynch. First, he is seen through the prism of emotive events. Those who believe the Irish government did well to avoid a military engagement with the North are driven to heroise Lynch's role. Keogh devotes almost 40 percent of his biography to Northern-related matter. Secondly, attitudes towards Lynch and his nemesis, Haughey, usually amount to a zero-sum. They differed not only on the six counties, but in personality and political style. Haughey's abrasive command of Fianna Fáil sustained a certain nostalgia for Lynch, and his fall from grace after corroboration of corruption in the 1990s helped to restore Lynch's popularity. Keogh's dislike of Haughey is evident in repeated sideswipes. At one point he compares him with Josef Stalin.

Lynch was a private man, with few interests outside politics before he retired to company directorships. He never got round to writing his memoirs and restricted himself to rare and spare defences of his record after 1979. What Keogh offers us, in considerable detail, is largely the public man, sportsman and politician. By all accounts, there was no hidden side to Lynch. He and Máirín – they had had no children – were a devoted and happy couple. He gave her the final word on choices affecting his career, and occasionally on political decisions too. She normally accompanied him on the campaign trail as well as on official visits, and sometimes intervened publicly with a statement on his behalf. Keogh has published on a diverse range of topics, from trade unions to religion, but is probably best known as a historian of high politics. He makes good use of public archives, augmented by 'three sacks' of personal papers supplied by Máirín. The narrative is searching, but supportive.

How convincing is Keogh's apologia? Three criticisms are commonly made of Lynch. The first is that he stood for nothing other than, in the words of John A. Murphy, 'an affable consensus', and offered a bland leadership. There are various stories of Lynch taking a decision on the toss of a coin. According to Máirín, the coin was tossed to determine whether he would enter politics, as he wished, or defer to her apprehensions and stick with the bar. In Fianna Fáil folklore the toss was to decide which party to join. In a party in which family tradition was esteemed, Lynch's lack of an identifiable republican background was held against him, especially after 1969. Keogh is sensitive of the negative rumours about Lynch, and manages to find a few republicans in his extended family. It is certainly plausible that Lynch matured into a conviction Fianna Fáiler, of the Lemass rather than the Éamon de Valera variety. He became friendly with T. K. Whitaker, secretary of the Department of Finance and architect of the shift from protectionism to free trade, shared Whitaker's belief that partition could only be ended through prosperity, co-operation, and consent, and sought his advice on the North. Equally, Keogh rejects the claim that Lynch was a 'reluctant' Taoiseach, and it does seem as if the reluctance was Máirín's.

Because his place in history is overshadowed by the North and by Haughey, Lynch is not usually arraigned for his abilities as minister or as Taoiseach first time round, from 1966 to 1973, though the record is mixed, at best. He had a moderately good stint as Minister for Education from 1957 to 1959, with a few modest initiatives to his credit. Clerical control of education at that time restricted the role of any minister. As Minister for Industry and Commerce, from 1959 to 1965, Lynch was more obviously less successful in coping with the escalation of industrial unrest or reforming industrial relations. Under his tenure as Taoiseach, the 'Programmes for Economic Expansion', initiated by Lemass, started shipping water. Lynch abandoned the 'Third Programme' for the lazier option of prioritizing foreign private investment, and stimulating domestic capitalism through the building industry. A toxic chemistry evolved between Fianna Fáil and property developers. Fianna Fáil's fund raising agency, Taca [support], acquired a notoriety, and many were shocked at the way speculators were allowed to replace chunks of Georgian Dublin with functional office blocks. Keogh's treatment of Taca is typical of the endemic bias which mars the book. Targetting Haughey as the arch 'Taccateer', Keogh neglects to say that Taca emerged within three months of Lynch becoming party leader, or that Lynch defended it, and excuses his hero with a claim that he was 'alarmed' at the process of fund raising and tried to make it more 'transparent'. (p. 126) Patently, he didn't

try hard enough. This contrast between intent and effect is at the heart of the Lynch enigma. If personally honest, he did not curb practices like cronyism in public appointments, 'pork-barrelling', or gerrymandering. If personally progressive, he led one of Fianna Fáil's most dishonest and regressive election campaigns in 1969, combining 'red scare' tactics against the Labour Party with an egregious canvassing of convents. Keogh is disingenuous: 'Nuns too were citizens'. (p. 155). Lynch had blundered badly in holding a referendum to get rid of proportional representation (PR) in 1968. Victory in 1969 restored his authority, demonstrating the huge appeal of his style to floating voters, and his ability to screen Fianna Fáil's reputation for arrogance and corruption behind his self-effacing, mild manner.

The second and central criticism of Lynch relates to the North. Lynch had his first meeting, as Taoiseach, with Northern premier Terence O'Neill in 1967. He aimed to continue Lemass's policy of fostering cross-border co-operation. The emphasis in Northern policy was on nursing a rapport with Stormont. No one expected, before 5 October 1968, 'Day 1' of 'the troubles', that nationalists would present problems of management. Lynch had no instinct for handling angular Ulstermen, and it said much about him that he embarrassed the civil rights movement by trying to replace PR with the electoral system it was so critical of in the six counties. Not surprisingly, Northern anti-Unionists were more impressed by Harold Wilson than Lynch, and encouraged by the possibility that a Labour government in London might respond to a campaign for equality within Northern Ireland. By the summer of 1969, the Irish authorities were awakening to the gravity of the situation, and warned the British government, in vain, that the Apprentice Boys' parade in Derry on 12 August would lead to trouble. At the same time, the Irish underestimated the consequences, and Keogh concedes that Lynch did little to prepare his colleagues, the Department of External Affairs, the security and intelligence services, or the public, for the impending crisis. The emergency cabinet session on 13 August to consider a response to the 'Battle of the Bogside' and rioting in Belfast was the first of a long series of meetings on which there is dispute about what actually happened. One of the great merits of this biography is that it offers the most painstaking account to date of who said what, to whom, and when. The detail, however, is at the expense of overview and objective consideration of perceptions.

Keogh makes a good case for Lynch's ideological consistency, depicting him as steady in developing a two pronged policy. First, he sought to reassure his party by saying that partition was at the heart of the problem. The British government's insistence that Northern Ireland was a matter for the United Kingdom authorities alone gave him little room to manoeuvre in this respect. Secondly, he affirmed that partition could not be resolved by force and there was to be 'no fraternization' with paramilitaries. Does Lynch deserve an encomium for this? He was reiterating the line taken by John A. Costello, de Valera, and Lemass during the IRA's 'border campaign' from 1956 to 1962. Granted, his situation was more pressured, but lionizing Lynch as a man in the gap is mythification. Historians of the period are struck by the weight of feeling against, rather than for, closer engagement with the North. Lynch could rely on the backing of the civil service and the army, most of his cabinet, all parties in Dáil Éireann, and his popularity with the electorate. Keogh is less effective in tackling the contrast between Lynch's policy and his political management. Perceptions are important, and Lynch failed to reassure. The style that had hitherto served him so well became a liability in the crisis. Hardliners suspected his anti-partitionism as perfunctory and believed he lacked the steel to square up to the British. Moderates feared he was not doing enough to rein in his hawkish colleagues. There were some terrible decisions. Mícheál Ó Móráin, widely regarded as incompetent and unreliable, had been made Minister for Justice in July 1969. Lynch allowed the cabinet to revise his broadcast to the nation on 13 August to make it sound more militant. His announcement of army mobilization and remark that the Republic could not 'stand by', sent the wrong signals to the North, provoking the Unionists and raising false hopes among nationalists; though what he actually did, establishing field-hospitals along the border, was judicious and appreciated by refugees. He also made concessions to two ministerial hawks, Haughey and Neil Blaney. Both were appointed to a four-man security sub-committee, and a distress fund was set up to aid Northern nationalists. Haughey and Blaney ignored the committee, and used the funds to import arms for use in the North.

The greatest controversy surrounds Lynch's culpability in the arms conspiracy. Keogh says he was not as attentive to Northern affairs as he ought to have been, a defence contradicted later by his conclusion that

‘After 1969 Lynch’s focus was rarely on economic recovery’ (p. 478). Did Lynch not know, or did he not want to know? A crucial question is when he was informed of plans to import arms. According to his diary, Peter Berry, secretary of the Department of Justice, told Lynch on 17 October 1969, and formed the impression that the Taoiseach was not at all happy to be so briefed. Lynch always denied it, and Keogh argues that he should get the benefit of the doubt as Berry – whom he traduces repeatedly – was ill at the time. However, during the arms trial Ó Móráin and Jim Gibbons, formerly Minister for Defence, said they had made Lynch aware of the conspiracy. Lynch claimed he first heard of ministerial involvement in gun-running on 20 April 1970. Yet did not act until May, when confronted with allegations by the leader of the opposition. Haughey and Blaney were dismissed from the cabinet, tried, and acquitted. Lynch could certainly be sinewy where his career was at stake. He survived the convulsions in Fianna Fáil and would have won the next election in 1973 had he not underestimated the appeal of the Fine Gael-Labour coalition’s reform package.

That was a mistake that Fianna Fáil determined not to repeat, and the third major criticism of Lynch is that he sorely damaged the public finances with his ‘giveaway’ manifesto of 1977. Despite rising inflation, unemployment, and state borrowing, the Fine Gael-Labour government was extraordinarily confident about another election victory. An over-anxious Fianna Fáil dazzled the voters with an alluring array of tax cuts and increased public spending. Lynch swept back to power with a huge majority. From there, it was downhill all the way. The government’s hamfisted gamble for growth exacerbated the country’s economic problems, and contributed to the state’s fiscal agonies in the 1980s. By 1979 there was a widespread feeling that the government needed a change of direction. Lynch was planning to retire in 1980. The North hastened the process. In August 1979 the IRA killed Lord Louis Mountbatten and the ensuing furore again made Lynch look weak. Some condemned him for not cutting short his holidays in Portugal to return to Ireland. Others felt he was bending to Mrs Thatcher’s line on the North in the wake of the embarrassment of Mountbatten’s death, which occurred in the Republic. In November, Fianna Fáil lost two bye-elections in Lynch’s beloved Cork. Then it emerged that Lynch had agreed to allow British military aircraft to overfly the border. The overflight issue crystalized the mounting unease in the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party. Lynch announced his resignation on 5 December. He hoped to be succeeded by Colley, who was regarded as a man in the Lynch mould. Incredibly, Lynch had appointed Haughey to the cabinet in 1977, and with the aid of that partial rehabilitation, Haughey beat Colley by 44-38 votes. It was a disastrous finale to Lynch’s career, and taken as a reflection on his record.

Keogh, as the reader may have gathered, doggedly defends Lynch throughout, and it’s a pleasant surprise to encounter some critical assessments in the conclusion. Lynch is faulted for allowing ministers too much ‘autonomy’ and for some poor political judgment, especially in making appointments. Three explanations are offered of his difficulties as leader: the ‘hierarchical nature of Irish government’, the ‘consistent underperformance of various ministers’, and the ‘pre-modern nature of Fianna Fáil’ party organization.(p. 479) None of these are convincing. Cabinet government has generally become more prime-ministerial since the 1950s. Fianna Fáil’s authoritarian culture was surely an advantage to a leader. If its organization was ‘pre-modern’, it compared very favourably with its rivals. And blaming the underlings is lame. Lynch was outshone by some very competent ministers, and was unfortunate that two of them were Blaney and Haughey. At the close of this monumental piece of research, one is left with an uncomfortable feeling that the best that can be said about Lynch is that he was a nice man, and too nice to be an effective leader of Fianna Fáil.

Notes

1. Bruce Arnold, *Jack Lynch: Hero in Crisis* (Dublin, 2001). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. T. Ryle Dwyer, *Nice Fellow: A Biography of Jack Lynch* (Cork, 2001). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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