

Ryan, James

by Patrick Maume

Ryan, James (1891–1970), government minister, doctor, and businessman, was born at Tomcoole, near Taghmon, Co. Wexford, on 6 December 1891, eleventh of the twelve children of John Ryan, farmer, and his wife, Elizabeth (née Sutton). He was educated at Caroreigh national school and St Peter's College, Wexford, and regularly spent summer holidays at the Irish College in Ring, Co. Waterford. In 1911, having won a county council scholarship, he studied medicine at UCD, where he joined the college Sinn Féin club. He attended meetings addressed by James Larkin (qv) – whom he saw as inspirational but unscrupulous – and James Connolly (qv) and also made the acquaintance of Seán Mac Diarmada (qv), who swore him into the IRB in November 1914. (MacDiarmada was engaged to one of Ryan's sisters at the time of his execution; in old age Ryan recalled him as 'my idea of what a man should be'). Ryan joined the Irish Volunteers at their first public meeting in November 1913.

On the Easter weekend of 1916 Ryan delivered the countermanding order to the Cork Volunteer leadership given by Eoin MacNeill (qv); hearing of the outbreak of the Easter rising, he made his way to the GPO early on Easter Tuesday and was appointed chief medical officer to the garrison. He recalled coming under fire during the evacuation of the GPO, when his bag of medical supplies got caught on an obstacle. (He sometimes humorously suggested that his principal concern was to protect a bottle of whiskey in his pocket.) After the surrender of the rebels, Ryan was deported to Stafford jail, then sent to Frongoch internment camp until his release in August 1916.

In March 1917 Ryan passed his final medical examinations; that June he set up medical practice in Wexford town and became commandant of the Wexford battalion of the Irish Volunteers. His work in the town during the 1918–19 influenza epidemic helped him to secure a narrow victory in the 1918 general election in South Wexford (where Redmondism remained strong) over the sitting MP, Peter Ffrench (1844–1929). Ryan was present at the opening meeting of the first dáil in January 1919. That same year he was elected vice-chairman of Wexford county council, and after the 1920 local elections he became its first Sinn Féin chairman. In September 1920 he was arrested by crown forces and was driven as a hostage on British troop lorries. He was then interned at Spike Island. Ryan opposed the treaty, as did most of his family (though his sister Mary Josephine, who married Richard Mulcahy (qv), claimed that he was enthusiastic about it until he learned of the opposition of Éamon de Valera (qv)). He was defeated in the 1922 pact election.

In March 1922 Ryan obtained a diploma in public health and was appointed to the staff of the City of Dublin Skin and Cancer Hospital. When the shelling of the Four

Courts began on 28 June, he made his way into the building and provided medical aid to the garrison. He performed the same service for the republican garrison at the Hammam Hotel later that week.

Ryan was interned soon afterwards; he was imprisoned successively in Mountjoy and in Tintown Camp, the Curragh, where he participated in a 36-day hunger strike. In the general election of September 1923, while still imprisoned, he was elected Sinn Féin TD for Wexford, a seat he retained continuously until his retirement in 1965. Health damage as a result of the hunger strike led him to give up his Dublin medical practice in 1925, when he moved to Delgany, Co. Wicklow, and took up farming. (At his funeral Sean MacEntee (qv) remarked that, like most part-time farmers, Ryan experienced 'little profit but great happiness'.)

Ryan had been a co-founding committee member and trustee of the New Ireland Assurance Collecting Society in 1918; when it incorporated as the New Ireland Assurance Company in 1924, he became its vice-chairman. He resigned from the board in 1934 to avoid perceived conflict of interest with his ministerial position, but served again when Fianna Fáil were in opposition (1948–51 and 1954–7), holding the additional title of chief medical officer. At the same times he served on the board of the Irish National Insurance Company, a sister company.

He joined de Valera in seceding from Sinn Féin to found Fianna Fáil in 1926. At the inaugural meeting he was elected one of the party treasurers, which post he held for many years thereafter. In opposition he was the party spokesman on agriculture. On Fianna Fáil's accession to power in March 1932, he was appointed minister for agriculture, where he oversaw the Fianna Fáil policy of self-sufficiency (which he later claimed had been vindicated by the maintenance of Irish neutrality in the second world war, while opponents such as James Dillon (qv) accused him of pursuing a politically motivated vendetta against the cattle trade). The policies included the rationalisation of the bacon industry, the encouragement of wheat cultivation, the construction of three additional sugar-beet factories, and the imposition of a tariff on imported farm machinery (which raised farmers' costs but benefited manufacturers in Ryan's Wexford constituency). Ryan oversaw various attempts at subsidising small farmers, and opposed calls (supported by the Department of Finance) for a cutback in agricultural subsidies. He was one of Ireland's representatives at the Commonwealth trade talks in Ottawa in August 1932 and the negotiations which brought about the 1938 Anglo-Irish trade agreement and the return of the treaty ports. During internal government debates on postwar economic policy in 1945 Ryan was the main spokesman for the view that the small-farm way of life possessed an intrinsic value and should be preserved, as distinct from Seán Lemass's (qv) support for the consolidation of unproductive farms. Generally, however, he worked well with Lemass.

Ryan was appointed minister in the newly created Department of Health and Social Welfare in January 1947, partly because de Valera wished for a political

heavyweight to oversee health legislation. As minister he oversaw the passage of a Health Act despite criticism from the medical profession and the catholic bishops. He was health minister again in the 1951–4 Fianna Fáil government after the inter-party government debacle on the mother and child scheme. In 1953 Ryan succeeded in passing another Health Act, which considerably expanded the scope of subsidised medical care; debate continues as to whether the concessions made by de Valera and Ryan to the bishops (including the retention of a means test, to which Ryan had declared himself opposed in principle) represent capitulation or skilful political management.

As minister for finance (1957–65) Ryan moved away from the restrictive fiscal orthodoxy associated with that department and took a leading role in the implementation of the expansionist policies associated with Lemass. The report on planning for economic expansion drawn up by T. K. Whitaker for Ryan in November 1957 and subsequently presented by him to the cabinet, leading to the 1958 first programme for economic expansion, is seen as inaugurating the new approach. In 1960 Ryan oversaw the introduction of PAYE income tax, and in 1963 he displayed considerable parliamentary skill in getting the turnover tax, a precursor of value added tax (VAT), through a finely balanced dáil (Fianna Fáil having lost its overall majority in the October 1961 general election). Fianna Fáil's catch-all capacity is epitomised by Ryan's claim that his party was really a labour party to the left of the British (let alone Irish) Labour Party, while simultaneously declaring that raising direct taxation was inadvisable for a country building up its economy and that state-owned firms were overmanned and should not be expanded.

Ryan's stature within Fianna Fáil is indicated by the fact that it was he who asked de Valera to come to a decision about contesting the 1959 presidential election, and that there was some speculation by outside observers that he might succeed de Valera as a 'compromise' between Seán MacEntee's conservatism and Lemass's perceived radicalism. He was regarded as an acute student of personality, observing widely in pubs, and a genial and skilful handler of men; he had the reputation of feigning inattention during dáil debates until he could seize on some error made by an opponent (he was assisted in this by formidable statistical skills).

On retiring from the dáil in 1965, Ryan was nominated by Lemass to the seanad, where he served as leader of the Fianna Fáil senators until his final retirement in 1969. He died in his sleep at his home in Delgany, Co. Wicklow, on 25 September 1970. MacEntee declared that Ryan's labours had earned him a place in history, but because of the unobtrusive manner in which he exercised those skills his reputation would be less prominent than he deserved.

In July 1919 Ryan married Máirín Cregan, a prolific writer of children's stories; they had two sons and a daughter. Their elder son, Eoin Ryan (qv), was a prominent businessman and Fianna Fáil senator; a grandson (also Eoin) (b. 1953) became a Fianna Fáil TD and MEP. James Ryan's siblings were on both sides of the treaty

split. They included Mary Kate (d. 1934), first wife of Seán T. O'Kelly (qv), Phyllis (qv), O'Kelly's second wife, Josephine Mary (Min) who married Richard Mulcahy, and Agnes who married Denis McCullough (qv).

Liam C. Skinner, *Politicians by accident* (1946), 127–48; *Ir. Times*, 15 Mar. 1967; 16 March 1967; 17 March 1967 (three-part interview with Michael McInerney); 26 Sept. 1970; *Irish Press*, 26 Sept. 1970; *Sunday Press*, 27 Sept. 1970; *Wexford Free Press*, 2 Oct. 1970; *Echo and South Leinster Advertiser*, 3 Oct. 1970; 10 Oct. 1970; *Wexford People*, 3 Oct. 1970; Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922–58* (1978); Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, *Seán Lemass and the making of modern Ireland, 1945–66* (1982); J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: politics and society* (1989); John Horgan, *Seán Lemass: the enigmatic patriot* (1997); Risteard Mulcahy, *Richard Mulcahy (1886–1971): a family memoir* (1999); Mary Daly, *The first department: a history of the Department of Agriculture* (2002); <http://www.oireachtas.ie/members> (accessed 25 Oct. 2007)