

## Cosgrave, William Thomas

by Eunan O'Halpin

Cosgrave, William Thomas (1880–1965), revolutionary and politician, was born 5 June 1880 at 174 James's St., Dublin, second son among three surviving children of Thomas Cosgrave and his wife Bridget (née Nixon). He had a stepbrother and sister from his mother's second marriage to Thomas Burke of Seskin, Co. Tipperary. The son of a publican whose small premises lay in one of the poorer parts of the city, Cosgrave observed at first hand the realities of the poverty and deprivation endured by the people of Dublin. This, together with a profound religious faith, and an attachment to the ideal of Irish independence, was to drive him in politics, firstly at municipal level as a reforming Sinn Féin member of Dublin corporation, as a member of the underground dáil government of 1919–21, and from August 1922 to March 1932 as head of the first governments of independent Ireland.

**Upbringing** It would be as unwise to ignore Cosgrave's modest background as to harp on it. Although the Cumann na nGaedheal party which he founded and the Fine Gael party which he led came to be associated with the more prosperous and more conservative elements of Irish society – strong farmers, the professions, the worlds of finance and commerce – Cosgrave was of humbler stock and was proud of it. Educated by the Christian Brothers, he left school at 16 to work in the family business. Given his background, the Irish parliamentary party would have seemed an obvious political home: through it publicans and other vested interests already had a stranglehold on municipal politics in Dublin, and were notorious for wielding their influence to obstruct efforts at civic reform. But Cosgrave was cast in a different mould. In 1900 he wrote to a national newspaper to protest in fiery terms at the city corporation's decision to present a loyal address to Queen Victoria: 'it should be remembered that within three years of her majesty's accession . . . the population of Ireland was 9 millions. Now it is only 4 million'. He listed industries that had been crushed by English intervention, particularly deploring the ruinous taxation of whiskey, pointed to the 'havoc wrought' by the famine of 1847, and complained of the constant recourse to 'coercion' when faced with popular discontent. The queen's ministers, he concluded, were still bent on 'the extermination of the Irish race' (*Irish Daily Independent*, 12 Mar. 1900). This letter shows a side of Cosgrave which his later career as a sober and steady statesman tended to obscure, his early radicalism and his antagonism towards Britain as the source of Ireland's woes.

**Sinn Féin councillor** In 1905 Cosgrave attended the first meeting of Sinn Féin in Dublin's Rotunda with his younger brother Philip (qv). He joined the new party, and in 1908 he and twelve other Sinn Féin members were elected to the city corporation. In City Hall he made his name not as a firebrand but as an adroit reformer who mastered the art of steering committees towards desired conclusions. He gained a reputation across the political spectrum not only for integrity but for efficiency. By

1911 he was a member, and from 1915 he was chairman, of the influential finance committee – this despite the fact that by then his party's corporation representation had fallen to just three. He was also an effective if not a flamboyant public speaker, able to make his case concisely and on occasion with sharp wit. These were attributes which, along with his instantly recognisable shock of fair hair, also served him well during his years in national politics after independence. Almost alone of the revolutionary elite of 1919–22, he had already been successful in electoral politics and had experience of managing public affairs at the municipal level.

In 1910 Cosgrave declined an invitation to become a member of the oathbound IRB, refusing a further invitation in the week preceding the 1916 rising. He recalled that after the rising he was told that he 'had been given two opportunities of joining, and that there would not be a third'. He did, however, join the Irish Volunteers in 1913, becoming a lieutenant in the 4th Battalion. He was an active and diligent officer, and displayed initiative during the Howth gun-running in July 1914. In the spring of 1916 Thomas MacDonagh (qv) told him that there would soon be a rising and asked him for his views: 'I told him it would be little short of madness – as we lacked men and munitions . . . I was not impressed with gaining a moral victory', although he accepted that significant external developments such as 'neutralisation of the British fleet by submarines, importation of arms on a large scale', or the landing in Ireland of troops to assist a rebellion would alter the picture. He picked up further hints that a rising was planned, but like most of the Volunteers had no direct knowledge of what was envisaged for Easter 1916.

**Easter rising** Cosgrave took part in the rising as a member of the force that occupied the South Dublin Union, adjacent to his home. The intention was to block the movement of British troops from barracks to the west of the city towards the city centre. Using his detailed knowledge of the locality he advised his commander Éamonn Ceannt (qv) on the best disposition of his small force around the complex. Among his comrades was Cathal Brugha (qv), later to become the bitterest of all the anti-treaty leaders, who was wounded beside Cosgrave in the fighting. Cosgrave's young stepbrother, Frank 'Gobban' Burke, was killed by a sniper while on guard duty, something for which Cosgrave always felt partly responsible as he had encouraged him to join the Irish Volunteers.

W. E. Wylie (qv), who prosecuted Cosgrave for his part in the rebellion, and who had previously known of him as a reforming municipal politician, noted his dignified demeanour in the face of likely execution. Cosgrave was at pains to emphasise his view that the rising was an autonomous and legitimate act by the Irish people, not an outbreak conceived and carried out under German sponsorship. While in prison in Dublin he conferred closely with Ceannt and with Maj. John MacBride (qv) about the conduct of the courts martial and their probable outcome. MacBride was taken from an adjacent cell for execution: 'Through a chink in the door I could barely discern the receding figures; silence for a time; then the sharp crack of rifle fire and silence again. I thought my turn would come next and waited for a rap on the door'.

Cosgrave's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, at least in part because of his exemplary reputation in the affairs of Dublin corporation, as testified to by the lord mayor of Dublin. By 1919 he was a partner in an insurance brokerage with fellow Sinn Féin TD Joseph MacDonagh (qv); after Cosgrave's departure, the firm traded from 1920 as MacDonagh & Boland.

**Dáil Éireann** Elected in a by-election as Sinn Féin MP for Kilkenny city in May 1917, not long after his release from prison in England, after a turbulent campaign which led to a police ban on the carrying of hurleys, Cosgrave was henceforth involved with the political rather than with the armed-force side of the independence movement. Elected in December 1918 for Kilkenny North (which he represented until 1922), he was also elected for Carlow–Kilkenny in 1921 and represented the latter constituency until September 1927, when he was also returned for Cork borough, which he represented until 1944.

He was appointed minister for local government in the government of Dáil Éireann in April 1919, a post to which he brought his extensive experience of municipal administration. With the help of his able assistant minister, Kevin O'Higgins (qv), he achieved a good deal. They succeeded in destroying the authority of the local government board and in enforcing the will of the dáil government on most of the county councils outside Ulster. This was achieved despite the need for secrecy and the constant likelihood of police raids. Cosgrave particularly prided himself on arranging for the seizure by the IRA of Dublin corporation financial records, thereby freeing the corporation from their legal duty to produce these for audit and consequently from ferocious financial penalties. He encountered some difficulties with the dáil minister for finance, Michael Collins (qv), who sometimes complained about Cosgrave – as he did about his other colleagues – to Éamon de Valera (qv), and he was criticised for slipping out of Dublin to lie low for a time in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday in November 1920. That surely indicated common sense rather than any lack of moral fibre: he had demonstrated his physical courage and resolve in 1916, and he was to continue to do so throughout his long career, travelling with only minimal protection once the civil war had ended despite the real risk of assassination: his car was fired on in 1928, and many threats were made against him and his family.

**Civil war** Cosgrave was regarded as a de Valera loyalist in the dáil cabinet, but he disagreed with him on the composition of the Irish delegation to travel to London in late 1921 to negotiate an Anglo–Irish settlement, believing that the group should be led by de Valera rather than by Arthur Griffith (qv). The dáil cabinet was split on the issue of whether to dismiss the plenipotentiaries who eventually signed the treaty in December 1921, and then whether to accept the document itself. In each case Cosgrave's was the deciding vote. He supported the treaty, despite earlier reservations about the oath of allegiance, as the best settlement that could be achieved. Thereafter he publicly defended the cabinet's decision and the treaty itself with resolution and without reservation. He maintained that the surest way to

end partition was to operate the treaty faithfully and fully, although as a member of the provisional government he shared responsibility for its confused Northern Ireland policy in the spring of 1922; this envisaged preparations for sustained military action in conjunction with anti-treaty forces in order to relieve pressure on northern nationalists.

Cosgrave and Collins grew closer during the first few months of civil war, and were at one in agreeing that anti-treaty violence had to be confronted ruthlessly and relentlessly until it was completely eliminated. The sudden deaths in August first of Griffith and then of Collins saw Cosgrave unexpectedly become chairman of the provisional government and president of the dáil government. Under threat of assassination, he wrote a note forgiving whoever might kill him. On 6 December 1922, on the formal establishment of the Irish Free State, Cosgrave became president of the executive council. He and his colleagues pursued military and political victory with resolution and ruthlessness, particularly after the assassination of a pro-treaty TD, Seán Hales (qv), and the wounding of the deputy ceann comhairle of Dáil Éireann, Pádraig Ó Máille (qv). What was the alternative to drastic measures in response? The government's approach ensured a decisive victory by May 1923. When republican prisoners went on mass hunger strike that autumn, the government held firm and the strike broke. Within a year all 11,000 prisoners had been released, and their political leader de Valera had embarked on a tortuous journey towards acceptance of the new state and its constitution.

**Cumann na nGaedheal governments** However enduring the bitterness left by the civil war, the transition from widespread lawlessness to almost bucolic calm was extraordinarily rapid. There were, however, obstacles on the road to normalisation. In March 1924 a faction of army officers with grievances about demobilisation and promotions threatened mutiny; in the midst of this challenge Cosgrave fell ill, and it was left to his cabinet colleagues to deal with the crisis. Led by Kevin O'Higgins, they defused it through a combination of appeasement and firmness. The defence minister, Richard Mulcahy (qv), was sacrificed, the loyal general staff was purged, a judicial inquiry into army administration was announced, and although finally arrested the ringleaders were never punished. O'Higgins emerged from the crisis with his personal authority enhanced, but there is no evidence that Cosgrave was seriously weakened.

The extent to which Cosgrave should take credit for the achievements and the failings of his ministers is one that all heads of government face. He was certainly not one to dictate policy or to interfere in details, but it does not follow that he failed to lead. Much has been made of the intellectual abilities and energies of other members of the executive council, in particular the three lawyers Kevin O'Higgins, Patrick McGilligan (qv) and Patrick Hogan (qv), a coterie with a perhaps exalted idea of their own talents; on his death a former colleague, like that troika a UCD lawyer, spoke of the 'strong personalities' whom Cosgrave had around him: 'You can imagine what it is to have a driver driving a team of high-spirited horses'. Yet

Cosgrave had little difficulty in holding firmly on to the reins of power throughout the triumphs and the setbacks of a decade in office, and of a further twelve years in opposition.

In terms of legislation, his administration worked prodigiously hard. None of the governments that succeeded them managed to pass remotely as many measures in a single year – sixty-two in 1924. Laws to establish new institutions and to reshape inherited ones flowed through the Oireachtas. The Garda Síochána was established, an unarmed police force which proved remarkably successful. The 1923 land act succeeded in taking the land issue out of national politics; the Courts of Justice Act, 1924, reformed the legal system; and the creation of the civil service commission put an end – more or less – to the jobbery that had characterised Irish administration under British rule, producing an impartial and competent if highly cautious public service. Endemic inefficiency and corruption in local government were addressed largely through taking control of personnel and financial matters out of the hands of elected councillors and entrusting them to professional administrators, culminating in the introduction of city and county management in 1929 (an innovation denounced as undemocratic by de Valera, but one which his government strengthened in 1941). Despite instinctive economic conservatism reinforced by the prevailing academic wisdom, the government also made a somewhat apologetic start to the development of state enterprise through the establishment of the Electricity Supply Board, the Agricultural Credit Corporation, and the Industrial Credit Company, all of which played vital roles in national economic life for the succeeding fifty years.

From the outset Cosgrave and his ministers were clear that Anglo–Irish relations should be conducted on a basis not of subservience but of equality. The governor general was treated with courtesy but otherwise was rendered a cipher. Despite British pressure Ireland pursued her own course in the League of Nations, managed her own diplomatic relations, and became the first dominion to establish a legation in Washington. These developments were Cosgrave's direct ministerial responsibility, as he dealt with external affairs until 1927.

Cosgrave made a very favourable impression internationally, earning a reputation for modesty, for decency, and for economy with words. In January 1928 he visited the US and Canada, making radio broadcasts extolling the achievements of the new Ireland in both countries. The trip was not without its hazards – he survived a train crash that killed an engineer while en route from New York to Ottawa – but politically it was highly productive. Notwithstanding the strength of republican sentiment in Irish émigré circles, in both countries he was greeted with considerable public as well as official enthusiasm. The Canadian prime minister Mackenzie King described him in his diary as 'a fine character, simple, unassuming, [and] brave as a lion . . . I have the greatest admiration for him' (Mackenzie King diary, 30 Jan. 1928). While on this trip his government lost a vote in the dáil, but once the whips did their job the crisis was overcome.

The calamitous outcome in 1925 of the Irish boundary commission's deliberations presented Cosgrave with enormous political difficulties. The government had reposed considerable faith in the commission, believing that it would of necessity produce favourable findings which would lead to a significant accretion of territory and which might ultimately pave the way for negotiated unity with Northern Ireland. The result was a shattering blow to all nationalists, leading to a hasty agreement between Dublin, London, and Belfast to leave well enough alone. As a sop, Britain made significant financial concessions to the Irish Free State, but this was little more than an obscure technicality. Yet no great storm broke about Cosgrave's head in the dáil, for the simple reason that his main opponent Eamon de Valera and his Sinn Féin TDs were still committed to their policy of abstention from the Oireachtas.

The most dramatic single event of Cosgrave's decade in power was the murder (July 1927) of the vice-president, Kevin O'Higgins, who was Cosgrave's heir apparent and widely recognised, not least by himself, as the ablest member of the government. This proved to be an opportunistic crime, but might well have presaged a campaign of assassination. Cosgrave met the challenge by forcing de Valera to choose once and for all between opposing the state and accepting it: the law was changed to invalidate the election of any TD who did not then take his seat. This forced de Valera's hand, and in August he took the plunge by accepting the oath of allegiance and bringing his new party Fianna Fáil into the Oireachtas.

Four days after Fianna Fáil deputies took their seats in August 1927, Cosgrave put his government's position very plainly in dealing with a motion of no confidence tabled by the Labour party: 'We stand for a balanced budget, for easing the burden of taxation on all the citizens, for developing the country's resources in every possible way, for improving and increasing the efficiency of every service we have got, for one army, one armed force in this country, under this parliament, no other, no matter what sacrifices may be entailed by nailing that on our mast' (*Dáil debates*, 16 Aug. 1927).

Parliamentary life was harder and far more rancorous with Fianna Fáil in opposition. Nevertheless, Cosgrave remained in office and his government continued to function effectively for another four years, despite acute economic difficulties as the impact of world economic depression spread to Ireland. In 1931 his government, genuinely alarmed at the growth of communist influence on the IRA and also anxious to boost their electoral prospects, promoted a 'red scare' with the support of the catholic hierarchy. The accusation that de Valera was the Irish Kerensky was frequently levelled during the general election campaign of February 1932, but it did not have the desired result. To Cosgrave's great disappointment, Fianna Fáil gained sufficient seats to form a minority government with Labour support. Despite attempts by the egregious Garda commissioner Eoin O'Duffy (qv) to organise a military coup, a plan which Cosgrave knocked on the head, the handover of power was peaceful and smooth. This is all the more remarkable because Cosgrave genuinely believed that

the democratic state and polity which his government had created was in mortal peril.

**Leader of the opposition 1932–44** Courteous as ever, in the aftermath of the traumatic election defeat he wrote to the celebrated rugby player Eugene Davy (qv), who had been persuaded to run as a Cumann na nGaedheal candidate in Dublin: 'I much regret that my anticipations were not realised – but I would like to assure you that I was firmly convinced you would win. Even now it appears that with a little more time better results would have been obtained' (Cosgrave to Eugene Davy, 24 Feb. 1932, letter in possession of the Davy family).

Cumann na nGaedheal found itself in very difficult circumstances in 1932. For a time the British government clung to the illusion that if they took a resolute line against de Valera's demands for changes in the Anglo–Irish settlement, he would soon lose office and Cumann na nGaedheal would be restored to power. It is scarcely to the credit either of Cosgrave or of his party colleagues that they encouraged the British in this shortsighted approach, although it reflected the despair that had set in after their defeat left all that they had achieved, domestically and internationally, in the hands of the enemy. The snap election of January 1933, so far from producing the Cosgrave victory which the British had fondly anticipated, saw de Valera consolidate his position. Cosgrave's party was left demoralised and virtually bankrupt; one of its leading supporters privately appealed to the British for financial support lest it collapse altogether. It was in these circumstances that Cumann na nGaedheal amalgamated with Gen. Eoin O'Duffy's United Ireland party – previously styled the Army Comrades Association, and colloquially termed the 'Blueshirts' – to form the Fine Gael party in September 1933. Cosgrave became chairman while O'Duffy, as president, took the lead in confronting both the Fianna Fáil government and the republican movement. While a handful of Cosgrave's colleagues were intellectually attracted by elements of fascist ideology, Cosgrave and most of his associates saw O'Duffy and his organisation principally as a counterweight both to de Valera and to the republican movement, which had supported Fianna Fáil's election campaign in 1932 and which had constantly disrupted Cumann na nGaedheal meetings. There was also an element of excitement surrounding O'Duffy, who was as, Cosgrave well knew from O'Duffy's time as Garda commissioner, a charismatic but impetuous, bombastic, and unstable man who had little faith in parliamentary democracy and revanchist views on partition. Paying homage to the growth of fascism in Europe, and without a dáil seat, O'Duffy was an incongruous leader of a naturally cautious and conservative party, and he was eventually eased out in 1935. Fine Gael under Cosgrave then assumed an entirely democratic character. In the face of further electoral setbacks, its leaders found consolation in the role of guardians of public standards, referring to themselves in public and in private as speakers of uncomfortable truths to a people all too often beguiled by the charlatans and opportunists of Fianna Fáil.

During the second world war Cosgrave and other senior opposition figures supported the policy of neutrality. When a German invasion seemed a real possibility in June 1940, he and de Valera spoke from the same platform in Dublin to urge Irishmen to join the defence forces. Cosgrave repeatedly made it clear to both British and American diplomats that there was no alternative to neutrality, although he was affronted by de Valera's unwillingness to confide in the opposition leadership about any aspect of the crisis. He and party colleagues privately urged the British government to offer a generous settlement of the partition question. His patriotic defence of neutrality, despite his antagonism towards de Valera, was a significant element in British assessment of Irish affairs. It contrasted with the behaviour of his one-time party leader Gen. O'Duffy, who represented himself to the Axis as a Quisling in waiting.

**After politics** Cosgrave was leader of the opposition for twelve years after losing office. In retirement after 1944, he appeared a somewhat solitary figure. One former party colleague wrote of Cosgrave's unwillingness to discuss any aspect of the old days. He did contribute substantial entries on Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins to the *DNB*, and helped at least one of Collins's biographers. But in general he chose to say very little about the history of the Irish revolution and the founding decade of independence. In his statement to the Bureau of Military History, Cosgrave concentrated on providing an overview of the fighting and its aftermath in the western part of the city, and on the work of the underground dáil department of local government in 1919 and 1920. His stated reasons were that he 'had not kept a diary and had no papers of any sort', and 'was somewhat reluctant to rely on his memory . . . there were many things which would be better left unsaid in case any injustice might be done to the persons concerned'. The dearth of Cosgrave papers probably explains the absence of a full-scale biographical study.

Cosgrave blamed de Valera personally for the treaty split, and avoided direct contact with him for decades. There is evidence that while de Valera came to regret the depth of that estrangement, Cosgrave did not. It was therefore ironic that almost the last significant public duty which fell to the aged President de Valera was to appoint Cosgrave's son Liam as taoiseach following the surprise defeat of Fianna Fáil in the February 1973 general election. Cosgrave's relations with de Valera's successor as taoiseach, Seán Lemass (qv), were rather warmer. When Lemass became taoiseach he sought Cosgrave's advice on aspects of cabinet government.

Cosgrave's personal life was a conventional and happy one. He married (1919) Louise Flanagan, the daughter of Alderman Flanagan of Portmahon House; she predeceased him in June 1959. They had two sons, of whom the elder, Liam (b. 1920), became both leader of Fine Gael (1965–77) and taoiseach (1973–7). In the 1920s the family moved to Beechpark in Templeogue, then well outside the city. Always devout, whenever possible he attended daily mass on his way into Dublin. Cosgrave, a keen horseman, was chairman of the Racing Board from 1946 to his resignation in 1956; he was reappointed as a member of the board by the minister

for finance, James Ryan (qv), in June 1957. Cosgrave received honorary degrees from Cambridge University, TCD, NUI, Columbia University, New York, and from the Catholic University, Washington.

**Reputation** As a pro-treaty political figure Cosgrave has sometimes been unfavourably compared with others, particularly the stellar Michael Collins and the ambitious and acerbic Kevin O'Higgins and his UCD-educated acolytes, as a man whose administrative skills could not obscure his lack of political talent and the poverty of his political imagination. He has also been criticised for his economic conservatism (as though obvious alternatives to sound money and cautious protectionism were freely to hand), for his deference to the catholic church, and generally for a want of modernity in his outlook. In such interpretations, Cosgrave held on to the leadership of pro-treaty opinion for over two decades largely by luck. There were greater talents, more ardent spirits, sharper minds. Yet Cosgrave's career both as a revolutionary and as the leader of pro-treaty Ireland is a safer guide to his capacities and achievements. His most resonant epitaph was provided not by his Irish friends or his foreign admirers – London was always inclined to think rather better of him than was strictly merited by his record of resolute pursuit of Irish interests at the expense of British imperial suzerainty up to 1932 – but by an erstwhile opponent. After his sudden death on 16 November 1965, the taoiseach Seán Lemass, like Cosgrave a Dubliner of modest background and limited formal education, paid him a measured tribute in the dáil which acknowledged alike his military record, his achievements in creating a stable democratic and solvent state after 1922, and 'the grace with which he relinquished power when the people so willed'. We should all wish for such an epitaph from our foes.

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Military Archives of Ireland, Bureau of Military History, WS216 (W. T. Cosgrave); *Ir. Times, Times*, 17 Nov. 1965; *WWW*; Walker; Mary E. Daly, *The buffer state: the historical roots of the Department of the Environment* (1997); R. Fanning and others (ed.), *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, ii (2000), iii (2002); Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (2000); *ODNB*