

History: Eamon De Valera and (from left) Robert Barton, Count Plunkett, Arthur Griffith and Austin Stack



Should de Valera have been at the table?



Maurice Manning

Ireland’s ‘ablest player’ unexpectedly left himself in reserve in 1921 and his explanations do not entirely stand up to scrutiny

I have vivid memories of listening to my two grandfathers engage in a debate that never seemed to change. My father’s father came from East Galway Fianna Fáil, while my mother’s father was an old Parnellite who had morphed into Fine Gael.

The issue that divided them, as it would much of the country in the 50 years after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was the role of Eamon de Valera, the most loved and most hated politician of the age.

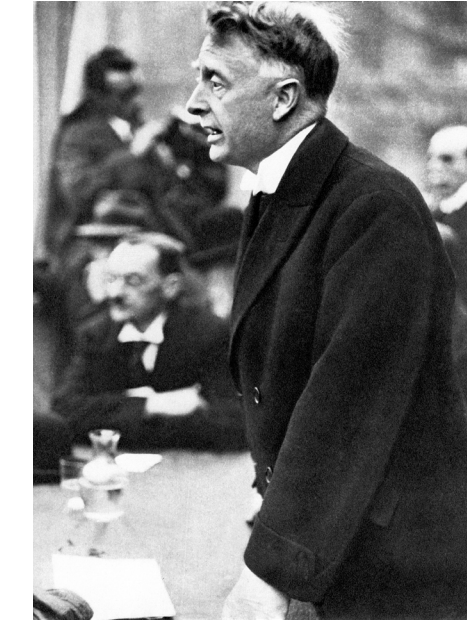
The key issues were whether he should have led the Irish delegation to London and whether, by not doing so, he was responsible for the Civil War.

The issue was not settled then, and nor has it been since. It is fair to say the pendulum of history has shifted away from de Valera, who spent much of his later life seeking to justify his actions at that time. Indeed, the Civil War marked the lowest ebb in his fortunes. Despite his many later successes and achievements, it always raised questions that were never fully answered.

When it was agreed in late 1921 that there would be negotiations in London to reach a settlement of the War of Independence, most people expected de Valera would take the leading role. The question is whether his absence severely weakened the Irish



Tour: Eamon de Valera travelled extensively in the United States, raising awareness of the Irish cause. Above right: WT Cosgrave voted in the opposite way to what de Valera expected
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independent action”. But the ambiguity remains.

The details of this period are brilliantly recounted in the first volume of McCullagh’s superb biography of de Valera, *Rise*, which highlights his extraordinary failure to stay in Dublin — where communications were reliable — during the final days of the negotiations. resumed a tour of the west. Was he physically distancing himself from an outcome he felt he could not accept? Certainly, his actions over these few days are at odds with his earlier claim of being in a position where he could make a last-minute intervention should the talks be in danger of collapse.

If de Valera thought he could get the cabinet and Dáil to reject the treaty, he miscalculated. He misjudged Cosgrave, whose support he had expected in cabinet to give him a four-to-three majority. Cosgrave was his own man and voted with Griffith. Collins and Robert Barton in favour of acceptance. The Dáil vote was equally close: 64 to 57 in favour of the treaty.

So why did de Valera reject it? He had shown himself willing to compromise in his tortuous discussions with the delegates during the negotiations, so why was he so opposed to the compromises reached in London? The late professor Ronan Fanning, an admirer of de Valera, argues that he opposed the Treaty not because it was *a* compromise but because it was not *his* compromise — “not, that is, a compromise he had authorised in advance of its conclusion”.

What difference would de Valera’s leadership of the delegation have made? The one certainty is that no treaty would have been signed if he was opposed. And a treaty signed by de Valera, given his huge personal authority and appeal, would have ensured stronger cabinet approval and a much bigger Dáil vote in its favour. There would have been opposition but it would have been far less and would have lacked strong political leadership.

Did de Valera cause the Civil War? The answer is no. There would have been military and political opposition regardless. But de Valera’s support and some of his incendiary speeches did intensify the conflict, strengthen the anti-treatyites and prolong the hostilities. He made no great effort to bring it to an end.

The truth is the Civil War was the most miserable time of de Valera’s life. In the words of McCullagh, “he was swept along by the course of events, sidelined and deprived of the power to shape his own and his country’s destiny”.

Yet within a decade he was head of an Irish government, stable and internationally recognised. It had put down deep and lasting democratic roots, justifying the high hopes in the potential of the treaty as had been championed by Collins and Griffith. It was not something he ever acknowledged.

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delegation and precipitated a conflict that might otherwise have been averted or at least greatly mitigated.

In one sense, we will never know. History obliges us to deal with facts, with what actually happened. But we are allowed to speculate.

The reasons for de Valera to lead the delegation were strong. He was the undisputed leader of Irish nationalism. Among his cabinet colleagues, there were disagreements and bitter personal clashes. Cathal Brugha had a toxic relationship with Michael Collins, whom he had grown to distrust and detest. Austin Stack had his differences with Collins and Richard Mulcahy. These very bitter disputes were real and deep, but one of de Valera’s great strengths up to that point was his ability to keep all sides on board and to avoid any damaging splits.

His other great strength was his ability to control and dominate the political agenda. His colleagues trusted and obeyed him. He was the public face and voice of Sinn Féin.

He was also the best-informed member of the cabinet as to what might be gained from the negotiations with the British. He had met David Lloyd George and knew what he was up against. He had good channels of information. He knew what the British prime minister was prepared to offer. It was an offer that would give Ireland dominion status, with power over taxation, finance, justice, home defence and policing with all the autonomy of the other self-governing dominions. There was not going to be a republic and the existence of the new six-county regime was off the agenda.

In other words, de Valera knew from the outset that if there was going to be a settlement, there would have to be compromises. It was this realisation, his opponents later claimed, that persuaded him to reserve his position and distance himself from an unsatisfactory outcome.

There was one further reason he should

have gone: the strength of the British delegation. Lloyd George was a world figure backed by some of the toughest, most battle-hardened and experienced politicians that Britain could offer.

The Irish delegation, by contrast, were political neophytes. Five years earlier, most had been unknown. They had little parliamentary, governmental or negotiating experience. Their back-up was flimsy and untried. De Valera was by common consent their most consummate and experienced politician and he was president of the Republic. As WT Cosgrave put it at the time as he tried to persuade de Valera to go: “[This] was a team they were sending over and they were leaving their ablest player in reserve.”

De Valera did not yield. He argued that in the event of a breakdown he could be in a position to intervene and prevent the talks collapsing.

There was a certain logic to this, but his absence meant that the delegates risked being second-guessed by those back in Dublin and did not have the certainty and security of his direct input at the negotiation table.

The details of the cabinet meeting in Dublin on December 3, when Collins, Arthur Griffith and other

members of the delegation reported on what looked like the final provisions, is still contested. One thing is certain: both sides were close to physical exhaustion. The delegates had endured a rough sea crossing and de Valera had just returned from Clare.

It was a stressful but not bitter meeting and it should have produced clear and precise instructions for the returning delegation. The historian and broadcaster David McCullagh argues that on the balance of probability “the plenipotentiaries were entitled to take

‘He argued that in the event of a breakdown he could be in a position to intervene and prevent the talks collapsing’

‘Collins has never shown anybody how he may secure the Republic’

From the *Irish Independent*, Saturday April 15, 1922

Mr de Valera has given the following interview to a representative of the Hearst Press of America.

Question: Considering the possibilities of civil war in Ireland, is it not possible for your party to reach some compromise on the basis of the Treaty with Mr Griffith and those who accept the Treaty?

Answer: I do not see how you could frame a compromise on the basis of the proposed ‘Treaty’. There was a compromise which united for the past four years those whose opinions were the opinions of the Republicans today and those

whose opinions were apparently those of the present Free Staters, namely, the compromise embodied in the implied contract of the Sinn Féin Constitution.

The London Agreement was a violation of that Constitution and a breaking of the contract, and by splitting apart the bodies that the contract united made the present situation. The best way to unite is, to lay mind, the way of the Sinn Féin Constitution.

Q: Mr Collins and many of the pro-Treaty party accept the Treaty as a means to securing an Irish Republic in time. Why do you not accept that point of view?

A: Mr. Collins may accept the ‘Treaty’ with that view, or pretend to accept it with that view. A Missouri man would say to him, I think: “You will have to show me.” Mr Collins has never yet shown anybody how he may, by his ‘Treaty’, secure the Republic ‘in time’ or eternity. If Mr Collins

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has discovered this new primrose path to the Republic, he might map it out for us in advance a little. That would be far more convincing than ever so many bald assertions which no one who really tries to gauge the future without being interested in deceiving himself will accept for a moment.

Q: How can Irish unity be established? A: If I knew how unity could be established, you may be sure I would have set about establishing it. I have spent four years in maintaining unity. I have indicated above that I believe the way to be that of adherence to the Sinn Féin Constitution and the maintenance of Dáil Éireann in all its authority and functions.