

# The Free State asserts itself on the world stage

Susannah Riordan

After initial rejection by the League of Nations, Ireland’s politicians and diplomats secured acceptance of the state’s sovereignty and went on to play leading roles in the organisation



**Global reach:** The League of Nations in session in Geneva. Above: George Gavan Duffy, who pushed for Ireland’s admission to the organisation. Right: a *Punch* cartoon depicting US President Woodrow Wilson presenting a League of Nations olive branch to the dove of peace, which resonds: ‘Isn’t this a bit thick?’

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‘Ireland looms very much larger than ever she did before’

**Irish Independent**

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Mr Sean T Ó Ceallaigh TD returned to Dublin on Saturday. Mr Harry Boland TD left New York on Saturday on the Olympic for Ireland, and Mr George Gavan Duffy TD, who arrived in London from Rome on Saturday, left for Dublin last night.

Messrs Ó Ceallaigh, Boland and Duffy have been engaged in France, the USA, and Italy respectively in propaganda work, and have successfully made the case of Ireland thoroughly known.

Mr Ó Ceallaigh, as representative in Paris, had a particularly strenuous time of it, and the result of his labours has been to secure the fervent sympathy of the Continental press and political leaders with Ireland in her struggle.

**FRANCE AND IRELAND**

Mr Ó Ceallaigh, who was appointed by Dáil Éireann early in 1919 as its ambassador to Paris, arrived at Dún Laoghaire on Saturday evening. Accompanied by Mrs Ó Ceallaigh, he was met by Madame Markiewicz, who was accompanied by four Fianna officers and a number of others, who gave the returned envoy a hearty welcome. He afterwards proceeded by train to Dublin.

He went to Paris in February 1919. He was accredited French capital by Dáil Éireann and declared himself on arrival there as “Delegate of the Provisional Government of Ireland, and Deputy for the College Green Division of Dublin”.

His first official act in Paris was to address to the secretary of the Peace Conference, [which was] then sitting, a letter presenting a claim for the international recognition of the independence of Ireland. He established a regular Irish Embassy and was in constant communication with the heads of the Peace Conference and of the French government.

During the early months of his stay Mr Ó Ceallaigh received constant attention from a small army of Scotland Yard agents.

Mr Ó Ceallaigh, interviewed by an *Irish Independent* representative, said there was no cause which created as much enthusiasm and got as much sympathy in France as the cause of Ireland.

“I know public speakers of every party in France,” he said, “who when they wanted to get a cheer tried to drag in Ireland’s name, being certain of a hearty response. Every newspaper, who whether in Paris or the provinces, makes every effort to provide its readers with news of the doings in Ireland and every day their representatives came to the office of the Irish Mission in Paris seeking information.

“Ireland looms very much larger than ever she did in her history before,” he said. “I have personally been assured by the political leaders of all parties in France, without exception, of their most profound and ardent sympathy for Ireland.”

The first meeting of Dáil Éireann, on January 21, 1919, occurred two days after the Paris Peace Conference opened. There were hopes that the conference would endorse the ‘Fourteen Points’ that US president Woodrow Wilson had proposed as the basis for an enduring peace. These included freedom of the seas; equality of trade; “adjustment of colonial claims”; the principle of self-determination and the formation of “a general association of nations... for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike”.

Determined to take advantage of the possibilities now opened, the Dáil adopted a Message to the Free Nations of the World. Ireland, it stated, “calls upon every free nation to uphold her national claim to complete independence as an Irish Republic against the arrogant pretensions of England”. It demanded representation at the peace conference.

European peace, the Dáil claimed, could not be achieved until “the existing state of war between England and Ireland” was ended by British military withdrawal. An independent Ireland was also essential to the freedom of the seas and to international trade, it said. Ireland was “the gateway to the Atlantic... the last outpost of Europe towards the West... the point upon which great trade routes between East and West converge”.

In pursuit of admission to the conference, and as part of a broader endeavour to create an international public opinion sympathetic to Irish independence, Seán T Ó Ceallaigh arrived in Paris as ‘Delegate of the Elected Government of the Irish Republic’. He was later supported by George Gavan Duffy and Erskine Childers.

On February 21, 1919, the draft text of the League of Nations Covenant was published. The next day Ó Ceallaigh presented a demand for admission to the league. This was endorsed by the Dáil, which adopted a motion supporting membership of a league “based on equality of rights, in which the guarantees exchanged neither recognise nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those that are powerful and those that are weak. We are willing to accept all the duties, responsibilities, and burdens which inclusion in such a league implies.”

The victorious wartime Allies did not listen to Dáil Éireann’s demands.

## ‘Dáil diplomacy had advanced international public sympathy for the cause of independence’

By summer 1919, the Dáil’s international propaganda campaign had broadened and intensified. Éamon de Valera joined Harry Boland and Patrick McCartan in the United States for a speaking tour, bond drive and political meetings.

Envoys — including a number of women, such as Margaret Gavan Duffy and Nancy Wyse Power — travelled throughout Europe, the dominions and Latin America. They sought to influence public and political opinion, but it was understood official recognition of the Irish Republic would not be forthcoming from any government, and that it would be unwise to ask for it.

A different approach was attempted in Soviet Russia, where People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin took McCartan’s approach seriously, if sceptically. A memorandum was drafted in favour of recognition of the Irish Republic, but it came to nothing.

The Dáil’s diplomacy had made little in the way of concrete gains, but it had advanced international public sympathy for the cause of independence.

Learning on the job, the diplomats of Dáil Éireann had gained experience that should not be forgotten when considering the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. In addition to those who held ministerial office — which included Arthur Griffith as Minister for Foreign Affairs — the Irish delegates to the treaty negotiations included George Gavan Duffy. Erskine Childers and John Chartres, who had been the Dáil envoy to Berlin, acted as secretaries.

The dominion status conferred by that treaty would theoretically place significant restrictions on the Irish Free State’s ability to develop an independent foreign policy. The British Empire was a single diplomatic unit; the Foreign Office determined policy and British ambassadors represented dominion interests abroad. Yet these limitations were neither absolute nor immutable, as Collins well knew when he famously told the Dáil that the treaty “gives us freedom, not the ultimate freedom that all nations desire and develop to, but the freedom to achieve it”.

Less often quoted is his explanation of his argument: “The fact of Canadian and South African independence is something real and solid and will grow in reality and force as time goes on.”

Cumann na nGaedheal would contribute to the evolution of dominion independence over the course of the 1920s, and Éamon de Valera would inherit the statute of Westminster they played a large part in shaping. It became the legal basis for dismantling the treaty.

For the diplomatic corps, the Dáil’s acceptance of the Anglo-Irish Treaty created a microcosm of the divisions, tragedies and possibilities experienced by the country.

Having left the Dáil on January 30, 1922, de Valera posed for international

press photographers with the “foreign representatives” who supported him: Boland, minister to Washington; Art O’Brien, minister to London; Ó Ceallaigh, minister to Paris; and Count O’Byrne, minister to Rome. Another key individual who took the anti-treaty side was Robert Brennan, the ‘under-secretary for foreign affairs’ (or secretary general of the department), who resigned in early 1922.

Brennan had been active in organising and professionalising the Dáil Department of Foreign Affairs. Now, with a much-reduced staff, no ministry in the Provisional Government and — certainly in the eyes of London — no apparent *raison d’être*, the task was continued by Brennan’s successor, Joseph Walshe, and Gavan Duffy, who remained as minister in the parallel Dáil Éireann cabinet.

**FIRST APPEARANCE**

Gavan Duffy was optimistic about the future. He and his team began to research dominion law and to prepare for the first official appearance of the Irish Free State at the League of Nations. One aspect of the evolution of dominion status — led by Canada — had been the right to independent representation at the Paris Peace Conference and, consequently, to independent membership of the League of Nations in Geneva.

Gavan Duffy anticipated an active role for the Irish Free State at Geneva because of other nations’ perceptions that “Ireland is a world race” with great influence in the United States and a unique knowledge of England. He reiterated the belief that Ireland’s position as “the great link between the old world and the new” made the country potentially an invaluable hub for international trade, particularly given developments in aviation.

On September 10, 1923, the Irish Free State was formally admitted to the League of Nations. President WT Cosgrave led a delegation to its Fourth Assembly. Having

resigned from government and become a critic of executions carried out after trial by military tribunal — which had claimed the life of his former colleague Erskine Childers — Gavan Duffy was not there to see the warm welcome given to the Irish representatives, particularly by the representatives of the other small states.

The league was a forum in which Irish sovereignty could be asserted — not least by registering the Anglo-Irish Treaty as an international document — and a possible vehicle for Irish reunification. The 1923 delegation noted how the league dealt with comparable situations.

Irish politicians and diplomats wanted that their country be a significant player on the world stage. At Geneva, they developed the policies that would characterise Irish foreign policy for a century and are central to policy today at the United Nations: support for multilateralism, collective security, the rule of law and the rights of small nations.

In 1930, the Irish Free State was elected to a temporary seat on the Council of the League, the equivalent of the UN Security Council seat Ireland holds today. The main organiser of the campaign was Seán Lester, the Irish Permanent Representative. Lester was later seconded to the league’s secretariat, served as High Commissioner of the Free City of Danzig (now Gdańsk) during the dangerous years between 1934 and 1937, and ultimately became the League’s last secretary general. In July 1947, he formally handed over the League of Nations’ assets to representatives of the United Nations. His career epitomises how, through the League of Nations, multilateralism became central to Irish foreign policy.

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