

Ireland's First "Normal" Election Examined

- ***Vying for Victory – the 1923 General Election in the Irish Free State*, edited by Elaine Callinan, Mel Farrell and Thomas Tormey (University College Dublin Press, 2023).**

Published to mark the centenary of the first election after the Irish Civil War, this is a “deep dive” into the context, conduct and influences affecting the August 1923 ballot and its outcome.

The editors have assembled 11 essays from nine historians – two essays each from Callinan and Farrell, including the latter’s *Introduction* – on aspects of the general election, from the parties involved to their messaging, the Catholic church role to the international backdrop, the gender dimension to newspaper coverage. These essays are scholarly, well researched and thoroughly referenced. Farrell’s *Introduction* underlines the importance of the election in transitioning “from revolutionary action to keen electoral competition”.

As may be anticipated in a forensic examination of one event, there is some overlap - for example, the overall election outcome is given in several of the chapters and cross-referencing of other papers in the book features – but alongside this are some striking nuggets concerning the development of our democracy. Among the latter are the service of Canon O’Kennedy of Ennis as Cumann na nGaedheal Director of Elections for Co Clare (while the parish priest of Ballyvaughan proposed de Valera there); the reflection that the number of six women TDs elected in 1921 (five to this 1923 fourth Dáil) would not be reached again for over 50 years; and controversy around government leader William T Cosgrave’s use of State property (an aeroplane) in his campaign.

Complementing the essays on domestic politics are two which provide an international perspective. Gearóid Barry reviews developments in the Irish Free State through the lens of experiences of democracy (and of autocracy) in post-war countries including those of central and eastern Europe. Regina Donlon’s contribution is a short study of the disorganisation and growing irrelevance of the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic (AARIR) around the 1923 election.

The overview conveyed in this book is that the Cumann na nGaedheal victory in 1923 (63 seats with 39% of the vote), when compared with the next highest party (44 seats and 27% for de Valera’s abstentionist Sinn Féin), showed continued support for the Anglo-Irish Treaty while encouraging the anti-treatyites in their political development. This encouragement would lead to the founding of Fianna Fáil and that party’s entry to the Dáil under de Valera within a short few years. As David McCullagh concludes in his essay, the 1923 election “demonstrated conclusively that de Valera still had a political future”.

In filling out this overview of the first election where the suffrage applied to all aged over 21 years, *Vying for Victory* acknowledges that apathy (over 41% of electors did not vote) or election fatigue (this was the fourth general election in less than five years) were evident. And while highlighting the general contemporary portrayal of the contest “in a nationalist and postcolonial frame” (from Jason Knirck’s paper), the Labour Party, Farmers’ Party and

Independents secured over 30% of the vote between them. This was done despite the emphasis on constitutional questions in (to quote the Minister for Agriculture) Ireland's "first normal election". Acknowledging Knirck's expert analysis of the smaller parties' struggle for a hearing, there is a sense that they are underplayed in the book, evidenced in part by just three references to Labour Leader Thomas Johnson in the (comprehensive) Index, as against some 40 to William T Cosgrave and many more than that to Éamon de Valera.

Mel Farrell's examination of Cumann na nGaedheal's "safety first" campaign encompasses the costly process of building and running a new party, finding candidates and developing messaging about trusting that party to provide stability. Passage of the Land Act of 1923 conveyed a message to one section of voters about potentially completing land purchase, although it was clear – as evidenced post-election by measures such as the cut to old age pensions – that government finances were in serious difficulty.

Augmenting his catalogue of publications about his native county in the period, Owen O'Shea surveys coverage of this election in the Kerry newspapers. Due to civil war violence, which included attacks on newspaper premises, there are no Kerry press sources for almost a year up to June 1923. However, when publication resumed in the weeks before the election, the local message was clear. Both the colour of reporting and editorial content saw the government of Cumann na nGaedheal given "unquestioning and laudatory coverage", with the treaty as the sole election question, as against "side issues" raised by the Labour and Farmers' parties.

Elaine Callinan's analysis of methods and themes of election propaganda notes the focus of the two main parties on their leaders as symbols. As in Kerry, newspaper coverage was essential for candidate promotion. Callinan references the enormous sales of the three national morning dailies, estimated to exceed half a million copies at this time. Her discussion of election posterage is notable given the book's cover which features this aspect of the propaganda battle.

There are insightful chapters also about the roles of women in the election and about the Catholic clergy's involvement, by Claire McGing and Daithí Ó Corráin, respectively. Expressions of support for Cumann na nGaedheal by individual bishops were explicit and widespread while the list of government, Sinn Féin and Farmer candidates proposed by priests (Labour contenders seem not to have been so anointed) is extensive. Although women candidates were a rarity, McGing demonstrates the strong role of women as campaigners and activists. She appeals for commemorations of the period to take account of the barriers faced by women in terms of their participation in public affairs.

Sinn Féin asserted that the imprisonment of large number of its adherents damaged its electoral performance, but there were prominent instances of incarcerated candidates performing particularly well. In Clare, de Valera secured almost three quotas while Austin Stack led the field in Kerry with more than 10,000 first preference votes. Dan Breen and the "on the run" Frank Aiken also headed the polls in their constituencies.

One could disagree with some assertions made in this book. Was there really "no effective opposition" in the fourth Dáil? Is it correct to deny any link between de Valera's Sinn Féin

and the party of that name today? And one might wish for even more detail in some respects – this reviewer would have valued a full listing of all 376 candidates who contested. That said, this publication provides a valuable snapshot in time of an important election and of the factors which influenced its conduct and outcome. For many years from 1973, *Nealon's Guides* (and similar publications) have recorded the participants in, and the results of, general elections. This study of the 1923 contest, although significantly broader in its focus and less detailed regarding candidates and results, sits well alongside the more recent volumes.

Noel Ward (Committee Member, ILHS)