



# De Valera in Australia: 1948<sup>(1)</sup>

by Patrick O'Farrell

**I**n February, 1948, a general election in Ireland ended sixteen years of Fianna Fáil government, and with it the prime ministership of Eamon de Valera: from 1932 to 1948, de Valera and his party had dominated Irish politics, and were to do so again for a further twenty-two years from 1951 to 1973.<sup>(2)</sup> De Valera's fall from power in 1948 took place during a marked revival in Ireland of the issue of partition. He had been long prominent in demands for an end to partition, a subject on which, in its wider context, John Bowman has written the definitive book *De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1982). Immediately upon his electoral defeat he turned his whole energies to the partition agitation, in an endeavour whose spirit is caught by the title of Bowman's chapter on 1948-1959- 'Hoping for a Miracle'. Always the internationalist, with a keen feel for the potential impact on Irish politics of Ireland's far-flung human empire, he embarked on a tour of the U.S.A. and Australia, and of Britain, with the declared purpose of rousing the overseas Irish into a world-wide anti-partition movement. Without question, he was motivated by genuine principle, which went back to his entry into nationalist politics in 1913, but his anti-partition crusade was also a party political manoeuvre, designed to get him back into office. His taking up of this emotional national issue compel-

led the government parties to do likewise, and, in tactical terms, this amounted to his seizing the political initiative and forcing his opponents on to ground where, for reasons of national sentiment, he had a considerable advantage.

On 27th April, 1948, de Valera, accompanied by Frank Aiken, his former Minister of Finance, arrived in Sydney from the U.S.A. to begin a six weeks' tour of Australia and New Zealand. Much to the surprise of the organisers, he had accepted Archbishop Mannix's invitation to attend the Melbourne Archdiocesan centenary celebrations, an invitation which provided de Valera with a reason for his visit and the certainty of a larger audience assembled for the Melbourne occasion. Between fifteen and twenty thousand assembled in the Melbourne Exhibition Hall, and a variously estimated seven to thirteen thousand were at his Sydney Stadium meeting. Smaller audiences attended his meetings in Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart: de Valera himself regarded his Tasmanian trip as the most memorable part of his visit, for there he followed the steps of Mitchel and Meagher and the other exiles of 1848.

De Valera's longest and strongest Australian contact had been with Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne. They had first met in the United States in 1920 and thereafter

**DE VALERA**  
 PATRIOT and SOLDIER,  
 STATESMAN and SCHOLAR.  
 Accompanied by  
**MR. FRANK AIKEN, T.D.,**  
 Soldier of the Irish Republic,  
 Former Minister for Finance.  
 will address a

**Monster Demonstration**

SYDNEY STADIUM - RUSHCUTTERS BAY  
 8 p.m. TUESDAY NIGHT, 1st JUNE, 1948.

The Irish National Association invites you to come and address your own country.

Honour and Honour  
 A GREAT HISTORICAL FIGURE  
 ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PERSONALITIES.

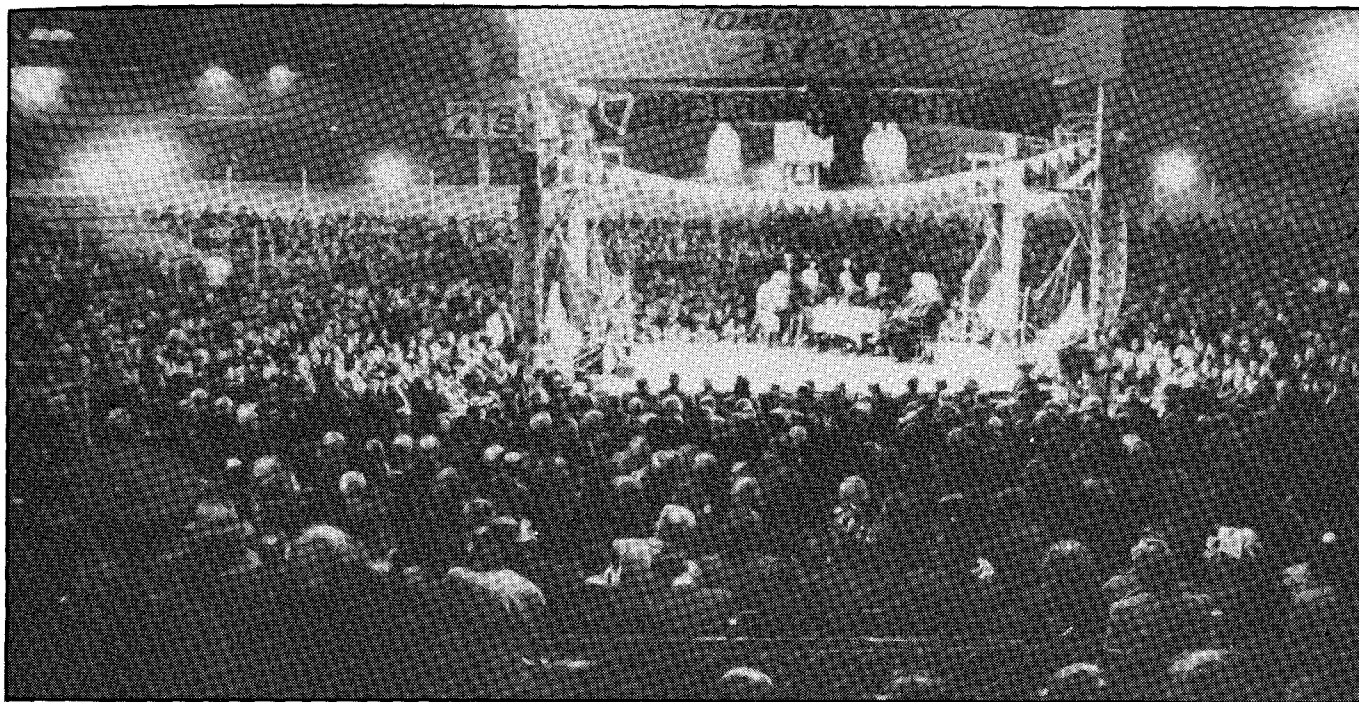
A handbill advertising de Valera's Sydney meeting.

Mannix had strongly and consistently supported de Valera's republican position, at the cost of considerable isolation and unpopularity even among Australia's Irish. Mannix had visited Ireland in 1925 and had repeated discussions with de Valera: one of Mannix's biographers credits him with advice that 'may conceivably have been decisive in leading the Republicans to revise their policy of abstention from the Dail'. At subsequent major turning points of Irish history, at the oath crisis in 1927, on the 1937 constitution, over neutrality, and at various points between, Mannix gave de Valera advice, some private, often public, always supportive. The distant Archbishop could be relied on invariably to understand the de Valera viewpoint and to applaud his actions.<sup>(3)</sup>

Despite the Melbourne and Sydney thousands, de Valera's Australian tour was not a success. It - and its aftermath - were to prove conclusively that Irish Australia was at an end, and that Australians of Irish descent or even Irish birth, could not be roused to any interest whatever in the affairs of Ireland. The cause which de Valera sought to promote in Australia - anti-partition - failed to attract Australian support. At long last, a basic truth about Irish Australia as a historical phenomenon had surfaced above the tides of sentiment and controversy. The affairs of Ireland were of interest to her descendants in Australia only if they called on their charity, or somehow appeared to symbolise or involve their own circumstances within Australian society. Partition evoked neither response. If



De Valera and Frank Aiken arrive in Sydney to be met by Dr. Dwyer, his wife and son, and on the far right, Dan Minogue, Co. Clare-born member of the Australian Parliament.



The crowd at de Valera's Sydney stadium meeting, 1st June, 1948, a venue usually used for boxing matches.

anything, it was counter-productive, for most of those few Australians of Irish descent who adverted to the matter saw that the cause of anti-partition would alienate them from the general climate of Australian opinion, a position they had neither wish nor reason to occupy.

The context of de Valera's Australian meetings was that of public hostility. In Sydney there were two large protest rallies, one conducted by the British Ex-Servicemen's League, the other by various Protestant organisations. In Brisbane, the city council refused the use of the Brisbane stadium for de Valera's meeting. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English historical viewpoints. However, the clearest index of how he was viewed by non-Irish Australia was perhaps the remarkably slight press coverage accorded his visit – suppression motivated by hostility, his supporters believed. Dr. Albert T. Dryer, who organised his Sydney visit, regarded the ignoring of Irish affairs by the Australian press as a deliberate English policy as subtle as it was successful. Whether deliberate or not, there can be no doubting the sparseness and hostility – and even contempt – of the press treatment of things Irish at this time.

The anti-Irish bias evident at the time of de Valera's visit derived, of course, from a historical tradition which went back to the foundation of Australian settlement. This had been revived and made immediate by Ireland's neutrality in the war – which was strongly resented in Australia – and this animus

focused naturally on de Valera who was held responsible for this and previous policies deemed anti-British, as was his demand for an end to partition. The character of this widespread Australian reaction is clearly revealed in a list of objections to Australia's involvement in the partition issue compiled by an ordinary citizen, and sent to Dr. Dryer in April, 1949. They were: 1. Ireland had done nothing for Australia and Australia owed it nothing. 2. Ulster people didn't want union with Eire. 3. Claims of persecution of, or discrimination against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland were fictional: if they were true, Australians would have already heard. 4. Ireland was hostile to Britain, as was shown by its neutrality during the war, when it acted as a fifth column. 5. The Irish were illiterate and superstitious. 6. Australia had its own problems: why import Irish problems which had nothing to do with Australia?

Such objections were predictable. Perhaps more significant is the fact that they were to some considerable extent shared by many in Australia who were of Irish descent. Most of these, if they did not regard de Valera with hostility – and some did – regarded him with either indifference or embarrassment. Those older Irish Australians who cared anything for Ireland remembered the Irish civil war of 1921-23, which had been a profound disillusionment and embarrassment to them, when Archbishop Mannix alone in Australia had supported de Valera's extreme republican stand. And since that time of the early 1920s, sentiment among

Catholics in Australia had changed into hostility or at least unwillingness to be identified with or involved in things Irish. True, de Valera's Melbourne and Sydney meetings were large, but nothing like what might have been expected, given the Irish element in those cities' populations. (There were 11,134 persons of Irish birth recorded as living in Sydney at the 1947 census: those of Irish descent would have been several hundred thousand).

In Melbourne, de Valera had the advantage of sharing Mannix's platform, and in both places considerable sections of the audience were organised attenders rather than voluntary ones – school children, choirs and the like, and those constrained by invitations or a feeling of duty – or, as the organisers later admitted, the merely curious. In Hobart, de Valera's public meeting and entertainment incurred a financial loss.

The enthusiasm – such as it was – generated by de Valera's visit was likely to be highly evanescent, a tendency sharply increased by the way in which de Valera preached his message. It amounted to this: 'Partition will go – it must go. It is inevitable that this blot from the Irish scene will be removed. Why? Because it is fundamentally wrong, immoral, based on unnatural foundations'. Pitched at the level of high-principled, emotional sloganising, de Valera's attacks on partition required no more from his audiences than an immediate sympathetic response on the occasion, which they readily gave. He made no demands on them for any continuing commitment



The stadium meeting: those on stage. Dr. Dyer is chairman.

or for practical action. His treatment of the central practical difficulty – what should be done about Ulster Unionists – implied either an evasion, or some kind of majority dictatorship. While this approach might well have been appropriate to whipping up political support, it was highly simplistic as a solution to a profound practical difficulty. Yet it seems that de Valera's actual thinking as well as his speechifying stopped well short of engaging the realities of the Northern situation. In 1950 he wrote to Dyer in Sydney about 'the old cry that a majority of the people in the Six Counties want to remain separated from us here. This is the cry that has to be dealt with on all occasions. It is not easy to give a simple reply to counter it. One has to go so much into detail that the real position is not brought out sharply. The only reply I can think of is to say that the majority of the people of Ireland as a whole want Ireland to be one, etc...'. Even Dyer, an ardent disciple, was baffled by the vagueness of this response: 'I'm afraid, Sir, that I do not fully grasp the point ... but would the following sentence approach the essence of your meaning: "The majority in thirty-two of the nation's counties invalidates (or counter-balances) that in six of them five times over".' Seen in the perspective of events in Northern Ireland since 1968, de Valera's attitude, and Dyer's, seem irrelevant to the real difficulties of solving the partition problem, and those of Northern Ireland generally. In part, the absence of this practical dimension reflected the then common Irish nationalist assumption that as Britain had created the partition problem

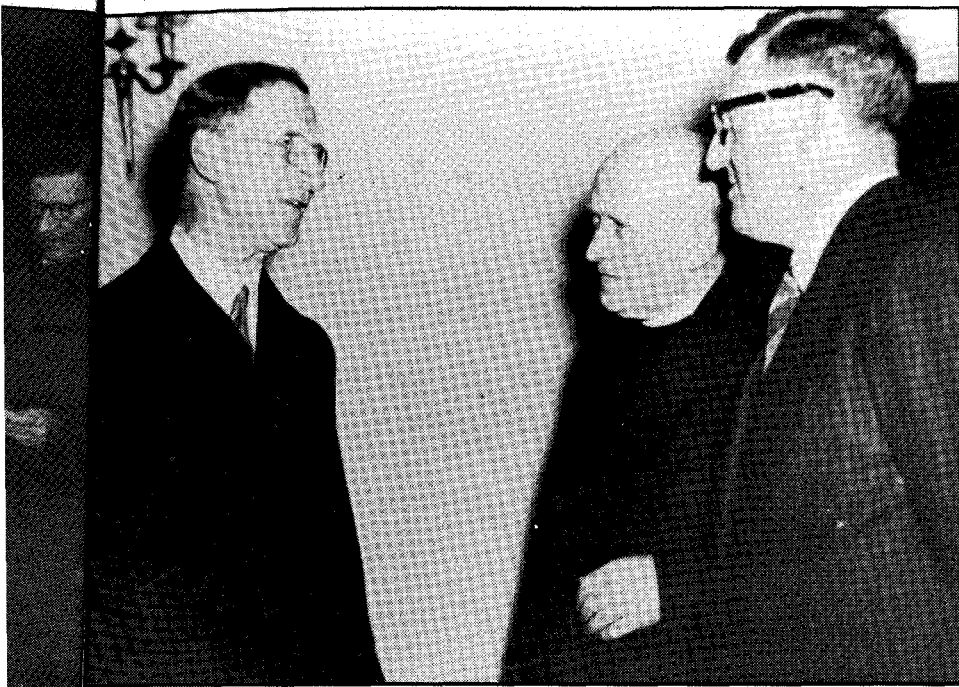
it was up to Britain to solve it. In part, it expressed an aspect of de Valera's political style. He was, or at least appeared to be, as a Brisbane Catholic journalist described him, 'a public figure who believes ... that it is his country's high duty to teach the world the might of moral beauty and stamp God's image truly on the struggling soul'. This was a conviction and cast of political mind shared by Dyer in Australia, and it lent itself to declaiming principles of politics as articles of faith and morals rather than to devising pragmatic detailed programmes. The *Sydney Morning Herald* had a rather different view of de Valera's capacities for idealism, dubbing him in

1937 'the Godfather of the Fairies of illusion'.

In Australia, de Valera sought to bring about the formation of an Australian League for an Undivided Ireland, that is, an organisation which would promote the anti-partition cause, and bring Australian pressure to bear, in this matter, on the British government. In each of the Australian centres he visited he took this up privately with the organisers of his meetings. There are several possible explanations for his not announcing his wishes publicly, but the main one would seem to be his anxiety that an Australian anti-partition movement should seem to arise spontaneously, from Australians, rather



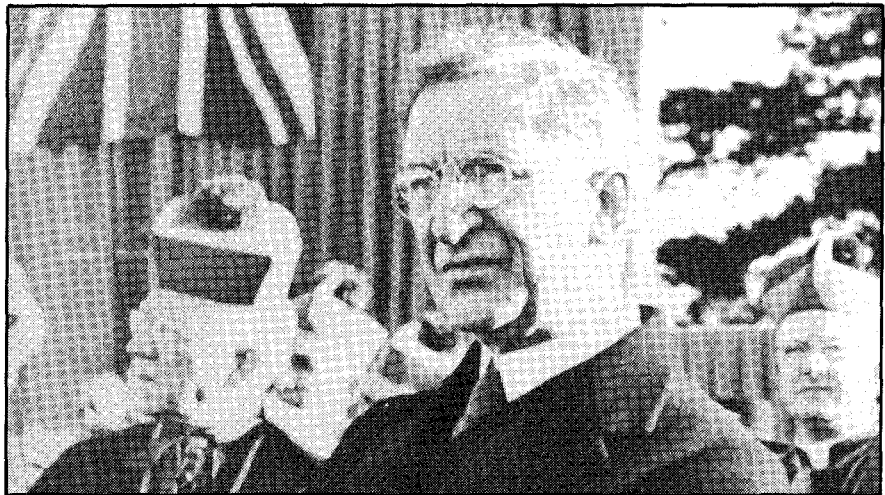
With Dr. and Mrs. T.J. Kiernan, Ireland's representative in Australia, Canberra, June, 1948.



Talking with an unidentified priest and Hon. Arthur Calwell, Australia's Minister for Immigration and long time enthusiast for Irish causes.

...aries can be demonstrably an Irish contri-  
-ance.

ought to It seems highly likely that nothing  
Australia would have come of this prompting by  
Ireland Valera - save perhaps in Melbourne  
would had it not been for the remarkable  
se, an energy and devotion of Dr. Dryer. De  
ear, Valera, recognizing Dryer for the true  
ment believer he was, charged him not only  
he vis with organising a Sydney movement,  
ith thout with co-ordinating that for the  
re are whole of Australia. Dryer had founded  
or his the Irish National Association on a  
blicly republican basis in Sydney in 1915, had  
be his been jailed for seditious activities in  
rtition 1918, and, although an Australian who  
spon had never been to Ireland, devoted  
ather himself unsparingly to Irish causes.



Thoughtful in British Melbourne, at the Archdiocesan centenary celebrations, Xavier College, May, 1948.

Dryer regarded de Valera's request  
to found an anti-partition organisation  
as a great honour and virtually a sacred  
duty. He venerated de Valera as 'this  
titanic historical figure ... master states-  
man ... [of] transcendent brilliance',  
'the very embodiment of the spirit of a  
free and Gaelic Ireland'. On Dryer's  
initiative, the Australian League for an  
Undivided Ireland was formed at a  
meeting of sixty people in Sydney, 9th  
August, 1948. Its object was 'to strive  
by lawful means, for the abolition of the  
partition of Ireland'. An executive was  
elected, with Dryer as secretary, and  
£120 subscribed to the League's funds.

But, such enthusiasm as had been  
aroused by de Valera's presence  
promptly vanished with his departure.  
Over the next five years, Dryer  
endeavoured to promote this organisa-  
tion in vain, in the face of indifference  
and even considerable hostility within  
the Irish Australian population. He had  
hardly begun his impossible task when

Ireland's withdrawal from the Com-  
monwealth to form the Republic pro-  
voked an intensely hostile Australian  
public reaction. Moreover, de Valera  
had lost interest: a photograph of a  
pensive de Valera in Melbourne, in a  
setting draped with the Union Jack,  
raises an obvious question. Did that  
most acute and nationalist politician  
sense that Mannix's Irish sentiment  
was no true gauge of the disposition of  
the Australian environment, and there  
was nothing of importance to Ireland to  
be gained at that time here? However,  
even as early as October, 1948, six  
months after their visit, de Valera and  
Aiken had demonstrated that pious  
nationalist exhortations at irregular  
intervals was all the help they could -  
or would - give Dryer. His requests for  
advice and information and contacts in  
Ireland went unanswered. De Valera  
poured cold water on Dryer's sugges-

tion of a World League for an Undi-  
vided Ireland. Dryer did not abandon  
the idea, which was logical in terms of  
the strength of the American and  
British anti-partition movements, but  
he seems not to have conceived the  
possibility that de Valera's opposition  
sprang from unwillingness to permit  
any organisation which might detract  
from his own prominence in the anti-  
partition campaign.

The Australian League had never  
really lived: by 1954 even its vestiges  
were dead. Throughout, and until his  
death in 1963, Dryer continued to  
report the elements of this dismal situ-  
ation to de Valera: de Valera's secreta-  
rial machine responded each year with  
a Christmas card, bearing the facsimile  
signature of the great man. Dryer trea-  
sured these. He exemplified at its end a  
tradition of de Valera veneration that  
went back in Australia to 1916. In the  
1920s, when houses commonly carried  
names, a Sydney republican supporter  
had her house labelled 'de Valera'. It  
was defaced and torn off, until she  
hired the Waverley Fire Brigade to

place it at the top of her house beyond  
reach, by virtue of their long ladder.  
Like much of Ireland in Australia, even  
the name of de Valera was magic, inspi-  
ration, a dream.

### NOTES

1. This article is, in substantial part, a section of my lecture 'Irish Australia at an end: the Australian League for an undivided Ireland, 1948-1954?' *Tasmanian Historical Research Association. Papers and Proceedings*. Vol. 21, No. 4, December 1974. Detailed source references are given there.
2. This is with the exception of a brief period of inter-party government from 1954 to 1957. De Valera resigned as Taoiseach in 1959 and was elected President, an office which he held until his retirement in 1973.
3. For Mannix's relationship with de Valera see B.A. Santamaria *Daniel Mannix*, Melbourne, 1984 and Michael Gilchrist *Daniel Mannix*, Melbourne, 1982.