

Éamon de Valera and the Easter Rebellion

by Tom Toomey

Eamon de Valera was born in New York on 14 October 1882 to a Spanish father, Vivion de Valera and an Irish mother, Catherine Coll. In April 1885, at the age of two, he was brought back to Ireland by his teenage uncle Ned Coll. Catherine Coll was originally from near Bruree, so she chose to have her son reared by her mother and brother Patrick, who was also known as the 'Dane' Coll. Patrick was a formative influence on the young de Valera and he was to remain so until the boy grew to be a man. While he was growing up de Valera used the Christian name 'Eddie' and it was only later when he became involved with the Gaelic League that he began using Éamon, the Gaelic form of his name.

In May 1888 de Valera began primary school in Bruree and then moved on to the Christian Brothers' School in Charleville. He showed great academic promise and, considering that he was living in a cottage with his uncle and grandmother, it was a major achievement, at the time, for a student from such a background to receive a second level education let alone contemplate progressing to third level. De Valera excelled as a second level student. In 1898, when he was aged sixteen, he won a scholarship worth £20 per annum to Blackrock College, County Dublin. In 1903 he was appointed professor of mathematics at Rockwell College, near Cashel, County Tipperary, a fellow college to Blackrock, as they were both run by the Holy Ghost Fathers. In 1905 he returned to Dublin to take up a teaching post at Carysfort Teacher Training College.

In 1908 he joined the Gaelic League, a first step on a path that was to lead to the highest political office in the country. It also impacted on his personal life as his Irish teacher Sinéad Flanagan would later become his wife. It was a relatively brief courtship; they were married in January 1910 and went on to have seven children.



Eamon de Valera

In 1913, de Valera was one of the earliest recruits of the Irish Volunteers when the organisation was founded. In July 1914 he was among the hundreds of Irish Volunteers who marched to Howth to receive a shipment of rifles that were landed there, on board a yacht called *The Asgard*, to arm the Volunteers. In September of that year a split arose in the movement following Redmond's pledge to support England's war effort and de Valera supported the minority who rejected Redmond. Over the next eighteen months de Valera rose through the ranks, until he was

appointed Commandant of the 3rd Battalion of the Dublin Volunteers. De Valera joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) early in 1916, and was sworn in by Thomas MacDonagh.

It was at this stage that he became heavily involved in the planning of the upcoming 1916 Rising. When it finally began on Easter Monday, 24 April, de Valera was in charge of his Battalion, based at Boland's Mills, with responsibility for holding the southeastern approaches to the city. This was an important posting as the garrison commanded the routes from Dun Laoghaire by which military reinforcements from England would arrive. Boland's Mills and Clanwilliam House, overlooking Mount Street Bridge, were among the main strongholds in de Valera's command area. It was men under his command, at Mount Street Bridge, who inflicted by far the heaviest casualties on the British forces.

Nearly half of the casualties suffered by the British military during the fighting were in this area. In total forty-five officers and men were killed and over one hundred and sixty wounded. Nearly all the Volunteers who inflicted these casualties were also killed in the fighting. There are conflicting reports



Bringing the guns from Howth



Boland's Mill where Eamon de Valera and his men fought gallantly.

on de Valera's own performance during the week, as some accounts maintain he suffered a nervous breakdown at one stage, while other reports state that he fought gallantly. It was Easter Saturday 29 April when news of the surrender came to Boland's Mill. When de Valera went forward to meet the British surrender party he insisted on proper treatment for his men regardless of his own treatment.

De Valera and his men were then marched to the nearby RDS grounds which were used as an interim holding

area. By the time they were moved on to Kilmainham Prison, to be processed for trial, around 8 May 1916, most of the leaders had been executed and the politicians in Westminster began to realise that they had made a terrible mistake. The mood in the country which had been totally against the rebels one week previously had changed utterly. In the words of the poet W B Yeats 'a terrible beauty had been born'.

A number of misapprehensions have been accepted as fact in relation to de Valera and the Rising. In many accounts

it is alleged that he was the only Commandant to be spared execution. This is not so, as Thomas Ashe, who was in command of the Fingal Battalion in north Dublin and whose men inflicted severe casualties on the RIC at Ashbourne, was also spared. As with de Valera, the cases of Ashe and his second-in-command, Richard Mulcahy, were not processed until after the sixteen executions had ended. Furthermore, when Gen Sir John Maxwell reviewed de Valera's case he was not aware of his involvement as an organiser of the Rising and he commuted the court-martial death sentence to life imprisonment. A myth also exists that de Valera was spared execution because of his being an American citizen. If this is true, it did not prevent the execution of Tom Clarke who had been an American citizen since 1905.

Following the collapse of the Rising, de Valera was interned in Frongoch, a former whiskey distillery in North Wales, where he provided good leadership to the men interned. This included a significant gesture of exchanging a handshake with Eoin MacNeill who also was interned. This was an important reconciliation. MacNeill's countermanding order, given on the Saturday evening before the planned date of the Rising, had been the main reason why huge numbers of Volunteers, even in the Dublin area, failed to turn out and fight. By this simple gesture, he rehabilitated MacNeill and clearly established himself as the leader of Irish Republicanism. In



De Valera and his men being marched to the RDS after the surrender in 1916

June 1917 he was released from prison having served just over twelve months. He returned to an Ireland that had changed most dramatically. When he was led to the prison boats in May 1916 he was taunted and jeered by the citizens of Dublin. On his return just over a year later he was cheered as a hero.

In June 1917 a vacancy arose in the East Clare constituency following the death of sitting MP Willie Redmond, who died in the Great War. He was the brother of John Redmond who led the National Volunteers following the split in the organisation. A month later, de Valera successfully stood for election in East Clare. Thus began a path to a political career, which depending on one's opinion was either the most divisive or one of the greatest leaders of the modern era.

Éamon de Valera was President of the first Dail in 1919 and became President of the Irish Republic in 1921. He was also President of Sinn Féin from 1917 to 1926 and then left Sinn Féin to form a new party Fianna Fáil. In 1932 he led that party into government. He was Taoiseach and Minister for External Affairs from 1937 to 1948, from 1951 to 1954, and finally from 1957 to 1959. De Valera served as President of Ireland for the maximum two terms, from 1959 to 1973. He died on 29 August 1975 aged 92.



De Valera being held captive in Richmond Barracks



Eamon de Valera steps ashore in Kingstown (Dun Laoighre) in 1917 following his imprisonment in England



Eamon de Valera inspects troops on the 25th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising