

# The South Needs Encouragement: The Irish Republican Campaign in the American South and Southern Irish American Identity, 1919-20.

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## **“The South Needs Encouragement”**: The Irish Republican Campaign in the American South and Southern Irish American Identity, 1919–20

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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ON 11 JUNE 1919, Eamon de Valera, the sole surviving commandant of the Easter Rising, arrived in New York City, four months after his escape from Lincoln jail in England and two months after his election as president by Dáil Éireann. De Valera was to remain in the United States until shortly before Christmas in 1920, seeking to raise funds for the de facto Irish republic, to rally support from citizens of the United States, and to obtain recognition of the republic from the U.S. government.

As “president of Ireland,” as he was known during his time in North America, de Valera traveled across the United States in what Diarmaid Ferriter calls a “long, exhausting, occasionally exhilarating, but often frustrating journey.”<sup>1</sup> (In October and November 1919 alone, for example, de Valera visited no fewer than nineteen states.) Although **[End Page 198]** de Valera’s American tour focused on traditional areas of Irish Catholic immigration and political power (such cities as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco), he and his associates Liam Mellows and Harry Boland also concentrated some of their attention on regions of the United States that seemed less likely bases of support for the Irish republican movement, including the American South.

De Valera’s sojourn in the South, which took place in April 1920, has most typically been treated as a footnote to the larger story of his experience in the United States. In his recent study of de Valera’s American tour Dave Hannigan devotes a few pages to what he calls de Valera’s “not so gentle Southern swing.” Hannigan emphasizes the negative and often hostile response that the Irish republican movement received in the South, which was, to be sure, an important part of de Valera’s experience. Perhaps the low point of de Valera’s entire North American travels came in Birmingham, Alabama. The city commissioners there denied local organizers permission to hold a parade in the republican leader’s honor, while a public meeting of over one thousand white residents denounced the arrival of “the Sinn Fein propagandist.”

The local American Legion requested that Alabama's governor, Thomas E. Kilby, declare de Valera "persona non grata." In response, while the governor conceded that he had no power to do so, he commented wittingly that "the pilgrimage of de Valera and his Sinn Fein propaganda should have long ago received the attention of the State Department. . . . Were I [the] directing official of that department . . . , I would unhesitatingly order the deportation of de Valera without delay."<sup>2</sup>

The negative reception that de Valera received in Birmingham is far from surprising. The Southern American states are often regarded as "the home of quintessential American Anglo-Saxonism," a region marginal to the history of the Irish American immigrant experience.<sup>3</sup> **[End Page 199]** Even the authoritative study on the Irish in the nineteenth-century American South notes that most Irish Catholic emigrants to the southeastern United States in this era went to border states such as Maryland and Missouri rather than to the eleven states that comprised the Confederacy. David Gleeson observes that "from climate to politics, everything about the South was alien to the immigrant Irish."<sup>4</sup>

Yet the hostility displayed by the white Protestant citizens of Birmingham was also quite exceptional, even for a Southern city. Opposition to de Valera there stemmed from anti-Catholic sentiment, which intersected closely with a resurgent Ku Klux Klan. In part this hostility stemmed from the success of the Irish American community in Birmingham in preceding years, which had led to the election of an Irish American Catholic mayor and chief of police.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in several locales in the South white southerners gave "the Chief" a warm welcome, and both Catholics and Protestants of Irish descent responded enthusiastically to the call of the Irish republican movement for independence. In Charleston, South Carolina, for example, de Valera received a remarkably warm welcome from a city traditionally considered to be aristocratic, Anglophile, and conservative, and his two days in the city were...

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An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2010 meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies. I am grateful to James Donnelly, Deirdre McMahon, Matthew O’Brien, and members of the conference audience for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 34. Historians have held divided opinions over the impact of that visit. Ferriter notes that “the methodical preparation and constant lobbying resulted in the trip being a considerable propaganda triumph, but it also created conflict and rows and failed to achieve the recognition of the Irish Republic or induce the American party to pronounce in favour of recognition.” His time in America also contributed, as Owen Dudley Edwards has written, to de Valera’s “remarkable international sense.” On de Valera’s visit to America, see Francis M. Carroll, *American Opinion and the Irish Question, 1910–1923: A Study in Opinion and Policy* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), 149–76; Troy D. Davis,



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