

A VISIT TO A CONVENTION IN EIRÉ

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WHEN Fianna Fail was holding its thirteenth Conventioll a few years ago, the Convention called Ard-Fheis by an and sundry, I paid it a visit. The vast round hall of the Dublin Mansion House was crammed to capacity, with delegates from all corners of Eiré. Their party was founded in 1926 by Eamon de Valera, then still in opposition. It took six years to reach power—in 1932, even then dependent on the good will of a third party. A General Election, however, won them a smashing success: an absolute majority over all other parties. Fianna Fail then began to rule Eiré, so what had been decided here to-day would be the law of the land to-morrow.

Against the green white and orange tricolor sat the Executive of the party. Mr. Sean T. O'Kelly, De Valera's understudy, was in the chair, a small, dapper man, nose and expression somewhat reminiscent of Earl Baldwin, but rosier, more the professional man than the rustic. He was constantly looking round, his brow permanently knit in mild worries, as if he suspected someone would pull a rabbit out of his coat pocket at any moment. He had a winning manner of smothering his smile when something funny reached his ear. But his mirth did not hurt, it was as mild as his voice.

All the members of the Government were on the platform. Lemass, Minister of Commerce and Industry, praised by friend and foe as one of the best men in the team (and it was noticeable that, whenever he rose to speak, he drew an extra applause), looked very matter of fact, a young bussiness man of the "go-getting" type. He sucks his pipe in a rather off-hand manner, but when his time to answer comes, he says what he has to say succinctly, sure of his subject and his facts, and with often a twinkle of fun round the corner of his mouth and in his humorous eyes. McEntee, the Finance Minister, was of the best continental style, with a finely chiselled, serious intellectual face, carefully dressed. Rutledge, the Minister of Justice, deputy in the chair most of the time, reverts more to Irish type; he has the quiet distinction of the lawyer, and thick greyish locks more decorative than the best wig.

The only two non-ministers were the Party Secretary and the Treasurer: a study in contrasts if ever there was. Hand-

some, alert, young Davan and homely, somnolent, elderly Miss Pearse. She sat there, well covered up in coat and shawl, as a tribute to the dead: sister of Padraic Pearse, executed after the Easter Rising, near thirty years ago.

One could not envy the lot of the speakers. They had to come up to a corner halfway between the platform with its big names, and the long press table full with scribbling critical newspapermen, to say their piece in a microphone. They spoke in their overcoat or muffler, many carrying hat, cigarette or a newspaper. But they knew of no stage fever. On the contrary, the standard of oratory was uncommonly high, much better in fact than their reasoning. Their success with the audience was assured. For the vast majority of these delegates are simple people, sprung from the soil, whether worker or farmer. I scan the sea of faces so eagerly concentrated on every succeeding speaker. Most of them wear collars, so crumpled that they look more like ribbons; their ties are more pieces of string tucked in somehow. Others, in extreme contrast, wear collars high as notice boards, which must be family heirlooms. The lapels of most overcoats are curled up beyond recognition. They have square, very red hands and weather-beaten open faces. A glance suffices to see that they are a race apart. Jet black hair predominates, high foreheads on which often is a combed up abundance of curled locks. Many of them are below average size, with small hands or feet. There is, too, a fire in these eyes and a movement in these limbs which the Anglo-Saxon would consider most alien. They thunder, castigate, glorify and gesticulate. A very small man, a typical cross-road orator, almost dances his arguments; his small absolutely round face bounces like a ball behind the microphone, which sounds as if it is giving up the effort to keep pace. There are young intellectuals from the towns, on the other hand, with voices that burn white like a flame cutting through steel. Their arguments are pursued with driving cold logic.

Some of the delegates come from Northern Ireland, the six counties still under British sovereignty. The mere mention of the name of their constituency brings down an ovation. Here comes an old parish priest with a simple kind face, but the moment he invokes those historic Irish names of Armagh and Downpatrick, still in alien hands, the crowd roars. A gong goes, time is up, but the delegates shout "We'll let you go on, Father", and the Chairman has no alternative but to fall smilingly into line. His ruling, however, is generally obeyed

scrupulously. For one of the characteristics of this audience is its good grace and fair play. When a speaker is rebuked for not sticking to the resolution under discussion, he protests "If that is'nt the resolution, it must be a pretty close cousin," but breaks off all the same.

Partition is the keynote of this assembly. One speaker deplores that Eiré has not simply marched in some time ago when the European constellation was ripe for such an action; another urges the "now or never," but all testify their faith in their leader, and every time his name is invoked, there is a roar of assent. There is a grimness, a deadly earnestness on these faces which must be seen to be believed. Their anger, about that clumsy artificial frontier in the North, is not political opportunism, but an open wound to them. Again and again in watching the speakers I find myself thinking of Bellini's statue in the Villa Borghese: David slinging his stone at Goliath. His jaws set in grim concentration resembles the determination of these men from Dublin, Cork or Limerick, from Donegal to Kerry.

De Valera had come in, not with the fanfares heralding leaders elsewhere, but sliding up quickly along the far wall. His supporters, however, notice him when he is almost halfway, and under a crescendo of applause, which he acknowledges shyly, he reaches the platform. Most of the time he follows the speakers closely, his chin cupped in his handsome hand. I have seldom seen a man who can listen with such attention, every line in his strong face at place. It is difficult to judge his reactions, other than a stare which gets colder and colder when someone is making a fool of himself, or the softening of the strong lines round his tight lipped decisive mouth, when he is pleased. Now and then his eyes roam the hall, travelling slowly from delegate to delegate before him. Many he knows from difficult days, he has courted death with them, others again he won in political persuasion. Now and then his eyes seem to be fixed to a distance further than any hall can hold.

When De Valera rises, he dominates so completely that even the most representative men in his entourage are dwarfed. His speaking is reasoning, with that warm-timbred clipped voice of his, his tall spare frame swinging softly to the rhythm of his words. Hardly ever does he take his hand out of his coat pockets. All the emphasis is put in the intonation of his voice, or the quicker movements of his head, which gets flushed. His hair begins dropping down his forehead, first one tuft, gradually more, giving him an extraordinary young appearance,

particularly as there is not a grey thread among them. He does not appeal with romantic allusions, high faluting rhetorics, he reasons everything out, with still something of the mathematics professor who lucidly and patiently explains a tricky problem. He calls things by their names, never evades the issue; "We Republicans once failed, let us be straight about it. We must not rush matters, for we cannot retreat again." The theorist has become the supreme opportunist: "It is better to wait longer, and then not only to get the northern territory but to get also the people with us." It was the statesman too who spoke, again and again declaring that he wants good relations with the people "on the other island," but holding Britain responsible, all the same, for creating the border and for maintaining "this injury."

How well he can handle the crowd was shown in the matter of pensions for an ex-minister, an allowance for the opposition leaders and increased salaries for ministers and M.P.'s. One speaker after the other had fulminated against these measures, often violently. For to the majority of the delegates even a small sum is a capital of which they stand in awe.

De Valera spoke at great length. In taking the convention into his confidence, he confessed that he approached "most things from the point of view of the man who has been largely brought up in the country." The vast majority of his listeners were at once with him, and settled down to follow the rest of his arguments with benevolence.

He explained the difference in appearance and costs between town and country. He demonstrated how bad a reward of civic service is that by which only the wealthy can afford to serve the state. A metallic voice from the audience shouted out spontaneously: "And that is not right, Taoiseach." Another argument won.

It was not wizardry, no play of masterly phrases soaring to lofty ideologies. Read in cold print, they are matter of fact things we all know. But round these thousand delegates, most of them not blessed by earthly goods at all, it wove a spell. It worked as effectively as a parable of Scripture. De Valera went further, he defended the party who had held Government before them, the value of an opposition. "They shot at us like hares and rabbits on the mountain side," one had complained. But a leader patiently taught elementary democracy to his party, only thirteen years old in a state hardly much older.

One carried away lasting impressions from this convention of the party which commands to-day the support of an absolute majority of the Irish electorate. One was the inherent sanity of democracy: here man after man, some known, others completely unknown, came forward and told the party leaders what their fellow voters—the “forgotten men” in other countries—thought and felt.

Another impression was the completeness with which Eiré has been reborn as a sovereign independent nation, to which Britain is a foreign country as much as France, or Germany or the United States. Predominant was the insistence on seeing the wrong of Ulster separation redressed before relations with Great Britain can really become friendly.

And overshadowing all: the unique position of Eamon de Valera, the sway he holds over his people, a respect and a popularity which is rooted so deep that nothing, one feels, can rift it. Whatever he says goes, not because he dictates, but because he remains at pains to convince, though his followers have implicit faith in his leadership. He is, probably, the greatest leader that ever rose in Ireland. There can be no doubt that any settlement which he will countersign will be lasting. It is an opportunity such that wise statesmanship in Britain should not fail to avail itself of it and make out of the closest neighbour a new Ally.