Review of Karen Garner, *Friends and Enemies: the Allies and Neutral Ireland in the Second World War* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 the independent Irish state was just seventeen years old, its new constitution and control of its strategic ports barely two years old. The controversial policy of wartime neutrality was therefore an exercise in establishing national sovereignty and a foreign policy independent of its old colonial overlord, Great Britain. Irish neutrality was also about projecting national *identity* and this is the subject of Karen Garner’s *Friends and Enemies*.

As a high political history focusing on ‘the dominant personalities of Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Eamon de Valera’, the book goes against historiographical trends emergent in recent years, which have tended to move towards ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ accounts of ‘the Emergency’ (as World War Two was euphemistically termed in neutral Ireland).[[1]](#footnote-1) This, then, is a move back towards a ‘Great Man’ school of writing about how awkward little Ireland complicated the Special Relationship. Its style is typical of an older historiography too: one which has been told like this many times before, as demonstrated in the heavy source reliance on published diplomatic histories and its rehashing of the ‘Franklin and Winston’ metanarrative.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Taoiseach Éamon de Valera was the bête noire of the generation of Irish ‘revisionist’ scholars who dominated scholarship from the 1970s to the turn of the century, and whose negative appraisals Garner largely subscribes to, criticising his ‘misguided wartime neutrality policy’. In doing so she rejects a spirit of what might broadly be termed ‘post-revisionism’ over the last twenty-five years whereby a new generation of historians have chipped away at some of the more caustic verdicts of the revisionists, looking past the figure of ‘Dev’ and pointing to the substantial areas of state collaboration with the Allies. This included extensive intelligence sharing, the free passage of Irish nationals to contribute to the British armed forces and war economy, emergency relief of the Belfast Blitz of 1941, and the execution of dissident Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers. What has subsequently emerged is a consensus around the nature of Irish wartime neutrality: looking beyond the medievalist rhetoric of de Valera, in practice Ireland’s was an ‘un-neutral neutrality’ or even a quietly ‘pro-allied neutrality’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although aware of this more nuanced take on Irish neutrality, Garner prefers to revert to the well-worn tropes of the Churchill-Roosevelt bromance. This speaks to the weakness of the book’s focus and methodology. This story has been told before. In electing to yet again tell the story of neutral Ireland through the voices of Great Statesman, the real dynamics behind wartime survival - the economic, the social, the domestic political - are overlooked.

The book’s claim to originality rests on its bringing a gender analysis to the table, exploring how the national identities and war stories constructed by the heads of government of Britain, Ireland and the United States were inherently ‘gendered’. Unfortunately, this analysis is wanting. Garner’s observations on gender come across as superficial, reduced to throwaway phrases such as ‘fraternal friendship’ which do little to dig deeper beyond established Great Man narratives. Elsewhere the ‘gender analysis’ comes across as arbitrary: apparently the ‘ideal type’ of masculinity exuded by British diplomat Malcolm MacDonald matched the type of masculinity given off by Hollywood actor John Mills. Often, these reflections on masculinity appear to be an afterthought, lacking sufficient development, and pasted into the altogether racier (yet well documented) story of wartime diplomatic intrigue in an attempt to demonstrate originality.

The real originality of *Friends and Enemies*, and the one way in which the book succeeds in its stated mission of displacing hegemonic masculine narratives, is through the voice of American war correspondent Helen Kirkpatrick, confidante of US ambassador David Gray, who spent part of the war in Ireland and whose story is relayed here. The account of Kirkpatrick’s time in Britain and Ireland, pieced together from a range of sources and complete with the dollop of gung-ho requisite of the war reporter, provides an engaging narrative thread.

What a pity, then, that this overlooked female voice belonged to a woman who wasn’t so much a journalist as a propagandist. The hyperbolic Kirkpatrick had her stories published in the pages of the *Chicago Daily News*, where readers could pore over her overblown accounts of bands of fifth columnists and Nazis roving unmolested around wartime Ireland. The reality was much more prosaic; while neutral Ireland was not a sleepy ‘Plato’s Cave’ it was closer to that analogy than to Kirkpatrick’s fantasy version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Kirkpatrick’s wild exaggerations may have been composed with the strategic intention of nudging neutral Ireland towards the Allied fold, but in all likelihood they had the opposite effect, souring relations with Éamon de Valera’s administration.

Like Kirkpatrick, her champion and protector David Gray is presented in a largely positive light by Garner. While acknowledging the ‘naivety’ of America’s top diplomat in Ireland, she conveys neither the amateurishness nor the utter weirdness of the man. Gray’s chief qualification for the job appears to have been the fact that his wife happened to be an aunt of Eleanor Roosevelt. Garner’s sympathy towards him is, one suspects, largely due to his friendship with the heroine of the book, Kirkpatrick, whose jaundiced and derogatory pieces about Irish neutrality were dashed off from Gray’s residence in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. Frustratingly, other calmer and better-informed American voices are drowned out by the shrillness of Gray and Fitzpatrick. According to one of America’s own spies in Ireland, Martin S. Quigley of the US Office of Strategic Studies, Gray - incredibly for a man in his position - fundamentally failed to grasp the subtlety of Irish neutrality: that it was, in effect, quietly but pronouncedly *pro-Allied*. But then Gray, a keen spiritualist, was more interested in receiving messages from the hereafter than from the OSS. The source for some of his hibernophobe reports to Roosevelt was impeccable: the ghost of the late conservative and unionist politician Lord Arthur J. Balfour who, as chief secretary for Ireland between 1887 and 1891, had lived in the same Phoenix Park house. Gray’s conversations with Balfour over seances are not discussed here. Given the theme of the book, surely this represents a missed opportunity to explore the persistence of shared WASP masculinist-imperialist worldviews past the temporal realm and into the afterlife.

The book does address the ethno-religious chasm at play at the time, in other words the racial politics. In its introduction it promises to explore how gendered national identities - embodied in political elites - were heavily coloured by ethno-religious stereotypes. Garner is right to stress neutral (largely Catholic) Ireland’s ‘racial’/cultural separateness from Anglo-Saxonism and its patrician elites. Yet she fails to develop some of these points evenly. This is most clearly demonstrated in her account of Irish cabinet minister Frank Aiken’s diplomatic mission to the United States in 1941. The bullish Aiken was dubbed by contemporary Irish wags ‘the iron man with the wooden head’ and Garner captures some of the consequently hostile State Department attitudes to him. But what she seemingly fails to grasp is exactly what the book purports to explore, missing the fact that Aiken, a big man, was described in terms not far removed from the simianised paddy of Victorian racial caricature: irrational, brutish, ‘stupid’. In turn, Aiken’s perception of how America’s Anglo-Saxon elites viewed him was expressed, in language of its time, thus: “they were regarding me as a big buck nigger.”

In a book all about masculinity, the book also fails to develop some fairly obvious points about the physical projection of power. Aiken’s visit, we are told, challenged FDR’s ‘masculine autonomy’. Their tumultuous meeting in the Oval Office allegedly ended with Roosevelt launching the dishes and cutlery from his lunch tray across the floor in anger. If we are to go with the notion that this diplomatic disaster was informed by Aiken’s threat to FDR’s ‘masculine autonomy’ then the physical disparities between the wheelchair-bound president and the 6 foot 3 inch tall Aiken surely warrants a mention.

Putting the physical and the racial to one side, a striking feature of this work is its ignorance of the economic factors underlying Great Man diplomacy. Unlike other neutral European states such as Switzerland and Sweden, Ireland had nothing to gain economically from the policy: no looted gold to store, no vital metals to trade. Ireland’s ‘moral neutrality’ may have been ruralist, parochial, inward-looking and blinkered, but in terms of the spoils of war it was not greedy, contrary to what Allied propaganda suggested. Ireland’s decision to stay neutral enraged Churchill, who retaliated with sustained economic bullying, seriously aggravating poverty and public health in the nascent state. Yet there is nothing here on Churchill’s trade war on Ireland via the restriction of vital supplies. This is referred to instead entirely in the abstract, in the hawkish opinions of Kirkpatrick and Gray, who advocated inflicting famine on the Irish. Garner implies that such hard-line stances were understandable in attempting to get Ireland on-side in the great war for democracy, and one can of course empathise with this viewpoint. What’s less easy to come to terms with is the absence of discussion of the real economics informing the Great Men and their grandstanding. All the way back in 1977 historian Alan S. Milward would write about how the historiography of war was shifting from narrowly diplomatic/military histories in which ‘armies and navies come or go, commanded by greater or lesser figures deciding momentous historical issues’, giving way to a focus on productive forces ‘which alone give such events meaning’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Not here.

Then there are the tsk-tsk factual errors. For example, the blanket description of the IRA as on the ‘far political left’ (p. 4) ignores the split in militant republicanism in 1934, when leading socialist republicans left the IRA to form the Republican Congress. To characterise the (right-wing) IRA’s subsequent ideological shift under the leadership of Seán Russell, leading to its embrace of Nazi Germany, as ‘far political left’ is wholly inaccurate. Terminology also niggles: ‘Southern Ireland’, for example, is employed to denote independent Ireland (Éire) and ‘the Irish Isle’ is the odd shorthand used for the island of Ireland. Structurally, too, there are deficiencies. Ireland was a ‘long haul’ neutral and this is perhaps the greatest argument against the policy: from late 1942 it was becoming ever clearer that Germany would lose the war, prompting many previously neutral states to align with the Allies out of self-interest, yet independent Ireland would maintain the policy, through the early reports of the death camps, to the bitter end. Frustrating, then, that of the book’s 248 pages just thirty concern the years 1942 to 1945.

Although the author makes some use of primary source material on US, British, and American foreign relations, this book is wanting in originality of argument. The conventional narrative of the forging of Atlanticism obscures fresh perspective. Lengthy block quotations from historians or established Great Men like Churchill are frequently deployed instead of defter, shorter paraphrasing. In accounting for the reasons behind de Valera’s escape from the firing squad in 1916, for example, or Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, certain historians’ judgements are presented as fact and alternative verdicts don’t get a look in. This suggests a certain lack of authority around some of the subject matter and a lack of familiarity with some recent additions to the historiography of the Irish ‘Emergency’ in general and Irish diplomatic history in particular.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Garner informs us that Roosevelt, Churchill and de Valera were ‘chauvinistic, parochial, racist, and gender biased’ but that ‘their words and their understandings shaped the contours of postwar global politics’. De Valera receives the shortest thrift and, for his part, the Irish leader’s attitude could be irredentist, unrealistic and intransigent; the scrupulousness could also be foolhardy, most notably the daft decision to personally express condolences to the German legation in Dublin on the death of Hitler in April 1945. As Garner notes, Irish neutrality would help forge the modern nation state’s perception of itself, but it would also do lasting damage. Ireland was largely frozen out of the post-war Anglo-American mainstream and the United Nations, undergoing diminished international standing as poverty and emigration continued apace, with Irish-American relations largely remaining contentious until the symbolic visit of John F Kennedy to his ancestral homeland in 1963, just five months before his assassination.

Sixty years later, against the backdrop of Brexit, Joe Biden’s visit to Ireland in 2023 would be the next time Ireland would host a President from an Irish Catholic background, marking a high-point in Washington-Dublin relations as the Anglo-American Special Relationship showed increasing signs of strain. Perhaps, then, contrary to the prevailing tides of historiography, nations can be reduced to their great men. This is what *Friends and Enemies* ultimately implies. Nonetheless, what promises to be a fresh interrogation of the identity and assumptions of these specific national ideologies fails to materialise. Instead, this book reproduces the Great Man narrative of the Second World War in all its fascinating but rather simplistic, and all-too-familiar, glory.

1. See Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: a cultural history of Ireland during the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007); Bryce Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War: Farewell to Plato’s Cave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A good example of this type of history is John Meacham’s *Franklin and Winston: an Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship* (New York: Granta, 2005). Garner remains heavily reliant on standard overview works such as T. Ryle Dwyer’s *Behind the Green Curtain: Ireland’s Phoney Neutrality during World War Two* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2009); Brian Girvin’s The Emergency: Neutral Ireland (London: Pan MacMillan, 2007); and Robert Fisk’s classic *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster, and the price of Neutrality, 1939-1945* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Eunan O’Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish State and its Enemies since 1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Kennedy, *Guarding Neutral Ireland: the Irish Coast-watching Service and military intelligence, 1939-1945* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan S. Milward, *War, Economy and Society, 1939-1945* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. # Among other works, the absence of Barry Whelan’s *Ireland's Revolutionary Diplomat: A Biography of Leopold Kerney* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) is notable.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)