



William Cosgrave

Date

1923

Primary Maker

Sir John Lavery

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

Framed: 103.9 x 84 x 6 cm 91.5 x 71.1 cm

Description

William T. Cosgrave (1880-1965), politician and president of the executive council of the Irish Free State; was born at James Street, Dublin on 5 June 1880. He was educated at Francis Street Christian Brothers School and the O'

Brien Institute. He followed his father Thomas, a licensed vintner, into the pub trade. In his youth he was a member of Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin nationalist movement. He attended the first Sinn Féin convention in the Rotunda in Dublin in 1905. He was elected to Dublin Corporation in 1909. He joined the Irish Volunteers on their formation in 1913. During the 1916 Rising he served at the South Dublin Union under Eamonn Ceannt. Cosgrave was sentenced to death for his part in the insurrection but this was later reduced to life imprisonment. He was interned at Frongoch in Wales until January 1917, when he was released under a general amnesty. He was elected Sinn Féin MP for Kilkenny North at a by-election in August 1917, and was re-elected in the 1918 general election. Cosgrave became one of the honorary treasurers of Sinn Féin in 1917. He sat in the first Dáil Éireann which met on 2 April 1919 and was a minister for local government from April 1919 to September 1922. He married Louise, daughter of Alderman Flanagan in 1919; they had two sons. Cosgrave was himself returned as an alderman in 1920. Like other members of the Republican Government, Cosgrave was imprisoned many times for the part he played in endeavouring to establish an 'alternative' to the British system. Like Collins and Griffith, he supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Cosgrave succeeded Michael Collins as chairman of the Provisional Government and minister for finance in July 1922, and Arthur Griffith as president of the Dáil government in August 1922. His experience in local government was one of the main reasons for his appointment. While not as flamboyant or as charismatic a leader as his predecessors, Cosgrave was an effective chairman who knew how to delegate. In September 1922 he became the first president of the executive council of the Irish Free State. He also served as Minister for Defence (1924) and Minister for Justice (1927). He set about establishing an administration, which would enable the country to recover from the ravages of war. His first decision as President was to merge the Dáil government and the provisional

government. This measure ended the system of dual executive that had existed since January 1922. The powers of the provisional government expired and henceforth the government of Saorstát Éireann was entrusted to a parliament (Oireachtas) with two houses Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann. The Cosgrave government drew up a new Constitution, which lasted until 1937. Leinster House was purchased from the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) and this was where the Dáil would sit on a permanent basis. In September 1922 he succeeded in getting Dáil approval for a special powers resolution. This enabled the Irish Army to hold military courts and impose the death penalty for a variety of offences, including the unauthorised possession of arms. Erskine Childers was one of the first victims of this piece of legislation. He was arrested after he was found to have an illegal firearm in his possession. Childers was tried in secret, found guilty and sentenced to death. He was shot dead on 24 November 1922. De Valera himself was arrested by the Cosgrave government. By April 1923 some 13,000 republican prisoners were in jail or being held in camps around the country. Many prisoners went on hunger strike but the government held out and refused to give into their demands. Cosgrave's hard line policy helped bring the civil war to an end. His own home in Templeogue, Co. Dublin, was burned down by the anti-Treaty IRA, 13 January 1923, and valuable historical documents destroyed. In April 1923, shortly before the General Election Cosgrave founded Cumann na nGaedheal and became its first leader. During its term of office, Cosgrave's government help lay the foundations of the new State. The institutions that were established were closely modelled on their British counterparts. Between 1923-27 a vast legislative programme was drawn up and approved by the Dáil. Areas that were given specific attention included local government, the land problem, police, the civil service, police, the courts, currency, intoxicating liquor and fisheries. Cosgrave's government was responsible for the foundation of ESB, the first semi-state company. The Shannon was harnessed to supply hydroelectric power. The Garda Síochána replaced the RIC, the one important difference being the Gardaí were unarmed. General Eoin O'Duffy held the post of Chief of Police 1922-1933. The Gardaí attempted to return some order after the chaos of four years of civil war. In 1924 the Dáil passed the Intoxicating Liquor Act, which made the possession of ingredients for poteen illegal. By the end of 1924 12,000 people had been prosecuted. The Courts were also transformed under the Courts of Justice Act 1924. District Courts were established and County Courts were replaced by Circuit Courts. The High Courts, Court of Criminal Appeal and Supreme Courts were at the top end of the legal scale. Agricultural reform was tackled with the Land Act of 1923. Cosgrave brought Ireland into the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. Despite the apparent strength of Cosgrave's initiatives, there were also weaknesses. Areas neglected by Cosgrave's government include housing and social welfare. The government also experienced a number of setbacks—The Army Mutiny, 1924; The Boundary Commission 'fiasco' of 1925, and the assassination of the strong man in the administration, Kevin O'Higgins in July 1927. O'Higgins's death seriously undermined the authority of Cumann na nGaedheal. The general election of June 1927 proved especially difficult for Cosgrave and Cumann na nGaedheal. The party faced the wrath of the public who were labelling Cosgrave and his followers pro-British. Cosgrave was also criticised for encouraging economic instability. Cosgrave managed to form a government with the support of the Farmers and Independents but only because de Valera and his followers refused to take the oath that would have given them government. In many ways 1927 marked a change in fortune for Cumann na nGaedheal. The party was becoming increasingly unpopular and Fianna Fáil was growing in strength. The world economic depression, however, was the catalyst that brought the Cosgrave régime to an end. Although Cosgrave

and his government succeeded in establishing a firm democratic basis for the twenty-six counties, Cosgrave was not a popular figure and in many ways was a 'reluctant leader'. Together with Kevin O'Higgins, Cosgrave has been described as a 'stabilising force' in the fledgling free state. When Fine Gael was formed in 1933 he stood down to let Eoin O'Duffy assume leadership but found himself back at the helm in 1935. He continued to lead the opposition to the Fianna Fáil government until he retired in 1944. In 1925 Cosgrave was made a Knight of the Grand Cross of the Order of Pius IX, and he received honorary degrees from universities in Ireland, England, and America. He was keenly interested in horse racing and was appointed to the Irish Racing Board in 1945 and served as its chairman. His son, Liam, was to continue the Cosgrave involvement in Fine Gael, serving as leader of the party between 1965-1977. He died in Dublin on 16 November 1965 and is buried at Goldenbridge Cemetery in Inchicore, Co. Dublin. Churchill offered his praise when he said of Cosgrave: "To the courage of Collins he added the matter-of-fact fidelity of Griffith and a knowledge of practical administration and State policy all his own".

Writings, biography & studies. O'Kennedy-Brindley, *With the President in America: the authorised record of President Cosgrave's tour in the United States and Canada* (Dublin 1928). W. T. Cosgrave, *Publicity tour of the United States and Canada, January 21-February 3, 1928* (New York 1928). Henry Boylan, *A dictionary of Irish biography* (2nd Edition Dublin 1988). A. M. Kehoe, *History makers of the 20th-century Ireland* (Dublin 1989). Stephen Collins, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin 1996). Brian Reynolds, *William T. Cosgrave and the foundation of the Irish Free State, 1922-25* (Kilkenny 1998). Barry Hayes, *William T. Cosgrave: the years of opposition, 1932-44* (Cork 1999). Louis McRedmond, *Modern Irish lives: dictionary of 20th-century biography* (Dublin 1998). H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (ed) *Oxford dictionary of national biography* 60 vols. (Oxford 2004) vol. 13. Tomás O'Riordan, University College, Cork