When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the independent Irish state was just seventeen years old, and 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 that was 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 [Prime Minister] Winston Churchill, [President] Franklin Roosevelt, and [Taoiseach] Eamon de Valera,” (1) Garner’s book goes against historiographical trends emergent in recent years, which have moved toward a bottom-up rather than top-down account of “the Emergency” (as World War Two was euphemistically termed in neutral Ireland).¹ This study does not seek to integrate these approaches but rather moves back toward the “Great Man” school of writing about how awkward little Ireland complicated the “Special Relationship” between the United States and the United Kingdom. Garner’s style is typical of an older historiography too: one which has been told many times before, as demonstrated in the heavy source reliance on published diplomatic histories and its rehashing of the “Franklin and Winston” metanarrative.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” (181). In doing so the narrative 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,” as he was known, 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. When scholars look beyond the medievalist rhetoric of de Valera, it is clear

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that in practice Ireland’s was an “un-neutral neutrality” or even a quietly “pro-allied neutrality.” Although Garner nods to this more nuanced take on Irish neutrality, her narrative reverts 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. Telling the story of neutral Ireland through the voices of Great Statesman results in a book that overlooks the real dynamics behind wartime survival—the economic, the social, the domestic political.

Garner’s claim to originality in her approach is through her analysis of gender, exploring how the national identities and war stories constructed by the heads of government of Britain, Ireland, and the United States were inherently “gendered” (14). Unfortunately, this analysis is wanting. The 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 (16). 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 (86). Often, these reflections on masculinity appear to be an afterthought. Lacking sufficient development, they are pasted into the altogether racier (yet well documented) story of wartime diplomatic intrigue.

The originality of Friends and Enemies involves its inclusion of the voice of American war correspondent Helen Kirkpatrick, confidante of US Ambassador David Gray, who spent part of the war in Ireland. In this respect the book succeeds in its stated mission of displacing hegemonic masculine narratives. The account of Kirkpatrick’s time in Britain and Ireland, which Garner 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 was not 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 John Buchan’s novel The Thirty-Nine Steps. Kirkpatrick’s wild exaggerations might 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 US relations with de Valera’s administration.

Garner’s portrayal of Kirkpatrick’s champion and protector David Gray is also largely positive. While acknowledging the “naivety” of America’s top diplomat in Ireland, the narrative conveys neither the amateurishness nor the utter weirdness of the man (64). Gray’s chief qualification for the job appears to have been the fact that his wife happened to be an aunt of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Kirkpatrick’s 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 (OSS), whose voice is also missing in this book, 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 Hiberno-phobic 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. Garner does not discuss Gray’s conversations with Balfour over séances, where the persistence of shared WASP (White

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Anglo-Saxon Protestant) masculinist-imperialist worldviews seems to have continued past the temporal realm and into the afterlife.

Garner does address racial politics, which were the ethno-religious chasm at play at the time. In the introduction she promises to explore how gendered national identities, as embodied in political elites, were heavily coloured by ethno-religious stereotypes. Garner is right to stress neutral (largely Catholic) Ireland’s racial and cultural separateness from Anglo-Saxonism and its patrician elites. Yet these points are not developed evenly. This is most clearly demonstrated in the book’s 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 as “the iron man with the wooden head” and Garner captures some of the consequently hostile State Department attitudes to him. Left undiscussed is the fact that Aiken, a big man, was described in terms not far removed from the simianized “Paddy” of Victorian racial caricature: irrational, brutish, and 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 n*gger.”

The book, which is all about masculinity, does not develop points about the physical projection of power. Aiken’s visit, we are told, challenged Roosevelt’s “masculine autonomy” (124). 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 the notion that this diplomatic disaster was informed by Aiken’s threat to Roosevelt’s masculine autonomy, then the physical disparities between the wheelchair-bound president and the 6 foot 3-inch-tall Aiken should have been explored.

Putting the physical and the racial to one side, a striking feature of this work is its lack of discussion 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; it had 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 (174-177). Garner implies that such hard-line stances were understandable in attempting to get Ireland on-side in the great war for democracy. What is less easy to come to terms with is the absence of discussion of the real economics informing the Great Men and their grandstanding. In 1977, historian Alan S. Milward wrote about how the historiography of war was shifting from narrowly diplomatic and 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.” Garner provides no such analysis.

There are also several factual errors. For example, the blanket description of the IRA as on the “far political left” (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 Chief of Staff Seán Russell, leading to its embrace of Nazi Germany, as “far political left” is

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6 Evans, “The Iron Man,” 143.
7 Evans, “The Iron Man,” 142.
inaccurate. Terminology also niggles: “Southern Ireland,” for example, is employed throughout 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\textsuperscript{11} 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 maintained the policy, through the early reports of the Nazi death camps, to the bitter end. Frustrating, then, that of the book’s 248 pages just 30 concern the years 1942 to 1945.

Although the author makes some use of primary source material on US and British 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 British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, certain historians’ judgements are presented as fact and alternative verdicts are not discussed. The inclusion of some recent additions to the historiography of the Irish “Emergency” in general and Irish diplomatic history in particular would have strengthened the arguments in the book.\textsuperscript{12}

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” (233). 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 helped forge the modern nation state’s perception of itself, but it also did 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 President John F. Kennedy to his ancestral homeland in 1963, five months before his assassination.

Ireland next hosted a president from an Irish Catholic background sixty years later, against the backdrop of Brexit, with President Joe Biden’s visit to Ireland in April 2023. This marked 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. Ireland’s course between 1939 and 1945 remains controversial, and its proper evaluation demands an analysis integrating experiences across political, cultural, diplomatic, and socio-economic history. 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.

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\textsuperscript{12}Among other works, the absence of Barry Whelan’s \textit{Ireland’s Revolutionary Diplomat: A Biography of Leopold Kerney} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019) is notable.