

The Shannon Scheme for the Electrification of the Irish Free State

The Shannon Scheme for the Electrification of the Irish Free State, upon which my father worked as a laborer in the 1920s when he was a young man, was an immense hydroelectric project. To do the work, the Irish Free State hired a German firm, Siemens, with a reputation for building such plants. In fact, it was an Irish-educated engineer, Thomas McLaughlin, working at Siemens in Berlin who drew up the original plans for the project, and who strongly lobbied for its adoption. "...we must have a national electricity network" he declared, "reaching to our cities, towns and villages, and on out to the rural areas. My country, of which I am so intensely proud, must not lag behind other lands. The people in our remote villages must have the comforts which villages in other lands enjoyed. Electricity, the great key to the uplift of the country, must be provided on a national scale, cheap and abundant."

There had been previous electrification projects during the time that the British held Ireland as a colony but they were all merely local and the Irish people, especially in the rural areas, where the great majority of the Irish lived, were woefully deprived of the power that electricity supplies to turn on a light or a radio, or to spin a sewing machine. Having won their semi-independence in 1922, the Irish government was determined to address the problem of electrification.



To build a large power plant it was necessary to overcome technical, financial and political problems. The most difficult technical problem was to place the hydroelectric plant on the Shannon River, the longest river in Ireland and the best location for an electrical grid because it would be much easier from the Shannon to distribute electricity to the entire nation. The problem is that the Shannon flows through level ground and does not naturally provide the kind of rapid currents that will turn turbines. It was therefore necessary to first construct a race-head, a canal that would divert the Shannon over a waterfall at Ardnacrusha where the power plant would be placed. Another canal would return the Shannon to its natural course a little outside Limerick, before it emptied into the sea. It was to dig those canals that my father and about 5,000 other Irishmen were hired.

Considering the size and complexity of the Scheme, it is not surprising that the cost would be very large. Siemens wanted altogether nearly ,12 million to build the project but even so, Siemens knew it was constructing the plant for less than it would cost. The Free State could not even afford the initial cost, 5 million and would have to borrow that sum. Fortunately, the Bank of Ireland, a highly respected, private institution agreed to guarantee the loan.

The Shannon Scheme presented a host of technical and financial problems but the political problems were perhaps more severe. The government of Ireland at that time was headed by William Cosgrave, the leader of the Cumann na nGaedhael (The Union of the Gaels), an offshoot of the various parties that had come together to fight the war for independence, and who then fought one another in a civil war in a bitter dispute over the terms of the treaty that ended the war with England. Despite its claim to be a union of all the Gaels, the

Cumann na nGaedhael was only one of several parties in the new Irish Dáil, and the opposition parties were sure to raise objections.

The Labour Party objected that the government would not pay the workers a decent wage, or provide them with decent housing or decent food. Sure enough, almost as soon as construction began, there was a strike by workers who wanted higher wages and better living conditions. The Cosgrave government scoffed at the strike, arguing that fewer than thirty workers walked out, nearly all of whom returned to the project when they realized that the government would make no concessions to them.

My father probably would have agreed with the government if he were employed on the project at the time of the strike. Before being hired on the Shannon Scheme, he lived at home with his parents in Galway, a bit west of Spiddal, in a dirt-floor cottage, without electricity and without indoor plumbing. For heat the family had to dig up and cart peat from a nearby bog. In comparison, the barracks (or huts) provided by the government were warm and dry, and had electricity and indoor plumbing. The wages my father was paid for a 50-hour week were between 20 and 25 shillings, most of which he sent home to his parents. Others might have resented conditions at Ardnacrucha, but not my father.

The Sinn Féin party also opposed the Scheme, mainly because of its cost, but Sinn Féin had no official voice in the government. It had won more seats than any other party in the 1923 election but it would not occupy those seats because its members would not swear loyalty to the English Crown. Eamon de Valera, the recognized head of Sinn Féin, was also incensed that a German firm had been hired to work on the project. In his belief that the Irish should do for themselves, he suggested that the Free State should limit itself to a less daunting project, a dam on the Liffey River, for example, which would train Irish engineers. When Ireland finally had a sufficient corps of engineers, there would be time to tackle something as challenging as the Shannon Scheme.

There was opposition to the Shannon Scheme even within the Cumann na nGaedhael party. Although Cosgrave was one of the founders of the party and was head of the cabinet, he usually deferred to the members of the cabinet, so the government was really run by department heads with very little interference. The most influential department of all was the Finance Department because Cosgrave gave first priority to an austerity budget. He wanted to reduce income taxes by almost any means available, like reducing old age pensions, and in that endeavor he relied mostly on the Finance Department, controlled by Joseph Brennan. Brennan naturally rejected the Shannon Scheme because of its large cost.

On the other side, Patrick McGilligan, head of the Industry and Commerce Department, strongly supported the Shannon Scheme despite its costs, and if anyone deserves the title of the Scheme's father, it is McGilligan. It was he who first brought the Scheme to the attention of McLaughlin and it was he who most persuasively answered objections to the Scheme. To de Valera's objection that it should be Irish engineers, not Germans, who should be hired for the Shannon Scheme, McGilligan argued that the use of a German firm would be way of declaring economic independence from the English. To those who argued that the government could not afford the expense, he pointed out that the electrification of the nation should be seen as an investment that would pay for itself in time as more and more subscribers signed up to enjoy the benefits of electricity. He also argued that the ability of the new government to successfully complete so large a project would demonstrate the ability of the Irish to rule themselves and would help knit up the divisions of the civil war. Cosgrave eventually sided with McGilligan by "promoting" Brennan out of the Finance Department.

Even while the political controversy continued, the work on the Scheme began in August, 1925 and was completed, nearly on schedule, on July 22, 1929. It was between those years that my father was hired as a laborer when he was in his twenties.

My father never mentioned the strike at the Shannon Scheme, but he vividly remembered a riot between Irish workers based on language. Those workers who spoke only English, who were the majority, resented those, like my father, who came from the Gaeltach, who spoke only Irish, or who, like my father, could speak English but felt more at home speaking Irish. The Irish-speakers tended to congregate together in part because the English-speakers looked down on the Irish speakers as hopelessly backward and let those feelings be known. The Irish-speakers finally struck back and a large-scale brawl broke out. My father was proud to remember that he knocked down a larger opponent and that one of the German supervisors who witnessed the fight said in effect "Good work, Paddy." The foreman may have known that my father's name, in Irish, was Pádraig (or Patrick in English) but it was more likely that for the Germans working on the Scheme, all of the Irish workers were Paddies.

Despite all the difficulties it had to overcome, the Shannon Scheme was a success. In 1927 the government created the Electricity Supply Board to distribute the power that would be generated at Ardnacrucha. The Board still exists and when the Shannon Scheme proved inadequate to the needs of the Irish people, the Electricity Supply Board upgraded it and built other generating stations, some powered by wind. It now faces competition from private enterprise because of the rules imposed by the European Union but the Board is highly resourceful and will undoubtedly compete successfully.

To end on another personal note, in 1980, I was driving toward Limerick with my father when he off-handedly mentioned that we were passing close to Ardnacrucha. I made the small detour necessary to see a place so important to my father but we found a large fence keeping us away from the power station. Fortunately we also found a guardhouse and stopped to speak to the watchman inside. When my father told the man that he had worked on the Shannon Scheme, the watchman told us that his father had also worked on it. They then swapped names and my father realized that he had shared a barracks with the guard's father.

The guard's father had remained in Ireland, while my father had emigrated in 1929 to start a new life in the United States. As part of that new life my father met and married a colleen from County Clare and had four children, I being the eldest. Although my father did well in America, he arrived at the start of the Great Depression and had to work hard his whole life. He sometimes wondered if his life would have been better had he remained in Ireland. At the time of his emigration, the Irish government was desperate to hire as teachers men whose first language was Irish. My father was tempted to apply because he would have enjoyed the respect then accorded to schoolmasters in Ireland. I, and I am sure my brothers and sister, are eternally grateful that he resisted the temptation.

(Written by James P. Walsh, January, 2009)

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