

January 2010

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Ian d'Alton

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Recommended Citation

d'Alton, Ian (2010) "A Protestant Paper for a Protestant People: The Irish Times and the Southern Irish Minority," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 5.

doi:10.21427/D7TT5T

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol12/iss1/5>

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A PROTESTANT PAPER FOR A PROTESTANT PEOPLE: The *Irish Times* and the southern Irish minority

Ian d'Alton

WE IRISH PROTESTANTS have always had a reputation for appreciating the minutiae of social distinction. Often invisible to the outsider, this extended to such as our dogs, our yachts and, of course, our newspapers. My paternal grandmother was no exception. Her take on the relative pecking order of the Irish dailies was that one got one's news and views from the *Irish Times*, one lit the fire with the *Irish Independent*, and as for the *Irish Press* – ah! Delicacy forbids me to go into details, but suffice it to say that it involved cutting it into appropriate squares, and hanging these in the smallest room of the house!

In this paper I set the scene, as it were: to examine those who formed the *Times*' perceived audience for much of its existence – Irish Protestants, in particular those who were citizens of the Free State and the early Republic. And while Irish Protestantism, like Irish Catholicism, was by no means a monolith – not just Anglicans, not just unionists – it is recognised that being Church of Ireland and loyalist are its overwhelmingly dominant characteristics.

When Lawrence Knox founded the paper, Protestantism was still the predominant political and cultural force in the island, and for its first 60 years the paper was in tune with the polity of which it was part. Indeed, in 1859 Ireland was in a situation never to be repeated, with a majority of conservative MPs. Knox had chosen a propitious moment to launch what he described as a 'New Conservative Daily Paper' (O'Brien, 2008: 16) since, in the words of a landlord, 'country quiet, prices good, farmers prospering, rents well paid' (Hoppen, 1984: 164–5). By the *Times*' half-century, though even if landlordism was a busted flush, Protestants, with about a 10 per cent proportion in the 26 counties' population,¹ still punched far above their numeric weight. In 1911, close to 20 per cent of the managerial classes were Protestants. They accounted for nearly half the lawyers, over a third of doctors, and nearly three-quarters of bankers. By 1926, Protestants had declined to 7 per cent of the total, yet still comprised 40 per cent of lawyers, over 20 per cent of doctors and well over 50 per cent of bankers (McDowell, 1997: 5; Saorstat Éireann, 1926: 46–7, 54–5). Over a quarter of large farms were still in Protestant hands in 1926 (Saorstat Éireann, 1926: 50, 52; McDowell, 1975: 121–2).

¹ House of Commons, 1912–13 (CD. 6051), cxvi 38–9. 'Protestants' are defined as members of the Church of Ireland, Methodists, Presbyterians and some minor Christian denominations – Ireland, *Census of Ireland 1991*, vol. 5. See http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/protestants_1861_1991.html#decline_roi: (consulted 22 December 2008).

This economically significant minority had a vital interest in how the new state approached taxation, business, education, the professions and the public service, and the *Times* reflected that interest. And long practice playing to a prosperous and literate constituency bore dividends. Even as the proportion of Protestants in the upper economic echelons declined from the 1920s, the newspaper astutely marketed itself towards those who took their places – the Catholic middle classes (Richardson, 2007: 17, 35, n.63; O'Brien, 2008: 165-166).²

If the economics broadly worked, politics was a trickier play. Fintan O'Toole (2009: 7) suggests, rightly, that 'the reality was that a unionist newspaper could never really avoid being a Protestant one'. If that was true, what about the converse which, in the new Ireland, was what really mattered? The eccentric genius of the *Irish Times*, edited and managed by eccentric geniuses, was its adaptive ability – mirroring, in many ways, the little-appreciated chameleon-like qualities of much of southern Protestantism. In this, the paper was much more successful than some of its peers. Adapt, or die. The Protestant unionist *Cork Constitution* newspaper, with its strident sectarian agenda, could not survive the change of regime in 1922 nor, indeed, could the *Freeman's Journal* on the other side of the fence, for somewhat different reasons (Larkin, 2006). The world of the *Irish Times* offers a proxy for the path that much of southern Irish Protestantism was to follow, itself becoming, as Mr O'Toole puts it 'an example of the virtues preached in its own leading articles, a solid, practical achievement by Protestants who, instead of standing aloof, threw themselves into the daily life of Ireland' (2009:7).

O'Toole's view is, though, I think, maybe slightly rosy. Reflecting the generality of southern Protestantism, the *Times* still possessed outsider status nearly half a century after independence. Indeed, under Smyllie and Douglas Gageby especially, it gloried in its contrarianism (O'Brien, 2008: 168-72, 18-85). But if the *Times* in particular, and Protestants in general, were still perceived as outsiders for so long, it is perhaps worth asking why. Was it a state imposed on them by the insiders, the Catholics? Or was it self-determined, a cocoon created to ensure that difference was maintained? Edward Said's argument is apposite – that nations are 'narrations ... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important' (Said, 1993: xiii). Despite a dominant plangent nationalism, a distinct Protestant narrative existed side-by-side right through to the 1970s. A Church of Ireland declaration in 1922 (*Church of Ireland Gazette and Family Newspaper*,³ 21 July 1922) that 'we are Irish and Ireland is our home' might seem unexceptional, and could have been subscribed to by Sinn Féin. But Protestants and Catholics were divided by a common language; in 1922, that simple phrase contained a minefield of differing interpretations of 'we', 'Irish', 'Ireland' and 'home'. The *Irish Times* spent much of the succeeding half-century offering *its* particular interpretation to the majority on behalf of the minority.

Amongst most Catholics, there was simply a lack of appreciation of, or desire to understand, the subtleties and difficulties of the southern Protestant position, and of the existential angst that was often involved in trying to reconcile patriotism with nationalism. 'We cannot tell what political change lies before our country', sermonised the newly-elected archbishop of Dublin in July 1920, 'but one thing is cer-

² Richardson's article is an excellent analytical introduction to the history of the *Times*. ³ Henceforth, *COIG*.

tain, the Church of Ireland must never let itself be a stranger in Ireland' (Seaver, 1963: 105). This text could be applied equally to the way the *Times* eventually conducted itself under the new dispensation.

It was not an easy road. Southern Protestants were wounded beasts in 1922. However, in many ways, though, independence marked but a stage in a journey that had already been well under way since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The cascading effect of land agitation, Parnellism, resurgent Catholicism and – above all – the Gaelic cultural revival had already led to an Ireland whose narrative maddeningly and inexplicably demanded their adherence to the nation and their exclusion from it at one and the same time. In 1916 Irish Protestants were looked upon, in the words of novelist Susanne Day, as 'illegitimate children of an irregular union between Hibernia and John Bull' (Day, 1916: 16). Crown and empire, in some measure, legitimised that existence; once gone, though, in the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen's words, 'in the life of the new Ireland ... the lives of my own people become a little thing' (Bowen, 1984: 437). Not so little as to be happily left in peace – a significant part of the 32 per cent decline in the Protestant population of the Free State between the censuses of 1911 and 1926 (Saorstat Éireann, 1926: 46) was due to 'involuntary migration' in the 1920–3 period.⁴ Irrelevance bore little value, but visibility had its price.

This kept them quiet for a long time. It is not surprising, really, that with a few exceptions – columnists in the more courageous Irish periodicals;⁵ writers such as Hubert Butler and Yeats; and some prominent, but totally atypical, churchmen – Protestants tended to curl into a ball. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s their representatives often seemed, in public at any rate, to offer an unattractive, rather cloying, cosyng-up to a state which many, in their hearts, despised (O'Halloran, 1987: 79–85). This was rooted in the realities. They had much to lose, and had nearly lost it. The economic position and educational privileges of the largely middle class southern Protestant were valuables well worth preserving by whatever means possible.⁶ In the phrase of a later cleric, Protestants – as 'white mice' – were encouraged to keep a low profile (Seaver, 1963: 117).⁷ Not for them the fictional Kate Alcock's words, from the playwright Lennox Robinson, in 1926: '... they're afraid of us still ... We

⁴ See McDowell (1975: 119–23) for a detailed discussion of population trends between 1911 and 1926; Dr A. Bielenberg, as reported by Harris (2008), puts the proportion of the Protestant decline due to forced migration at about 37 per cent. In the case of Cork, nearly half its Protestant population was driven out or left in the period from 1920 to 1926, although they had seemed to have been relatively well-integrated with their Catholic neighbours (Hart, 1996: 81–94). See also Hart, (1998: 272–93, 307, 309, 314) and, for the situation in Monaghan, Dooley (2000). See also http://www.reform.org/TheReformMovement_files/article_files/articles/cork.htm (consulted 23 December 2008) for an informative, if slanted, analysis of the decline of Cork's Protestant population, 1919–23. Something quite similar had happened before, elsewhere: the 1920–3 period echoes 1798, especially in Co. Wexford (Dunne, 2004: 128, 186, 247–64). ⁵ For instance, the *Irish Statesman*, the *Bell*, the *Church of Ireland Gazette* – and, sometimes, the *Irish Times*. ⁶ On the decline of 'poor' Protestants see Maguire, (1995: 196–7). So also in Cork city – in 1845, just before the Famine – a Cork city Anglican cleric angrily wrote to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, about the 2,000 Protestant inhabitants in his parish of St Mary Shandon – 'hundreds of them in the greatest distress' (Neligan, 1845). One hundred and twenty years later, the author's Cork Church of Ireland Boy Scout troop, in a fit of Christian enthusiasm, did up some Christmas hampers for distribution to poor Protestant families in the city. We asked the Church of Ireland Dean of Cork to nominate deserving recipients. Despite his endeavors, and to his great embarrassment, he couldn't find any! On *economic conservatism*, see the career of Bryan Cooper, TD, an independent who held a 'unionist' Dáil seat until 1927 in south Dublin (Buckland, 1972: 299). ⁷ The phrase 'white mice' is a recent description – see letter from Rev. A. Carter, *CoIG*, 27 April 2007.

must glory in our difference, be of proud of it as they are of theirs' (Murray, 1982: 195–6).

Some became different in a different way, embracing parts of the nationalist narrative through such as a devotion to Gaelic. More commonly, though, the duty that had tugged insistently at Protestant sleeves before 1922 was no more; the new state apparently did not want them; and they could retreat sensibly into a private and near-invisible community of their schools, the stockbrokers, the freemasons, the churches and Trinity College, whilst writing letters to themselves in the *Irish Times*. Integration was not a necessity; even in a place like Cork city where less than 5 per cent of the population was non-Roman Catholic, it was still possible to live a Protestant life, and die a Protestant death, without entering into a Catholic world – born in the Victoria Hospital, attending Cork Grammar or Rochelle Schools, dating and mating in church-run (and church-vetted) dances and socials, employed by the Lee Garage or Lester's chemists, socialising amongst the freemasons and the choir of St Fin Barre's cathedral, playing hockey with Church of Ireland Hockey Club and rugby with Cork Constitution, spending old age in St Luke's Home for Protestant Incurables, buried by Cross's, undertakers.⁸

But there was a little more to it than this. Many southern Protestants, at least up to the 1950s, were as conservative as Catholics when it came to matters like divorce, abortion and the place of women in society and the family (Regan, 2001: 254; Pilkington, 2002: 125–33). Raging radicals they were not. If the likes of Smyllie, Yeats and Hubert Butler – sometimes as far removed from many of their co-religionists as from the mass of Catholics – imagined they led an army, it was often a conscript one, reluctant and uncomprehending. And even the *Irish Times*, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, may sometimes have got just a little ahead of its natural audience.

As against this, as Mark O'Brien has pointed out, the *Times* was frequently castigated as the voice of a bigoted, unreconstructed Protestantism. That this attitude was simplistic is demonstrated in the issues it was prepared to take on, and those it wasn't. Let me give you two examples from the same year, 1950. Early that year, the outcome of the Tilson child custody case – intimately connected as it was with the very survival of the caste – was seen as pivotal by Irish Protestants. Ernest Tilson was an Anglican who, under the *Ne temere* decree (1908), had signed the promise to raise his children as Roman Catholics. On the breakdown of his marriage, he made to renege on that promise. The Irish courts held that it was a legally enforceable contract, notwithstanding Protestant protests of duress. While not relying solely on the Irish constitution's Article 44 which stated the special position of the Catholic Church, the judgment – as Irish Protestants saw it – effectively enshrined Roman Catholic canon law in Irish jurisprudence (Lyons, 1971: 671 n.; Cooney, 1999: 245–56; Seanad Éireann, 1964). It coloured Protestant attitudes towards mixed education, in particular, for a generation. The case engendered considerable reaction in the newspaper, both editorially and by letter.⁹ It spoke to the *Times's* ethic of a state unbiased towards any one religious viewpoint, as evidenced by the vigorous debate, also early in 1950, on what became known as 'The Liberal Ethic', in which it and its correspondents took on such

⁸ I am indebted to Rev. Peter Hanna for this insight. ⁹ As recently as February 2006 there was evidence of the still differing opinions on Tilson, in a speech by the archbishop of Dublin, Rt. Rev. John Neill (*Irish Independent*, 6 February 2006). A film, *Evelyn*, starring Pierce Brosnan, and loosely based on the Tilson case, had a limited release in the US (13 December 2002) and the UK (21 March 2003).

well-known champions of Roman Catholic hegemony as J.P. Ryan, secretary of *Maria Duce*, and Westmeath County Council (O'Brien, 2008: 133–6).

Later that year, the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary provoked a very different response, or rather non-response.¹⁰ The Church of Ireland, through a rare pastoral letter from its archbishops and bishops, issued a robust refutation of the new Article of Faith. But, reading the *Church of Ireland Gazette*, and its temporal counterpart, the *Irish Times*, what is striking is not the extent, depth and range of the adverse comments on the dogma, but rather their relative absence.¹¹ The aforementioned Tilson case had attracted much more attention, with extensive reports in the *Gazette* (*CoIG*, 1950) and numerous letters in the *Irish Times* during the last quarter of 1950. Why is this? We can adduce a couple of reasons. The obvious one is that the issue of the Assumption was esoteric, the arguments based on obscure early church history and difficult theology. Not the sort of stuff that would be the staple of loyalist pub-chat on the Shankill Road, nor even Saturday-night dinner parties in south Dublin – in a phrase, not likely to sell newspapers.

Again, in a conflict between the opportunity for a bit of Catholic-baiting and the sensible desire to keep heads down for fear of having them chopped off, the latter possibly predominated. The social, political and economic consequences of Catholicism were fair game, but purely religious topics were not. The furthest the *Times* would go is illustrated by its reaction to the 1932 Eucharistic Congress. The paper was impressed by what it called 'the unanimous and whole-hearted fervour' of Irish Catholics, while voicing a coded unease, in referring to the papal high mass, that they appeared to 'have no more ego in them than the sands themselves' (O'Brien, 2008: 73).

There is some fascinating, though hardly conclusive, evidence that the *Irish Times* may have deliberately decided to keep out of the controversy: one churchman complained in late 1950 that the newspaper had failed to publish a relevant letter to the editor. And the complete absence of any letters from the public is a little odd, to say the least – though a simpler explanation might be that, if there were any such letters the *Times* under Smyllie, its legendary, chaotic editor, may have simply mislaid them (Gray, 1991: 199–200). While it finally did publish the Archbishops' pastoral in full, it was not placed on the front page, but on page four, suspiciously juxtaposed with Myles na gCopaleen's satirical column 'Cruiskeen Lawn' (*Irish Times*, 11 December 1950). Maybe the newspaper had taken to heart a previous Archbishop of Dublin's admonition in 1920, at a time of great tension, that 'Singularity is never popular' (Seaver, 1963: 117).

On the Catholic side, provocative counter-attacks seemingly did not merit a response either. Alfred O'Rahilly's disparaging description of Anglican clerics as 'the prelates of this little man-made church' who 'could only be regarded by their flock as convenient officials under the constitution of 1870' did not elicit a riposte (Gaughan, 1993: 20–4; see also Stevens, 2007: 57). Even the nonagenarian Catholic bishop of Cork's mischievous suggestion, in his 1951 Lenten pastoral, that the Anglican archbishops of Armagh and Dublin were not qualified to discuss the finer points of Catholic theology being, in the sight of his Church, mere laymen (*CoIG*, 5 February 1951) was met with silence.

¹⁰ A more extensive discussion, including the theological element, can be found in d'Alton (2009). ¹¹ One letter relating to the Assumption appeared in each of *CoIG* on 13 October, 10 November, 1 December, 1950, 5 January, 16 February, 1951.

The half-century, then, saw southern Irish Protestantism on the back foot in the face of an aggressive and wholly intolerant Catholicism. Hospital control issues were always potential flashpoints and, in 1949, enthusiastic Roman Catholic doctors had taken over the governance of Mercer's Hospital by way of a legal putsch. Several Protestant medics subsequently resigned, or were sacked. It took a hasty combination of Archbishop McQuaid and a private member's bill in parliament to repair the damaged relations (Cooney, 1999: 243–4; Ó Corráin, 2006: 93–4). Also in that year, Protestants had had before them an image of the funeral of the former president of Ireland, Douglas Hyde, a member of the Church of Ireland. The cabinet, with one exception, did not attend the service, in obedience to Catholic Church rules. The poet Austin Clarke (1963) caught the atmosphere of legalism that made it such an embarrassment:

At the last bench
Two Catholics, the French
Ambassador and I, knelt down.
The vergers waited. Outside.
The hush of Dublin town,
Professors of cap and gown,
Costello, his Cabinet,
In government cars, hiding
Around the corner, ready
Tall hat in hand, dreading
Our Father in English. Better
Not hear that 'which' for 'who'
And risk eternal doom.¹²

A two-and-a-half pence stamp issued by the new republic in 1950 symbolised why Protestants might have felt *they* were still in the tuppenny-halfpenny league, as far as the state was concerned: it commemorated the Roman Catholic Holy Year, had St. Patrick and his arms, and bore the inscription 'Poblacht na h-Éireann'. There seemed little point in engagement with this Catholic-Republican unreconstructed construct. As late as 1956, the advice still offered by the *Church of Ireland Gazette* was that 'we should keep ourselves to ourselves and, if we speak, confine our remarks to platitudinous exhortations on non-controversial subjects...lest such attention should result in material or social disadvantages' (*CoIG*, 30 November 1956). Two years later, the general synod decided not to use the term 'Anglican', as it suggested 'a vague West British sound' (*CoIG*, 30 May, 1958).¹³ Perhaps, as a later writer has put it, 'as a vestigial population in the new nation-state' Protestants instinctively felt that 'their citizenship was a matter of indulgence and not of right' and they should act accordingly (O'Neill, 2001: 326–7).

In this atmosphere, symbol often took the place of substance. The *Times* both followed and led the southern Protestant adoption, from the twenties to the sixties, of a narrative based largely on such symbolism, centred on a sentimental fealty to Crown and Empire. Spontaneous renderings of *God Save the King* at Armistice Day

¹² The reference in the last three lines is to the (then) different versions of the Lord's Prayer. ¹³ I am indebted to Rev. Dr Robert Tobin for this reference. Churches of the Church of Ireland now (2009) are happy to describe themselves on their notice-boards as 'Anglican.'

remembrances in 1931 and 1950 were rare public manifestations of a loyalty usually kept in-house, often in-church (McDowell, 1997: 170; *Irish Times*, 15 November 1950). Bishop Day of Ossory ordered special services to be held in his churches for the silver jubilee of King George V in 1935 (Hartford, 1940: 116–17). Up to the 1960s, southern Protestants may have listened to the Queen's Christmas broadcasts – but this was done strictly in private between consenting adults. Since the Church of Ireland's *Church Hymnal* was designed for use in both parts of Ireland, it today still contains the hymn *God Save the Queen*, but did not acquire a rubric – 'For use in Northern Ireland' – until as late as the year 2000.¹⁴ Poppies sold to assist First World War veterans, and worn in the lapel, were a particular flashpoint. Republican poppy-snatchers in 1920s Dublin were painfully foiled by the young bucks of Trinity College, who threaded their poppies through razor-blades.

It helped that the public geography remained broadly congenial: even if Kingstown was now Dun Laoghaire, Kingsbridge was not yet Heuston; Nelson's Pillar was still the focal point of the capital; associations, clubs and professional bodies continued to carry the 'Royal' prefix; the postboxes had their royal ciphers, if now painted a fetching Hibernian green; and Dublin, pro-rata, still had twice the number of streets called after Queen Victoria than had London. And there was always the *Irish Times*. Its court and personal column, headed by the royal coat-of-arms, was a constant reminder of an emotional constancy, only removed in March 1942 as a result of wartime censorship (O'Brien, 2008: 108–11).

George Boyce (1988: 135) makes the point that 'Irish society was too divided on sectarian lines to enable any Protestant, however talented or committed, to enter into the experience of the other side'; but it can be held that the same was equally true of Catholics. Popular Catholic nationalism, whether through ignorance or design, found it difficult to comprehend an Irishness that involved notions of cultural Britishness, but a strong spatial loyalty to their particular bit of the island; political aloofness, but active economic engagement; a sense of moral individualism but a visceral tribal religiosity.¹⁵ Understanding was not helped, though, by mutterings from some Anglicans that *they* were the true heirs of St Patrick and that their church, unlike *another*, was not subject to foreign control.¹⁶ Count Plunkett (1897), like many nationalists, exhibited a simplistic view when he said in 1897: 'It should be left to England to snub them. That should make them Irishmen.' He was wrong. It was much more complex than that.

In 1953, the children of Cork Grammar School were compulsorily gathered to hear the live radio broadcast of the Coronation. A mere thirteen years later, the pupils were again required to assemble, but this time for a reading of the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic by the Head Prefect.¹⁷ By 1966, then, the declaration

¹⁴ See Terence Brown (2004: 102–37) for a wide-ranging discussion of the cultural fate of the minority community between the wars. ¹⁵ The historian Lecky had put it thus – 'I have never looked upon Home Rule as a question between Protestant and Catholic. It is a question between honesty and dishonesty, between loyalty and treason, between individual freedom and organised tyranny and outrage' (quoted in McDowell, 1997: 2).

¹⁶ George T. Stokes argued for the lineal continuity of the Church of Ireland from what was portrayed as the independent Celtic Church pre-1172 – 'Irish national independence and Irish ecclesiastical independence, in fact, terminated practically together' (1928: 348). ¹⁷ For 1953 – information from Rev. P. Hanna, who was a pupil at CGS in 1953; for 1966 – personal information. Two students wore Union Jacks in their buttonholes at this latter event, but maintained that it was in protest at what they saw as the glorification of violence in the Proclamation, not its republican sentiments.

that ‘We are Irish and Ireland is our home’ could clearly bear a resonance of Irishness not amenable to earlier times. Southern Protestants were not just ripe plums waiting to fall into Caitlín Ní Houlihan’s capacious apron; they were never a British ethnic minority that would mysteriously change into a docile Irish religious one, and the history of the *Times* is an emphatic reminder of that nuanced truth.

Would the *Times* have been missed, had it gone under at Independence? I think so. On the one hand, for southern Protestants it helped to supply an essential narrative of continuity, easing the ex-unionists into a tolerance – albeit often grudgingly – of the new Ireland. On the other, in a Free State that was, in many respects anything but free, it held fast to principles of personal responsibility and the questioning of verities almost single-handedly until at the last, in Roy Foster’s rather provocative formulation, it was rescued by Catholics becoming Protestants.¹⁸

In one particular sense, it is a miracle that the *Irish Times* survived at all. At the other side of the wide road from the paper, the Palace Bar, in Fleet Street, was a favourite haunt of the hacks. Truly, a Protestant God must have been watching over them. How *were* large-scale casualties avoided in those daily inebriated meanderings across Westmoreland Street?

AUTHOR

Ian d’Alton, a senior Irish public servant, was awarded the Royal Historical Society’s Alexander Prize in 1972. The author of *Protestant Society and Politics in Cork, 1812–1844* (1980), he has written extensively on southern Irish Protestantism in its political, social and cultural manifestations.

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¹⁸ First articulated by Marie-Claire Charon (1998) and by Eddie Holt, in *Irish Times*, 18 November, 2000; Foster (2007: 37–66).

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