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Book Review: Irish Journalism Before Independence: More a Disease Than a Profession (Kevin Rafter (ed))

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Kevin Rafter (ed.), *Irish journalism before independence: More a disease than a profession*

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Harry Browne

In his foreword to this fine book, James Curran acknowledges that the great volume on the history of British newspapers that he edited in the 1970s was forced to forego an Irish dimension due to the absence of scholarship in the area. Curran, indeed, was among those who have, over the years, promised to fill the gap. Others have begun to do so: Chris Morash and John Horgan have toiled at the big picture, while others have contributed smaller sods of knowledge about particular publications and moments in the history of Irish journalism. Hugh Oram's illustrated history of Irish newspapers from 1983 is a student favourite and Marie-Louise Legg's 1998 book on provincial papers from the Famine to the Parnell Split is a remarkable overview. Kevin Rafter's new edited volume is nonetheless something of a breakthrough.

It is in this context – namely discussing seminal work in a still-shockingly under-developed field – that we can run through the usual list of quibbles about what is missing, hopefully without the reviewer's typical scolding tone. The gaps are likely to be genuine holes in the extant scholarship rather than in Rafter's editorial efforts. Missing ingredients here include, in no particular order: Ulster, popular movements other than the national movement, magazines, women-oriented journalism, audiences, and even the *Irish Times*, though the history of that paper has been well recorded in Mark O'Brien's recent book.

Rafter was rightly prepared to employ a definition of Irish journalism that is not restricted to journalism in Ireland: for example, of the four journalists profiled in Gillian O'Brien's chapter on the late-19th-century Chicago press and Irish journalists, two were born in the USA and one moved there at age four. 'Irish journalism', we are invited to conclude from the veritable world tour on which this volume takes us, including profiles of three famous foreign-correspondents, is a wandering sort of practice.

For the first few chapters, however, the book does stay close to home. The book's provocative subtitle comes from a letter to the Dublin Evening Mail in 1908, in which a Dublin editor is quoted regarding then-new efforts to teach journalism.

The whole mistake ... arises from the gratuitous presumption that journalism is a profession. As a matter of fact, it is not so much a profession as a disease. It can be caught – not taught. (p.2)

In his introduction, Rafter thanks fellow DCU scholar Martin Molony for sharing the quote, but he doesn't dwell on it: indeed, given the book's implicit and explicit celebrations of ever-increasing 'professionalism' among practitioners of journalism (in Michael Foley's chapter, for example), the subtitle seems to stand initially as little more than a joke. Rafter, like some of his contributors in the early, most coherent part of this volume, takes a rather whiggishly rosy view of 'progress' in the increas-

ingly commercialised, professionalised late-19th-century press.

Mark O'Brien, for example, makes an anecdotal case for the existence of a potent and growing ethos of professional solidarity among Irish journalists throughout most of the 19th century, a case that is then rather undermined when he quotes *Irish Times* editor James A Scott, who wrote in 1887 that, until the then-recent founding of the Irish Journalists Association, practitioners of the craft were 'utterly unknown to each other; they were jealous of each other; they were often looked upon as in antagonism to one another' (p. 19).

As the volume gets into its stride it becomes a more scattered affair, mainly short biographical, single-paper and single-issue studies, many of them under the long shadow of the national question, and not-a-few that make something a mockery of the earlier 'professionalisation' narrative. Matthew Potter's definitive account of the proverbial tale of the Skibbereen Eagle and the Tsar of Russia, for example, leaves little room for the idealised late-Victorian image of the dispassionate and objective newspaperman.

We are back instead with the 'disease', which is probably best diagnosed as some syndrome involving foolhardiness, eccentricity and/or immutable political commitment, at least to one's own personal political interests. Thus, for example, the journalist entrusted by the venerable *Times* to skewer Charles Stewart Parnell in 1887 was himself an Irish absentee landlord, James Woulfe Flanagan – whose tale is well told here by Maurice Walsh. Two of the foreign correspondents profiled, E.J. Dillon (by Rafter himself) and Francis McCullagh (by John Horgan), were, by the ends of their careers, thoroughly partisan propagandists. 'Professionalism', such as it is, repeatedly seems honoured more in the breach than the observance.

Many chapters are fascinating. M.L. Brillman's strong revisionist take on the early days of *The Nation* protests perhaps a little too much that the paper remained fundamentally loyal to Daniel O'Connell during the mid-1840s. Anyone who has pored over 1846-47 editions of that great newspaper has experienced the shock on seeing the thick black borders in May 1847, after the Liberator died and was adoringly eulogised in the same pages where he had been so trenchantly condemned for many months previous.

Among the many chapters that prompted a yearning for more in this reader is Terence Killeen's on Joyce and journalism. It looks briefly at some of the novelist's journalistic writing and then analyses/appreciates the wonderful Aoelus episode in *Ulysses*, which takes place in the offices of the *Freeman's Journal* and *Evening Telegraph*. Killeen doesn't quote my own favourite line, spoken by the somewhat impecunious lawyer J.J. O'Molloy in that episode: 'Sufficient for the day is the newspaper thereof,' which I've long used as an epigram-cum-talking-point in my own history-of-journalism classes.

Joyce's rare forays into journalism consisted largely of opinion-writing. And as though to underline the supremacy of propaganda over professionalism in the history of Irish journalism, two other late chapters of this new volume are devoted to Arthur Griffith. The Sinn Féin editor is described by Felix Larkin as 'a forgotten man of Irish history' (p. 174), which seems something of an overstatement. Certainly he is in no danger of neglect here, since he is also a significant figure in the book's final chapter, which looks at the Irish 'peace process' of 1920-21. In a more perfect world some of the Griffith material would have made way for, say, a consideration of the

thriving, multi-faceted labour or feminist press in Ireland in the first decades of the 20th century. As it stands, the book makes only passing mention of Larkin and Connolly – and no mention at all of the popular newspapers they edited, nor of Helena Moloney and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington.

Still, a flick through this book to look at the endnotes to each chapter highlights its ultimate source of authority and its strongest claim to our respect. Most of its 16 authors have done impressive, even inspiring archival research and unearthed new and intriguing details about their subject matter. If the big picture remains a little murky, it is not for want of their scholarship.

REVIEWER

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