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Book Review: Mr. Parnell's Rottweiler: Censorship and the United Ireland Newspaper 1881-1891 (Myles Dungan)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Myles Dungan, *Mr Parnell's Rottweiler: Censorship and the United Ireland Newspaper, 1881–1891*

Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014, 384pp, €25.15 ISBN: 978-0716532347

Michael Foley

The Rottweiler of the title is the *United Ireland* newspaper, a paper that shone for a little more than a decade, that built the Parnell cult of personality, and protected Parnell, an inherently conservative man, from radical nationalists in the rural heartlands of Ireland and from the Irish in the US.

More moderate nationalist newspapers, in particular the *Freeman's Journal*, might have reflected Parnell's vision more accurately, but it was William O'Brien, as editor of the *United Ireland*, that kept, the 'mythic' entity of Parnell before the public and ensured that the *Freeman's* and the *Nation* toed the Parnell line.

Myles Dungan is, of course, well known as a broadcaster and in particular, the presenter of RTE's, *The History Show*. He is also a prolific author of mainly history. This work is based on his PhD research.

This is a very welcome contribution to a small but growing area of Irish press historiography and as Dr Dungan says Irish journalistic and newspaper history has been 'somewhat neglected'. Again he is correct to point out that while newspapers are a crucial research resource, little scholarly attention has been paid to their impact. Historians who have drawn on newspapers as source material have taken accounts of events at face value, with little understanding of media analysis or theoretical positions.

At the heart of this book are the attempts by the two governments of the 1880s, the Liberal Gladstone government, followed by Lord Salisbury's Tory government, to restrict the kind of information being circulated by an aggressively nationalistic press, especially the *United Ireland*, to its politicised readership and to do so without use of arbitrary power, or the abuse of freedom of expression. The two prime ministers tried to do so with coercion and libel. The attempts failed. Even imprisoning – O'Brien was jailed in Kilmainham, along with Parnell and other leaders of the Land League – did not prevent the appearance of the paper. It continued to be printed and published in Dublin, Liverpool and Paris and smuggled to Dublin through various means. Anna Parnell and the more radical Ladies' Land League, were also involved in ensuring the paper continued to appear.

A problem for the authorities was the idea of tampering with freedom of expression and of the press. Even those British newspapers that supported coercive policies in Ireland were wary of attempts to censor the Irish radical nationalist press. After all, might it not have consequences for the English press? It was also necessary to show there was still a functioning political union. Also, by the late Victorian period, freedom of the press had become part of journalistic practice and a given, and it was not quite as easy as it had earlier in the 19th century to send editors to prison, deport or

fine them. Having said that, many editors, mainly from the provinces, were jailed for publishing proclaimed material and even newsagents ended up in prison for selling the *United Ireland*, because it contained reports of Land League meetings and other material.

In one particular case the authorities thought O'Brien had gone too far and it would now be possible to close the *United Ireland*, using libel laws. The *United Ireland* had claimed a homosexual ring, involving senior Dublin Castle officials, including the RIC's director of detectives, the head of the General Post Office and the crown prosecutor, existed. The authorities encouraged those against whom the allegations had been made to take libel actions.

The government's hopes were dashed, however, when the 'scandals', proved to be true. O'Brien, never afraid to challenge the Castle, accused Lord Lieutenant Spencer and Chief Secretary Trevelyan of employing men guilty of 'abominations' and 'unnatural practices'.

Like O'Connell in the early part of the century, Parnell was well aware of the importance of the press and public opinion: 'The profession of journalism is a great and powerful one in these days ... the press is becoming ever mightier than the politician ... politics and journalism run very much together, and a tendency is more and more to combine the two' (Parnell's party contained a sizeable number of journalist MPs, including William O'Brien). O'Brien was lured by Parnell from the *Freeman's Journal*, where he had been a reporter, to establish and become editor of the *United Ireland*. He described his new newspaper as a 'weekly insurrection in print' and, in a reference to an earlier campaign of agitation, a weekly 'monster meeting'.

O'Brien was on somewhat shaky ground when he appealed to the morality of freedom of expression and of the press. The *United Ireland* was not above manufacturing news and regularly buried news that was hostile to Parnell. Dungan says Parnell had a very practical use for the *United Ireland*. Some of the information given about Parnell's foreign political excursions were spurious and were often covers for visits to Kitty O'Shea.

The *United Ireland* was also slow to show any solidarity or collegiality to other newspapers, often demanding the full rigour of the law against competitors.

With the Parnell split, following the Parnell/O'Shea divorce case, Parnell rushed to Dublin to take control of the offices of the *United Ireland*. O'Brien tried to convince Parnell to retire and then opposed him. The *United Ireland* limped on for another ten years, though the latter period is not part of this book.

And the importance of *United Ireland*? Dr Dungan suggests that O'Brien was given more lee-way because of his loyalty and that he served an important purpose; he portrayed Parnell as a radical leader of a quasi-revolutionary movement, which he certainly was not. *United Ireland* was more a successful propaganda publication than a conventional newspaper, with, maybe, more in common with party and revolutionary papers of the 20th century. That alone should be a warning to historians in using *United Ireland* as a source for the last two decades of the 19th century.

Dr Dungan has produced a very well written and seriously scholarly work, has employed an impressive range of sources and archival material, as well as theoretical works, especially Jurgen Habermas. The appendix contains a fascinating database and analysis of *United Ireland* editorials between 1881 to 1891, evidence of close reading of the newspaper.

It was a pity the publisher, Irish Academic Press, did not include some visual material. This was a period when photography was being used and newspapers employed cartoonists. We don't even know what a front page of the *United Ireland* looked like. It's also a pity an academic press uses 'z' instead of the use of 's', as is common this side of the Atlantic. Maybe someone should change the editor's spell check.

REVIEWER

Dr Michael Foley is the founding chair of the Newspaper and Periodical History Forum of Ireland and a journalism lecturer at DIT.

Mark O'Brien and Kevin Rafter (eds.) *Independent Newspapers, A History*

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012, 240pp, £38.07 ISBN: 978-1846823602

Kate Shanahan

Despite its huge influence on Irish public life there has been little overarching analysis of the role of the Independent newspaper group in Irish politics and wider Irish society. This volume of essays attempts to correct that imbalance with contributors assessing both the history and personalities behind Ireland's largest newspaper group. From its both pro and anti Parnellite past, to its larger-than-life Editors and proprietors it appears at times that O'Brien and Rafter may have taken on something of a herculean task. Truth be told any one of the articles in this volume could have been turned into a full book, but each contributes to give a tantalising glimpse into the way that Independent newspapers has intersected with the development of the Irish State itself. Solidly bourgeois and Catholic in its underpinnings, it has both reflected and led the concerns of the Irish middle classes as they wrestled with rebellion, economic stagnation and modernity. What makes the research herein valuable is that it brings together in one volume disparate areas and in so doing contributes to our overall knowledge of Irish media history. William Martin Murphy, The Mother and Child controversy, post-war Irish society, the editorships of Hector Legge and Vincent Doyle as well as the O'Reilly ownership are just some of the areas covered.

It seems invidious to pick out any one chapter but Pdraig Yeates 'The life and career of William Martin Murphy' grabbed this reader's attention simply because it fleshed out in a very balanced way a hitherto cartoonish figure. As Yeates points out, 'The success of his newspapers owed much to the fact that they reflected Murphy's own core values and aspirations which he shared with the Southern middle classes. Like him they were by turns intensely Catholic, nationalist and conservative.' The paper's close relationship with the Catholic Church is evidenced in Mark O'Brien's chapter on 'Frank Geary, the *Irish Independent* and the Spanish Civil War', as he outlines how, 'throughout the 1920s *The Independent* devoted two full-page length

columns to the Bishop's pastoral letters,' as well as urging support for Catholic teaching on various matters. In relation to the Spanish Civil war itself, O'Brien highlights the paper's unequivocal stance as it noted, 'it is, in fact a struggle to the death between Christianity and Communism'.

Kevin Rafter's analysis of Hector Legge's editorship of the *Sunday Independent* is equally fascinating as it casts light on Legge's close friendship with John Dillon and the background to the newspapers breaking of the declaration of a Republic. Similarly Ida Milne's 'Working at Independent House' reveals how the *Independent* reflected the conservative culture of the society it operated in. In the 1950s for example, 'Company policy was that every illustration or cartoon had to be inspected before it went to print.' She outlines how 'if a cartoon contained a female figure wearing a bikini, it would be whisked off by the artist to turn the bikini into a more modest swimsuit.' That policy also extended to staff, 'each year employees had to apply in writing for a pay rise; it was felt that those who were known not to attend church services and who frequented public houses were less likely to succeed in these applications'.

The editors in their preface have noted that there are other chapters they would like to have included had such academic research been available. 'The history of the media in Ireland offers a rich vein for scholarly study and hopefully this volume will encourage more work in this important area.' Let's hope that others will indeed follow in their footsteps.

REVIEWER

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Eoin Devereux, *Understanding the Media*, 3rd edition

London: Sage Publications, 2014, 352pp, £21.59 ISBN: 978-1446248805

Brian O'Neill

Now in its third edition, *Understanding the Media* is one of the undoubted successes of recent media studies and media education literature and Eoin Devereux a world-class leading author in this respect. Greg Philo in his Foreword to the volume provides a timely reminder of just how important this project is and how fragile the nature of media studies enquiry has become. He writes: 'Our world is profoundly unequal, and that inequality is sustained through the mass production of confusion and ignorance' (p. xiv). Philo points to the intense crisis in the international finance and banking systems – and the behaviour of the media in the crisis – as one of the defining reasons for a critical engagement with contemporary media discourse. There are many others. Conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq at an international level as well as national and regional responses to neo-liberalism and austerity economics all constitute points of crisis that require reasoned and critical scrutiny of forms of representation, discursive construction, contextualisation within systems of power and ideology, as well as an understanding of the history and tension between diverse

media forms. Yet, media studies still struggle for recognition in many institutions and higher education systems and the nature of its critical stance still treated with suspicion. Within media departments, that tension is often reflected in ambivalent attitudes among a student body which is often quite content to get with on media practice, relegating media studies' more idealistic ethical precepts for peripheral consideration. That is perhaps an exaggeration but some 50 years on from when a sustained form of media enquiry first entered higher education discourse, the challenge remains to ensure that this is an endeavour that ultimately has an impact on professional practice.

Understanding the Media is a vital tool in this respect. It is suited to a range of discipline interests and first year introductory courses in media. Most likely, such students will be journalism, communications and media specialists. It remains a very well constructed textbook of the field, ideal in many undergraduate (and even post-graduate) contexts, navigating the key concepts and debates in an accessible and thoughtful way. Successful in the international market, it is also highly recommended for Irish institutions and offers valuable references to Irish examples and literature in the field. It has also been thoroughly revised for this edition and solidly locates media studies within the ferment of convergence and social media. New case studies on audiences, fandom blogging pose important questions that students will enjoy. The text is highly useful for classroom settings and indeed elements would be more than suited for media studies at second level, for instance, in transition year settings which frequently offer valuable points of access to media education. A companion website is also available with slides, resources, student exercises for tutorials and coursework which all help to make this an impressive package.

REVIEWER

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Julien Mercille, *The Political Economy and Media Coverage of the European Economic Crisis: The Case of Ireland*

London: Routledge, 2014. 208pp, \$155 (hbk) ISBN: 978-0-415-72109-7 (hbk) 978-1-315-86357-3 (ebk)

Harry Browne

In September 2014, a Red C poll for the *Sunday Business Post* showed that most respondents said they believed the Irish economy was on the right track and that austerity had worked. A majority also said, however, that they favoured more public spending.

These might be said to be contradictory positions. But insofar as they are capable of being held by the same person at the same time, they might also be regarded as representative of how Irish political and media elites have communicated their

views about what was required to cure what ails us. Austerity was necessary, we were assured, but a necessary evil, to be carefully set aside when circumstances allow.

Now, just in time for the historical, ideological and tactical confusion created by the alleged sightings of long-awaited green shoots of recovery, comes Julien Mercille's study on how the crisis, mainly but not exclusively in Ireland, was constructed by those elites, and how alternative views on how it might be addressed were ignored and marginalised in the media.

Clear, cogent, well written and shockingly overpriced, *The Political Economy ...* has many admirable facets. Simply as an accessible account of the Irish crisis, with its European context to the fore, the book has few peers, especially due to its comprehensive explanations of the genuinely different choices that were available to Irish policy-makers but largely pooh-poohed in the media and elsewhere: default instead of bailout, good bank instead of bad bank, stimulus instead of austerity, exiting the euro rather than submitting to the troika.

The Irish media's role in the economic bubble and in subsequent rationalisations of the response has scarcely been ignored in the popular and academic literature. Indeed, newspaper journalists have grown flat-chested from breast-beating about the sins of Celtic Tiger property journalism, in particular. And work in these pages (notably Fahy et al., 2010) and elsewhere has critically scrutinised the failings of financial reporters to offer a critical analysis of what was happening in Irish business over those fateful years of boom. But Mercille is right to suggest that criticisms have tended to focus on 'herd mentality', source-selection and shortcomings in journalists' training and resources, rather than on the political economy of news organizations. Meanwhile, many books on the wider crisis, he writes, 'have often focused on the personalities of bankers, builders and developers, and the political intrigues surrounding the economic crash, instead of interpreting the events within a critical political economic framework'. (p. 2)

Mercille instead sets out to demonstrate that successive Irish governments made policy choices that can be understood easily if you understand that they purposefully served the interests of national and international elites; and that the media largely covered those choices and the issues they reflected in terms acceptable to those elites. It's not a conspiracy theory; more a matter, given the ownership and management of Irish newspapers, of 'they would, wouldn't they?'

Like many analysts, Mercille doesn't set out to prove that neoliberal press coverage, the presentation of a relatively narrow set of ideas, had a direct effect on public attitudes; he merely asserts that 'it would be naive to assume that such messages have no impact on popular perceptions of the state of the economy'. (p. 11) Rather, he attempts, mainly by studying the *Irish Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent* and *Sunday Business Post*, to put some Irish flesh on the skeleton offered by the Chomsky-Herman 'propaganda model', which asserts that for a number of reasons, largely related to their place in the corporate/state landscape, most media outlets can be reliably counted upon to interpret the world in ways that are favourable to the interests of relevant corporations and states.

Some of the evidence he proffers is devastating: 'For example, as late as November 2007, the *Irish Times* conducted a survey among "property experts" to predict how the market would evolve in 2008. The six experts selected all held high-level positions with property firms.' (p. 38) One of them was Sean Fitzpatrick. Less

than a year later, the same paper was editorially commending the bank guarantee and stating ‘that in relation to the guarantee, “the interests of the banks” and “the welfare of Irish workers ... were so closely entwined as to be indistinguishable”.’ (p. 63)

His data is occasionally quantitative, as when he tellingly breaks down hundreds of opinion articles according to their authorship and their position on austerity. But if there is a significant criticism of Mercille’s fine work, it is methodological: having amassed a vast dataset, he too often seems to cherry-pick particularly egregious examples from it rather than provide persuasive evidence that these examples are, in fact, representative. One suspects, from memory and prejudice, that indeed they are typical, just as one is inclined to agree with his largely unproven assertion that Irish news organizations tend to be more conservative than European ones; but one wants more than suspicion and inclination to take into the hard-hitting world of public and academic debate on media matters.

In the end, Mercille’s bracing, unapologetically left-wing critique of mainstream discourse is probably more potent than his specific case on media failings, as when he dismantles the national agonising that followed the troika intervention: ‘... the debate in the press about the “loss of sovereignty” that a bailout would entail was misleading. States are not homogeneous entities; they are internally divided by class,’ he writes, adding: ‘the only “sovereignty” that mattered in the media was the sovereignty of Irish elites to control Ireland, not the sovereignty of Irish people to have a say over economic policies that affect their lives.’ (p. 83)

References

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