

## Newspapers and Nationalism: the Irish provincial press, 1850-1892

**Review Number:** 122

**Publish date:** Thursday, 1 June, 2000

**Author:** Marie-Louise Legg

**ISBN:** 9781851823417

**Date of Publication:** 1999

**Pages:** 238pp.

**Publisher:** Four Courts Press

**Place of Publication:** Dublin

**Reviewer:** John McGurk

A fascinating survey and analysis of the 'Fourth Estate' and its impact and involvement on nationalist politics in Ireland in the second half of the Victorian age. Dr Marie-Louise Legg gets inside the period and writes to us about the newspapers themselves, their editors, the people who bought them and, those who actually read them and whether or not were influenced by them in their morals, intellects and politics. It may well pander to a kind of historical voyeurism to ask who is reading what? In this respect this book greatly satisfied, not least to the extent of the satisfaction we get when reading other peoples' papers in the bus or on the train. In her penultimate chapter, 'What did the Irish read?' we are told of a David King, who wrote *The Irish Question* (1882) that when travelling in a third class railway carriage he noted that out of twenty-five farmers 'more than half the people read the morning papers, even those who looked the least intelligent, showing a great interest in the news. I discovered the man who sat opposite me, a ragged looking individual read the other side of my paper with evident interest'. Pope Hennessy who wrote on what the Irish read in 1884 claimed that the owners of such national papers as *The Freeman's Journal*, *The Nation*, and *United Ireland* had plenty of evidence to show that the Irish reading public was a large and increasing one.

Historians of late Victorian Ireland, duly acknowledged here, tell us that the rural population of Ireland was well educated: between 1851 and 1911 (on the evidence of the census) the percentage of the population over five years of age which claimed to be able to read rose from 53% to 88%. There were plenty of laymen able to read and write and therefore capable of coping with the necessary paperwork and administration involved in political organization and electioneering not to speak of contributing to and running provincial newspapers. The papers became synonymous with political literature in nationalist Ireland. According to Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press* (1976), the number of newspapers and periodicals rose from 109 in 1853 to 230 in 1913. In the earlier Victorian period, as we might suspect, the Dublin based newspapers, especially *The Nation* became the leading voices of nationalist opinions though they had a small influence on the provinces lacking the specialised local knowledge of such editors as James Daly of *The Connaught Telegraph*, or Tim Harrington of the *Kerry Sentinel*. These able and talented journalists to mention but two had much to write about in the heady years of 1879-1881 when major political events impinged immediately on the rural population even unto the remote western seaboard. For a more specialised treatment of press influence on land agitation in the decade 1870-1880 the reader will find E.D. Steele, *Irish land and British Politics: Tenant Right and Nationality* (Cambridge, 1974) more authoritative on that aspect than the present work. However, as Dr Legg points out little serious work has been done on the role of the Irish provincial press in the nineteenth century - indeed, her select bibliography on that

century tells its own tale of neglect. Too frequently Irish papers are a quarry for quotation by politicians and their latter day historians.

Having read every word of this work- I can honestly say that she fulfils her aim of providing the basis for further work since she has identified many of the *dramatis personae* examined the statistics of individual newspapers, the issues, not to mention the persecution, they faced and their impact in creating political power bases and helping to forge a new 'self -image of Ireland in the next century'. However, the critic may well ask if all the *blague* and blather of so many editorials and correspondence really had all that much effect on the politics and voting habits of a restricted electorate. Indeed, it was a long haul to mobilise public opinion behind change and reform particularly as the people's members of parliament at Westminster appeared to be always letting them down. Nevertheless, the analytical work in 17 clear and authoritative Tables and a 45 page Appendix 'Irish Provincial Newspapers in print, 1850-92' are indicative of thorough research and will obviously make the task of the future historian of the Irish provincial press an easier one. Again, the Appendix is no mere list but gives details of the life-span of the papers, their circulation, proprietorships, printers and advocacy.

The book is classically structured into three parts- with four chapters in each part-: 'The Moral Nation 1850-1865'; 'The Emergent Nation 1866-1879' and 'The Militant Nation, 1880-1892' and well written in a style devoid of jargon and, not without humour, which is rare in an academic monograph. Each section devotes a complete chapter to the newspaper business whereby focusing on the evidence of the directories, business records, the correspondence of proprietors and editors we are given valuable insights into the survivors and new arrivals among a remarkable spate of provincial newspapers making it difficult to avoid the conclusion that Victorian Ireland was a nation of newspaper readers. The present reviewer was pleasantly surprised to find the order and account books of D.Wynne, Newsagent, photographer, souvenirs and Circulating Library, Main Street, Castlebar, Co.Mayo much used to illustrate the reading of one west of Ireland town during the height of the Land War. Though Wynne's still sell newspapers and magazines, clients in the 1890s and the habitués of Castlebar's reading rooms, would hardly recognise the modern county capital of Mayo. In the 1890s the population of the town was artificially increased by army detachments in barracks and the trade brought by tourism after the apparitions at Knock in August 1879. The interdependence of the small farmers, 95% of the Mayo farming community, and the town's traders made for a social elite which came into conflict with the landlords and the clergy. Surprisingly there is no mention of the Maumtrasna murders in the locality, gruesome events which sparked off so much in the Land War and may have had an influence on Gladstone's introduction of a Second and Third Home Rule Bills. However, on the social level it is fascinating to find out what the various groups of Wynne's customers, gentry, army, clergy, professional and small farmers read - *The Freeman's Journal*, the diet of doctors, solicitors, and engineers, *The Irish Times*, and *London Times* the staple of the army officers, the R.I. C. and the minor gentry and Protestant clergy. The Catholic priests took *The Freeman's Journal*, *United Ireland*, *The Mayo Examiner* and one priest subscribed to *The Nation*.

Of the specifically local press, *The Mayo Examiner*, *The Connaught Telegraph*, *The Western People*, and *The Cork Constitution* were patronised by the army and the clergy; and, from the evidence of Dublin Castle ( Tables 12, and 14 ) which kept a keen surveillance on the local press throughout the country, about 300 small farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers took *The Connaught Telegraph*. The case study 'Gaelic nationalism: Martin O'Brennan and the *Connaught Patriot* is of great interest to show how Gaelic history was raided for a vast range of political aims especially as Brennan was central in the Fenian movement. His paper railed against 'the great neglect of a knowledge of Irish History, in comparison with the histories of every other people on the globe' ( p.97) Brennan's paper continued the work of Thomas Davis in *The Nation* and in that sense the *Connaught Patriot* was no mere local west of Ireland paper; the teaching of history and the fostering of Irish nationalism, though nowadays a well ploughed furrow, was then of more immediately relevant. Brennan's *Plea for the Evicted tenants of Mayo* written at the height of the Land War and sent to Gladstone is in effect an historical tract. Despite all the hype then on race and language it is surprising to read that before 1870 apart from the Gaelic language column in *Nation* and another column in *The Tuam News* and, in the final years of the century, *The Cashel Gazette*, there was no provincial newspaper printed

solely in the Gaelic language.

On a personal note, I was disappointed not to find a mention of the scribal and antiquarian contributions made by my maternal great-grandfather, James Coyle, to the work of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, the Gaelic Union, and the Gaelic League in the 1880s and 1890s. The other case study which nicely balances Brennan's is the attention given William Johnston and his *Downshire Protestant* - an organ of the Orange faction - and whose radical populism was well ahead of his time. The celebrated and thoroughly unionist *Belfast News-Letter*, still going strongly and very recently bought by Antony O'Reilly, a Republic of Ireland businessman, dubbed Johnston, 'a rural buffoon'. His prosecution and imprisonment for taking part in a march forbidden by the Party Procession Act in 1868 - has a decidedly 20th century Northern Ireland touch about it. Indeed the past into present theme which runs throughout Dr Marie-Louise Legg's *Newspapers and Nationalism- the Irish Provincial Press 1850-1892* is an important and enchanting aspect of her work which must be essential reading for future studies in the subject.

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/122#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/717>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>