Newspapers and Newsmakers: The Dublin Nationalist Press in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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This is a useful contribution to the growing body of research on 19th-century Irish print media (it begins with a survey of academic literature on the subject). The title is misleading; despite occasional glances at 'Old Ireland' O'Connellite papers (hitherto almost completely unexplored), the English Catholic weekly *Tablet* (supportive of Daniel O'Connell's 1840s movement for the Repeal of the Union and the 1850s Tenant Right movement led by Charles Gavan Duffy; between 1850–8 the *Tablet* was published from Dublin [1]) and the tri-weekly (later daily) *Freeman's Journal*, this is essentially an account of the separatist press from the foundation of the weekly *Nation* in 1842 to the suppression of the Fenian *Irish People* in 1865. This in itself is a worthy project, given the influence of Young Ireland and Fenian literature on generations of Irish nationalists, and this book advances understanding of its subject through extensive research at the former British Newspaper Library in Colindale, in archives in London and Dublin and in published material (including parliamentary papers, most usefully the newspaper stamp tax returns which indicate the relative circulation of different titles). Unfortunately Andrews' broader analysis is less adventurous than her research.

In autumn 1843 the Irish-born Whig-unionist journalist William Cooke Taylor gave the highbrow London weekly *Athenaeum* his thoughts on *The Spirit of the Nation*, a book of political ballads originally published in the Dublin Young Ireland nationalist weekly, the *Nation* (first published 15 October 1842). After contrasting these poetic offerings with old-style street ballads, Cooke Taylor suggested the *Nation* ballads, despite their political content, indicated that Ireland was becoming culturally assimilated to Britain, because they echoed English literary models and aimed at an audience educated in the Irish National Schools established in 1831 when Lord Stanley (later 14th Earl of Derby) was Chief Secretary for Ireland. Cooke Taylor believed political assimilation would soon follow cultural assimilation.[2]

Over the remainder of the 19th century, Cooke Taylor's prediction was spectacularly falsified. Irish nationalism grew in strength, bringing with it innumerable cheap popular editions of *The Spirit of the Nation* and other writings associated with 'Young Ireland' and with successive incarnations of the *Nation*. The extensive memoirs of the Ulster Catholic Charles Gavan Duffy, proprietor of the original *Nation* and subsequently a prominent Australian statesman, did much to shape later perceptions of mid-Victorian Irish

political history; the Ulster Protestant John Mitchel, spokesman of the more radical wing of Young Ireland (he described Duffy as 'Give-In Duffy') gave focus to the anger and resentment of later Irish nationalists; the patriotic ballads and essays of the *Nation*'s first editorial-writer, Thomas Davis (a southern Protestant graduate of Trinity College Dublin) – whose high-principled idealism won the personal respect of an amazing range of ideologically-opposed contemporaries (including Cooke Taylor) and whose premature death in 1845 preserved him from later dissensions – continued to inspire believers in an Irish patriotism transcending sectarian divisions, while the *Nation* itself, having increasingly identified with nationalism and Catholicism under the proprietorship of the Sullivan brothers, was superseded by the newly-founded *Irish Catholic* in 1888. Later separatists applied Young Ireland criticisms of the alliance between Daniel O'Connell and Whig governments as based on jobbery and corruption to later co-operation between Irish nationalist parliamentarians and British liberals.

As Andrews points out, Arthur Griffith, founder of the first Sinn Fein party (the name Sinn Fein derives from a ballad 'Ourselves Alone' by John O'Hagan, originally published in the *Nation*) edited several selections of Young Ireland material and derived his prose style and many political opinions from Mitchel. When Patrick Pearse, the figurehead of the 1916 Rising, published a justification of the action he was about to take, he invoked 'four evangelists' of the 'Gospel of Irish Nationality': three 'evangelists' were Young Irelanders – Davis, Mitchel, and the land reformer James Fintan Lalor.

The post-independence Irish state, and its school curricula, reading public and political factions, celebrated the Young Irelanders as heroes and role-models; later generations noted that in 1945 commemorations of the centenary of the death of Davis eclipsed the centenary of the outbreak of the 1845–9 Great Famine in which millions died or emigrated. By 1945, however, the Young Ireland style of didactic balladry was overshadowed, first by the more complex productions of the Irish Literary Revival and then by 'realist' reactions against the tradition of self-idealisation which the *Nation* in its various incarnations had helped to form, and the abstraction of the Young Irelanders from their historical setting by idealising anthologists contributed to perceptions that they were too good to be true. In recent years, some scholars have reassessed the significance of Young Irelanders by recontextualising them in their own times.(3) This study contributes to this process, though over-identification with its subjects hinders Andrews from taking contextualisation far enough.

The book consists of four well-structured chapters. The first outlines the development of the Repeal Movement and the role played by the nationalist press in publicising and reporting 'monster meetings' with the aim of clarifying their significance, providing ideological education on such issues as the land system Catholic-Protestant relations, and Ireland's historic cultural achievements, and promoting a self-image of Irish respectability and self-control in contrast to hostile stereotypes of subhuman degradation and moral irresponsibility. Newspaper reports and correspondence are mined for information on such matters as communal reading aloud of newspapers, the role of local activist 'Repeal Wardens' in promoting circulation (pp. 33–4), and female Repeal activism (e.g. instances of women Repeal Wardens – p. 34).

The second chapter covers the divisions and decline of the Repeal movement after the brief imprisonment of its leaders in 1844, the impact of the Famine, the 1846 split between O'Connell and Young Ireland (when O'Connell ordered that the Repeal Association repudiate physical force even in theory while the Young Irelanders accused him of seeking a pretext to pursue a corrupt bargain with the new Whig government and establish his son John as political heir rather than the prominent Protestant MP and Young Ireland sympathiser William Smith O'Brien) and the role of the *Nation* in developing the Irish Confederation as a rival to the Repeal Movement. It details the subsequent split between radical and conservative Young Irelanders (over the question of whether they should continue to seek a union of all classes of Irishmen or adopt Lalor's strategy of writing off the landlords and using the land issue to mobilise the Irish masses) leading to the establishment of the *United Irishman* (edited by Mitchel) as a rival to the *Nation* in February 1848, and the role of the 1848 wave of European revolutions in escalating discontent and repression, leading to the trial and transportation of Mitchel in May, the failed Young Ireland rebellion of July, and the disappearance into exile of most leading Young Irelanders except Gavan Duffy. Here Andrews adds

relatively little to what is already known, and her tendency to over-identify with Young Ireland is reflected in the fact that while she details evidence in support of the Young Ireland view of O'Connell's motives, she outlines (p. 93) but neither rebuts nor analyses the view of the *Tablet* editor Frederick Lucas – advocated by Professor Maurice O'Connell – that O'Connell was legitimately concerned that Young Ireland verbal militancy might lead to government suppression of the whole Repeal Movement and that the Young Irelanders were irresponsible in insisting on what they called a theoretical point when the country was starving and splitting the Repeal movement would weaken pressure for government concessions. (Andrews also overlooks the point – made by O'Connellites and Mitchelites – that Smith O'Brien and Gavan Duffy expelled Mitchel from the Irish Confederation on the same grounds that O'Connell expelled *them* from the Repeal Association.) Andrews should explore what the Young Ireland emphasis on ideological consistency, in contrast to Lucas – let alone O'Connell – says about their specific views on personal integrity and the role of the media in political education.

The third chapter is particularly innovative and useful to students of 19th-century Ireland. It covers developments in the 1850s as Gavan Duffy and Lucas used the *Nation* and the *Tablet* to try to reconstruct a parliamentary movement based on the issue of tenant right and the maintenance of independent opposition to all British parties, and came into collision with clericalist 'whigs' supported by Archbishop Paul Cullen and financed by the fraudster-MP John Sadleir, while 'Mitchelite' radical-nationalists tried to maintain a press and an organisation which their numerous but impoverished supporters found it hard to sustain. The appearance and disappearance of journals such as the 1849–50 *Irishman* (with its associated Irish Democratic Alliance) and the 1855–6 *Tribune* (stimulated by the Crimean War, which seems comparable to the 1899–1902 Boer War in reawakening in Irish nationalists recovering from a political debacle a perception of Imperial vulnerability) is traced with meticulous attention to detail, and the analysis of how these groups (which had significant continuity of personnel) and their papers tried to replicate the project of the pre-1848 *Nation* illuminates a little-studied decade in Irish history. The chapter ends with the emergence of A. M. Sullivan (proprietor of the *Nation* after Gavan Duffy emigrated in 1855) as principal spokesman for the conservative Duffy-Smith O'Brien version of the Young Ireland tradition, while the 'Mitchelite' milieu crystallised around the Irish Republican Brotherhood (founded 1858) and found expression through the weekly *Irishman* (founded by Denis Holland in 1858) and, after the *Irishman* passed into less sympathetic hands in 1863, through the IRB's own *Irish People* (November 1863 – September 1865). The final chapter analyses the *Irish People* on the same lines as the analysis of the 1840s *Nation* in chapter one, discusses its readership and support, and maintains that it carried forward the social and cultural agenda of the original *Nation* and its universalist vision of Irish national identity, as distinct from the more specifically Catholic version advanced by Sullivan.

While certain themes such as the land issue recur from chapter to chapter, Andrews does not offer an overarching analysis. Instead she inserts her research into an existing nationalist narrative which takes Irish separatism for granted. The remainder of this review will discuss some of the shortcomings of this approach, and suggest possible avenues for exploration.

First comes the chicken and the egg. Andrews derives various political movements from the influence of the nationalist press, but it could just as easily be argued that the nationalist press derived from these movements. (She cites (p. 195) IRB activists giving away copies of the *Irish People* on the grounds that political education outweighed commercial concerns.)

Second, Andrews suggests that without the mid-Victorian Dublin press Irish nationalism might not have survived. Indeed, after the Famine and the 1848 political debacle some Young Irelanders feared Irish nationality was doomed and between the Famine and the Land War British and Irish unionists often suggested that the complete assimilation of Ireland was only a matter of time. However, if Andrews wishes to argue that the press prevented such an outcome, she should first suggest how it might possibly have come about. Two possibilities might be the channelling of Irish discontent into a regional variant of a broader British Liberal support coalition, as in Wales and Scotland, or a Catholic-clericalist form of particularist brokerage; but while both of these feature in the subsequent history of Irish nationalist politics under the

union, it is generally held that the religious, economic and social differences between Britain and Ireland were too great to allow either to provide a lasting alternative to nationalism. Perhaps Andrews equates nationalism with separatism and the posited alternative is a permanent political settlement based on federalism within the United Kingdom; if so this should be spelt out. Andrews should also have noted that ownership of the Young Ireland and Fenian traditions was disputed by later Home Rulers – John Dillon, the last leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was the son of a prominent Young Irelander and was present at Mitchel's deathbed – just as she cites officials in the 1860s who regarded Sullivan's version of the Young Ireland tradition as being just as subversive as Fenianism, though less honest – 'a poor sneaking rebel' (p.196). (On the other hand, Andrews inadvertently understates the gap between Sullivan and the Fenians when she quotes their contemporary attacks on him, but cites his retrospective praise of individual Fenians – once they were safely defeated and could be symbolically annexed for his own purposes – rather than what he wrote at the time.)

Two aspects of the press's role in opinion-formation underdeveloped by Andrews concern the relationship between the Dublin press and its local counterparts, and the role of newspapers in influencing the Catholic clergy, and hence mobilising them as local opinion-formers. Anyone who has read national newspapers from this period knows that they frequently reprint and comment on items from local newspapers, which in turn reprinted and commented on items from the national papers; but although these reprints are frequently cited by Andrews to illustrate specific points she makes no attempt to analyse the role of the local newspapers as 'feeders' to their Dublin counterparts or the extent to which sympathetic provincial papers might disseminate Dublin material further afield.

Similarly, while Andrews devotes a good deal of attention to Catholic clerics using newspapers as mouthpieces or attacking those they regarded unfavourably (there are some striking descriptions of pulpit denunciations of the *Irish People* and its readers) there is no sustained account of them as readers and contributors. It would be instructive to work out, for example, how many priests took the *Nation* at the various stages of its existence, and whether it made any attempt to appeal to such readers; certainly at this period they formed an information network which no contender for the public's ear could entirely ignore. When discussing the attempts of Lord Clarendon, Whig Lord Lieutenant 1847–52, to disseminate the official point of view to counter criticism from nationalist and conservative papers, Andrews mentions his clandestine subsidy to the scandal-sheet editor James Birch to mount personal attacks on the Young Irelanders, but not the more above-board activities of the tri-weekly Whig-unionist *Dublin Evening Post*, edited by the veteran Frederick William Conway and with Cooke Taylor – now Clarendon's chief Dublin Castle spin-doctor – as an editorial writer. According to Donal Kerr, the *Post*'s warnings in summer 1848 that new outbreaks of violence in France, including the killing of the Archbishop of Paris, heralded a communist menace which might spread to Ireland, had a significant impact on Catholic clerical opinion; Gavan Duffy attached enough importance to it to denounce the *Post* in his memoirs.(1)

Andrews' analysis of the tensions between Catholic and universalist nationalism needs refining. On one hand, her correct statement that under Sullivan the *Nation* became more specifically Catholic fails to note how it still differed from Cullen's clericalist version of Catholic-nationalism; where Cullen wished the nationalist political agenda to be defined and restricted by clerical leadership, Sullivan maintained the faith could only be preserved by alliance with political nationalism.(5) Whatever the differences between Catholic nationalism and civic nationalism, both imagined the Irish as potential or actual exemplars of public and private virtue, and claimed that British misgovernment of Ireland reflected an utterly amoral utilitarian mentality which explicitly replaced virtue with laissez-faire hedonism. Thomas Davis famously stated in a letter to his friend D.O. Maddyn that if the alternatives for Ireland were Utilitarianism - 'Englishism, which measures prosperity by exchangeable value, measures duty by gain, and limits desire to clothes, food and respectability' and Papal supremacy, he would prefer the latter since it could not last indefinitely 'leaving the people mad, it may be, but not sensual and mean'; even a failed armed revolt would 'throw up huge barriers against English vices, and, dying … leave example and a religion to the next age'.(6) This view of the British populace as a whole, not merely the aristocracy, as irredeemably corrupt and of an idealised Ireland endangered by the empty promises of British Liberalism, underlies the deliberate adoption of illiberal views

by Mitchel (who became a furious defender of American slavery) and by many of his disciples on the grounds that liberalism was merely another British swindle, and it counterbalances though does not negate the examples of alliance between Irish nationalists and British radicals cited by Andrews. This mindset is clearly reflected in the Fenian editorial-writer, quoted by Andrews, who saw Irish deindustrialisation and poverty as 'the melancholy consequences of our subjugation to a nation of shopkeepers whose god is gold, whose desk is their altar, whose ledger is their bible, and whose exchange is their church' (p. 218). On this view, whose proponents were able to quote numerous British cultural critics of commercial society, clerics and clericalists engaged in political compromise with the British authorities were in fact betraying Catholicism and succumbing to materialism, whether or not this was their conscious intention.(7)

One of Young Ireland's criticisms of O'Connell was that by flattering his audiences with unthinking praise and pouring indiscriminate derision on their enemies, he was creating an unreal and unsustainable self-image which actually discouraged the painful work of national self-building; oddly enough, later generations made this accusation against the Young Irelanders themselves. Douglas Hyde's famous 1893 lecture on 'The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland', which led to the formation of the Gaelic League, lists popular English-language political journalism as one of the forces whose attempts to reinforce Irish nationality have actually undermined it by weakening the Irish language and taking Hyde's view would imply that Cooke Taylor's prediction was actually correct; more plausibly, it suggests that the quest for a direct transmission of ideas from one generation to the next needs to be qualified by awareness of how one generation may independently develop the same response to recurring problems, or re-assess its predecessors in the light of its own new circumstances. Andrews' work is valuable above all for its ability to suggest such questions.

Some points of detail deserve attention. When Andrews quotes Lord Stanley's account of the eager reception of Mitchel's *United Irishman* (p. 115) by the Dublin populace, she misses the full significance of his intervention by identifying Stanley only as 'a peer in the House of Lords'. This was the leader of the (Tory-protectionist) opposition, and a former Chief Secretary for Ireland (and future prime minister), accusing the Whig government of allowing Irish disaffection to run out of control.

When Andrews discusses Fenian accusations that A. M. Sullivan made himself a 'felon-setter' by denouncing the clandestine Phoenix Society in his newspaper, she states that 'felon-setter' means 'informer'. There is a difference which is highly germane to a study of the political role of the press; an informer deals secretly with the authorities directly, a felon-setter does so indirectly by denouncing his victims publicly, then disclaims responsibility for the authorities' response. (Sullivan defended himself by claiming the authorities already knew of the Phoenix Society.)

Notes

1. Patrick Maume, 'Brethren in Christ: Frederick Lucas and social Catholicism in Ireland', in *Irish Catholic Identities*, ed. Oliver P. Rafferty (Manchester, 2013), pp. 231–42.Back to (1)
2. Athenaeum, 30 September, 7 October 1843; William Cooke Taylor, *Reminiscences of Daniel O'Connell*, ed. Patrick Maume (Dublin, 2004); Patrick Maume 'The natural history of society: the Orientalism of William Cooke Taylor', in *The British Empire and its Contested Pasts*, ed. Robert Blyth and Keith Jeffrey (Dublin, 2009), pp. 77–94.Back to (2)
3. Examples include Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Dublin, 1987); David A.Wilson, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee: Passion, Reason and Politics 1825–57* (Montreal, 2008); Helen F. Mulvey *Thomas Davis and Ireland: A Biographical Study* (Washington, DC, 2003); James Quinn, *John Mitchel* (Dublin, 2008); Melissa Fegan *Literature and the Irish Famine 1845–1909* (Oxford, 2002). Back to (3)
4. Donal Kerr, *A Nation of Beggars? Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1845–52* (Oxford, 1994); Charles Gavan Duffy *Four Years of Irish History, 1845–49* (London, 1883), p. 204.Back to (4)
5. T. D. Sullivan, *A. M. Sullivan: A Memoir* (Dublin, 1885).Back to (5)
6. Davis to Maddyn, 24 July 1842, quoted in Helen F. Mulvey, *Thomas Davis and Ireland: A Biographical Study* (Washington, DC, 2003) pp. 59–60.Back to (6)

7. For a representative statement of this view, see Anon., *Letters of an Irish Catholic Layman: Being an Examination of the present state of affairs in relation to the Irish Church and the Holy See, showing that the Home Rule, Land and education movements, with which the Irish people are identified, are in perfect conformity with natural justice and are in essence a struggle between a Christian and a non-Christian civilisation* (Dublin, 1884). This was originally serialised in the *Nation* under the proprietorship of A. M. Sullivan's brother T. D. Sullivan, and attacks bishops hostile or lukewarm towards the movement led by Parnell. Its tone may be judged by its comparison, in a later edition, of a bishop's dealings with the Dublin Castle administration to entering the antechamber of Hell to bargain with Antichrist.Back to (7)

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