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"Aggiornamento", in *Bright, Brilliant Days: Douglas Gageby and the Irish Times*, Andrew Whittaker (ed.) A.A Farmar, Dublin 2006, pp. 59-69.

When I first attempted to join the staff of the *Irish Times*, I hadn't even heard of Douglas Gageby. I had an introduction to Seamus Kelly[1] and worked that line for a time until, after dozens of phone calls to the 'Irishman's Diary' office which—to my innocent surprise and eventual disillusionment—were never answered and never returned, I knocked on the door of Conor O'Brien at the *Evening Press* and got a job.

Not much later, now working for Des Fisher at the *Catholic Herald* in London, I ingratiated myself with Donal Foley and John Arnott[2] by re-writing press releases as paragraphs for their 'London Letter' in the *Irish Times* on an unpaid basis during my lunch break. A job prospect materialized in some curiously unspecified fashion and, after an interview by Alan Montgomery[3] at a Formica-covered table in the Kardomah Café in Charing Cross, I was hired. With the arrogance of youth (and probably at Donal's instigation) I responded to the job offer with an audacious request to Monty for an assurance that the *Irish Times* was not about to go bust. Even more amazingly, I got it. I still hadn't heard of Gageby.

I worked for a couple of months in the *Irish Times* office in Printing House Square, the headquarters of *The Times*, before coming back to Dublin in September 1963. The man who had hired me was gone—to a sinecure in Guinness's from which he dispensed countless buckshee barrels of stout to any journalist (myself included) who rang him up on the eve of a party. Douglas had by now taken his place. I must have met him shortly after my arrival, but have no memory of our first meeting: it was probably brief, courteous, and just the right side of peremptory. The firm handshake

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1 Sole proprietor, for many years, of the 'Irishman's Diary' column, as well as theatre critic of the *Irish Times*.

2 Deputy London Editor and London Editor respectively. Arnott was the last surviving link with the newspaper's once-owning family. Foley came back to Dublin to become News Editor in late 1963, just after my return.

3 Douglas Gageby's immediate predecessor as Editor.

and the straight gaze didn't encourage small talk: with Douglas, there was always a job to be done, and the niceties could wait.

There was a whiff of change in the air, almost undetectable, but unmistakable when identified. My arrival in the newsroom was the occasion for subterranean growls, partly occasioned by an extraordinary decision (again, I suspect Donal) to run, as a main page news lead, a feature article I had written from London about Irish emigrants returning to the homeland in search of the prosperity that was then emerging. It had been based on a survey of one—myself. The growls turned to barely concealed mirth when, a year later, my first by-line appeared, as 'By Our Educational Correspondent'. This sort of nonsense, I was assured, would never catch on. Catch on? The photo by-lines are now crowding out even the headlines.

In retrospect, it can be seen that two things were happening. One was that the relationship between Douglas and Donal was beginning to bear fruit. Certainly Douglas never interfered with Donal's running of the newsroom, and their intermittent disagreements enriched that relationship rather than imperilled it. It was important to both men, and doubly important to the paper, which was sloughing off its past and fashioning a new identity.

The second thing, which was probably more Douglas than Donal, was the sense that the new kid on the block—television—stood, in relation to newspapers, in a totally different relationship than had its predecessor, steam radio. It was a voracious rival, gobbling up advertisements, poaching journalists and cannibalizing audiences with equal appetite. Its current affairs programmes were staffed by a new generation of (usually graduate) interviewers and reporters who had not had to serve the long apprenticeship of local and provincial newspapers, and who took on their new role as masters of the media universe with rare glee and a profound disrespect for their elders. Newspapers had to up their game if they were to challenge the glitzy new medium and, under Douglas, this is exactly what the *Irish Times* did.

The 'educational correspondent' was only one of a number of innovations which, taken together, broke radically with the idea of the newspaper as a dreary, pre-programmed mixture of news, finance and sport, and started to address the varied

interests of a new generation of young Irishmen and women, no longer growing to maturity in London or Manchester or New York, but in Dublin and Cork and (probably even) Roscommon, and justifiably impatient with the shibboleths and the tired old nostrums of the past. By the mid-1960s the three political party leaders of the older generation, Sean Lemass, James Dillon and William Norton had all gone and there was a palpable sense of excitement. It is important to remember, though, that although the economy was improving on an almost hourly basis, much of the excitement was not about money, but about ideas. And, in Douglas's *Irish Times*, the ideas fizzed like champagne.

His other huge contribution, at this initial stage, was subtly to change the paper's centre of gravity, so that writers now became of prime importance. The prominence allocated to people like Michael Viney, Desmond Fennell, Michael Foy, Mary Maher and many more underlined this commitment to style. This did nothing to dilute the potent mixture of truth-seeking and exhibitionism that fuelled the new breed of reporters: I still cringe with embarrassment at the memory of the arrogance with which I walked the length of the newsroom to ventilate my displeasure at a hapless sub-editor who had changed one of my semi-colons into a full stop.

If there was hubris, there was also comeuppance – and I had my first taste of the latter at Douglas's hands. I was on Sunday evening town,[4] the grave-yard shift, and one of my few responsibilities was to report that night's 'Thomas Davis Lecture', broadcast on RTE. The topic was the change of government in 1932. The speaker was some Fine Gael academic. The task was to make some sense of his remarks from the tiny squawk-box high up on the wall behind the news desk through which the RTE broadcast came into the clattery newsroom.

As the speaker trumpeted his praise of WT Cosgrave for handing over the reins of power to Eamon de Valera in 1932 "like the democrat he was", my already fragile grasp of Irish history (the Leaving Certificate syllabus in 1957 had probably ended with Poyning's Law) weakened even further, and my report, as printed, informed the

[4] The shift traditionally devoted to the mind-numbing practice of phoning Garda stations and fire stations to find out if there had been any unnoticed disasters in the city.

startled readers of the *Irish Times* that the democrat being praised was, in fact, Mr de Valera.

When I turned up for duty the following morning I was informed that the editor wanted to see me. There was a smell of sulphur in the air. Apparently a large proportion of the *Irish Times's* then modest readership had been on the phone to tell Douglas that they needed no further proof of the dark suspicions they had harboured since he had assumed the editorial chair – that the *Irish Times* had finally, and definitively, sold out to Fianna Fail. I entered the sanctum hesitantly, expecting to be given my cards.

Douglas looked up from his desk. "You made a right fuck-up of that, didn't you?", he remarked mildly. "Don't do it again."

This was light touch regulation several decades before the concept had even been invented, and I came to recognize it as one of the distinguishing characteristics of Douglas's editorship. It was not that Douglas didn't have opinions, or was remiss in expressing them, sometimes accompanied by military-style rhetoric. But he expressed his most considered opinions in the taut, idiomatic, carefully worked and deeply personal prose of his editorials, which still bear re-reading almost half a century after he penned them. Generally, his leader (or leaders—there were many evenings when he did two) had been dictated by about 5.30pm. He would then repair unobtrusively to the College Mooney pub—comfortably adjacent to the office, but at a safe distance from the Pearl Bar, which was the principal watering-hole of the other members of the editorial staff—for about an hour, before returning to carry on the night's work.

The rest of the paper was a play-pen for the writers he trusted, and he found the space for them, on occasion, by throwing out advertisements or increasing pagination, to the consternation of the commercial side of the house. There was an occasional editorial cuff on the ear. An article which I had written for Fergus Pyle, then features editor (and later Douglas's successor) suggesting mildly that we had no need for a standing army was excised from the features section at page proof stage, and only reappeared a week later cheek by jowl with a salvo from one of Douglas's military buddies arguing the exact opposite.

There was a printers' strike in 1965. I still have my copy of the protective notice, signed by Douglas, which every reporter got. I was one of the lucky ones—kept on the payroll, contributing my RTE appearance fees for news programmes to the National Union of Journalists' hardship fund. Then the strike ended and, within a few days, Douglas approached me in the newsroom: at little more than a week's notice, he wanted me to go to Rome to cover the fourth (and final) session of the Second Vatican Council.

It was an extraordinary time for Catholicism generally, and more particularly for the Catholic Church in Ireland. In fact, relatively little of what was happening had, until then, percolated to the Celtic fringe of Europe. With the exception of RTE, which had sent Sean Mac Reamoinn and also Kevin O'Kelly out to Rome for part of each of the first three sessions of the Council, no Irish news medium had done more than publish the hackneyed and stereotyped dispatches from the international news agencies.

Irish Catholicism, despite the first three sessions (and years) of the Council, was still in a state of torpor. John Charles McQuaid, a stern-visaged autocrat, had been Archbishop of Dublin for almost a quarter of a century, during which the power of the institutional Catholic Church had been extended and consolidated. Catholic attendance at Trinity College Dublin was still technically sinful. In more rural areas, Catholic attendance at the weddings and funerals of Protestant neighbours could still be problematic. Irish Protestants—the most quiescent minority in any country in Europe, as Gageby's friend the Presbyterian minister Terence McCaughey provocatively described them—complained intermittently and ineffectually about the effects of the Vatican's *ne temere* decree, which forced the Protestant partners in religiously mixed marriages to bring up their children as Catholics. It was a society, and a culture, in stasis.

To be taken out of this milieu and thrown into the cultural and theological maelstrom that was Rome in the autumn of 1965 was challenging, liberating, fascinating, and (occasionally in more senses than one) intoxicating. You were pulling yourself up by your own intellectual boot-straps, scraping together enough knowledge

to make sense of what was happening around you, and at the same time trying to find the words to make sense of it all to those at home, and to convey the excitement and intensity of it all.

Back in Westmoreland Street, Douglas sat back, watched, read, and let it happen. For three crowded months I wrote an average of about 1,000 words a day, six days a week. Sometimes it was even more. To the best of my knowledge, not a word was cut. On one occasion, imbued with Douglas's ideology of giving all sides a fair crack of the whip, I interviewed a Spanish cardinal only a short theological step removed from Torquemada. It was a lengthy interview and, from memory, it was given the best part of an entire page when it was published. On the other side of the ecclesiastical fault line, my fairly orthodox, middle-class, vaguely liberal Irish Catholicism had to come to terms with continental theologians who combined the sort of personal piety that would not have been out of place in a small Irish village with what initially seemed to my untutored ears to be rank heresy. There was the novelty—shock, almost—of the Mass in English, and the curiously mixed feelings engendered by the sight of a row of bishops, gift-wrapped in their scarlet belly-bands, kneeling in a queue for confession in a side-aisle of St Peter's basilica like so many altar boys.

Personal experiences apart, what strikes me about this in retrospect is that we were all, without consciously being aware of it, engaged on that most precious of journalistic missions—not the mission to convert, but the mission to explain. It was Douglas's editorship which nurtured that mission—the light but sure touch that sensed a popular mood and knew how to key into it. By the end of the Council—and after the Synods which succeeded the Council in 1967, 1969 and 1971—the *Irish Times* had escaped the protected habitat of the rectory and the manse and was to be seen, if not exactly flaunted, in an increasing number of presbyteries and, for all I know, even in the odd convent. Ireland itself was changing. More significantly—and certainly I was only a small part of that journalistic revolution—the landscape of Irish journalism was beginning to change. Before Douglas took over, the battle royal was the one being waged between the *Irish Independent* group and the *Irish Press* group: well before the end of his first term as editor, the *Irish Times* had become, unmistakeably and irreversibly, a player.

The even-handedness that Douglas inculcated now moved up a gear. Fresh from the Vatican, I was now posted by him every year to the Presbyterian General Assembly in Belfast, to the Methodist Conference in Belfast, Dublin or elsewhere, and to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in Christ Church, Dublin. In turn I was fascinated by the rhetorical richness of the Presbyterians as they argued about 17th century theology, astonished to find the Methodists more socially radical that any political party in Dail Eireann, and baffled by the barrack-room lawyers of Irish Anglicanism as they argued their way through their parliamentary procedures.

Douglas's light touch was evident also in another potentially critical area. We were contractually obliged to seek his permission before writing for any other publication, but one permission seemed to act as a sort of general absolution. Particularly on Saturday mornings when, in the absence of a Sunday paper after the *Sunday Review* folded in 1964 there was nobody on duty, the newsroom echoed to the hammered keys of the old stand-up typewriters as reporters plied the export trade.[5]

Curiously for a man who inspired such loyalty, he never stood in the way of anyone on the staff who felt he could better himself. I once asked him for advice after Jim McGuinness had offered me the editorship of the *RTE Guide* (the fact that I felt no diffidence in asking for his advice is itself emblematic of the relationship he had with us). "Think of the amount of money that would make it worth your while to move," he advised me, "and, if they agree, take it." By the time I had worked out that £1,500 a year (I was then on about £950 at the *Times*) represented the height of my financial ambitions, I had also worked out that no amount of money could compensate for leaving Westmoreland Street, and I turned the offer down without a qualm. Much later, Douglas was to wave goodbye to John Healy, a.k.a. 'Backbencher', as he departed for Tony O'Reilly's empire in Abbey Street, and welcomed him back equally cheerfully at the expiry of a contract which had cost O'Reilly a great deal of money, and in the course of which not a single word Healy

[5] Writing articles and news reports for other (usually UK or American) publications was a handy additional source of income.

wrote had been published because the National Union of Journalists at the *Independent* had blacked his copy.[6]

I can recall only one occasion on which he asked my advice. It was late at night in the newsroom, and he showed me a letter from a reader complaining about an article that had been written by one of my colleagues. "What would you do about that?" he asked. "I'd publish it," I answered, with the insouciance of youth, and a total absence of professional solidarity. "It's not as simple as that," he commented. "X [the journalist involved] says that if I publish it, he'll sue *me*." The letter never appeared, and I had learned, to my surprise, that not even Douglas was omnipotent.[7]

The benign neglect of one's outside activities already mentioned was probably responsible for the fact that when, in 1969, I stood for and was elected to the Seanad in the National University of Ireland constituency, the thought of asking Douglas's (or anyone's) permission never even crossed my mind. It became an issue only four years later, when the onset of the 1973 election coincided with the agreement by Douglas, Major TB McDowell, the chairman, and the board to launch the *Education Times* with me as editor. They would have preferred me to stand down from the Seanad, but agreed to a compromise: I could be editor while a senator, as long as I maintained my status as an Independent. The final move in that chess game was towards the end of these negotiations, when McDowell summoned me to the boardroom to say that they were very happy to launch the new title, but also to ask me whether I was aware that, by taking this route, I was effectively removing myself from consideration as a future editor of the *Irish Times*? The words "bird", "hand" and "bush" sprang to mind. I never regretted my decision. I was 32.[8]

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6 Healy had always refused to join the National Union of Journalists. He bought a Rolls Royce with the money from his Independent contract, and later gave O'Reilly a present of one of his paintings of the West of Ireland. O'Reilly was to say that it was the most expensive painting he had ever bought—which at that time it probably was.

7 See Mary Maher's essay in this book.

8 When a combination of factors, not least the horrendous economic situation in 1973-75, later made it obvious that the *Education Times* would not survive (which would have meant the end of my contract in any case), I joined the Labour Party, and was again summoned to the boardroom. I was reminded by Major McDowell that I had now broken my contract and would have to leave the employment of the company (ie be fired) with my contractual three months' notice. Pat Nolan, Father of the *Irish Times* NUJ Chapel, took up the cudgels on my behalf and won me a year's salary (£6,400) on which I fought and won a Dail seat in 1977.

The years before the launch of the *Education Times*, however, had been already full of many other things besides religion and education, the two areas in which I specialised. In the late 1960s the paper, not least because of the dramatic increase in circulation under Douglas, had begun to make money. Douglas loved spending it on his reporters. In 1968, as the ethnic conflict in Nigeria boiled over into civil war, he asked me to go out and cover the conflict. With the foolhardiness of youth, I agreed, and almost immediately found myself as one of half a dozen passengers on an ancient Super Constellation, loaded mostly with ammunition, flying at night into the secessionist province of Biafra, which at that time seemed to be run partly by General Ojukwu's rag, tag and bobtail army, and partly by the Irish Holy Ghost missionary order.

It was an extraordinary assignment for a number of reasons, not all of them apparent to me at the time. For one thing, communications between Biafra and Dublin were literally non-existent, and after flying into Biafra I effectively went off the radar for three weeks. (After I returned to Dublin, I heard that Douglas would inquire at editorial conferences, quizzically, whether I had perhaps been eaten.) It was a war of attrition. Hostilities were sporadic, and sometimes, for weeks on end, not a shot would be fired by either side. The sole occasion I felt in any personal danger was when I was interviewing Ojukwu and heard an aeroplane overhead (the only planes in the air during daylight hours were federal Nigerian MiG fighters piloted by Egyptian mercenaries).

A problematic aspect of the assignment was the requirement—again a Gageby trademark—that I should also file reports from the Federal side of the conflict. Accordingly, when I left Biafra, I posted (yes, gentle reader, *posted*) my type-written Biafran articles from Rome before flying back to Lagos, and enclosed with them a plea to Douglas not to publish any of them before I had safely exited the Nigerian capital. Unbelievably by today's news-hungry standards, he acceded—but only just. The first of my Biafran articles was published in the *Irish Times* (and duly publicised by the Biafran radio) on the morning of the day I was due to fly out, creating all sorts of apoplexy at the Nigerian Ministry of Information and ensuring that my taxi journey to the airport was more nerve-wracking than anything I had experienced in Biafra itself, as I anticipated being prevented from leaving the country.

The oddest thing of all about this saga was that I missed one of the most important parts of the story entirely. At least I was in good company. The Irish missionaries wanted the story to be about the persecution and starvation of their loyal Ibo flock and, by and large, that is what they got. There was certainly enough truth in it to make it stick. But the story behind the story, which most reporters (innocent of the realities of geopolitics) were slow to see, was that behind the secessionist struggle, and intrinsically related to it, France and Britain were fighting each other in a proxy war over the control of the oil-rich Niger delta. Not for the last time, an innocent and impoverished people were being caught up in a deadly conflict between international capitalists. And, for neither the first nor the last time, most of us failed to dig deep enough to uncover the roots of the story.

Later, there were more trips to Africa. One of them was to Rhodesia during the period when it had unilaterally declared independence from Britain and was defying, not only Whitehall, but the tide of change that was sweeping Africa. Here, the Antrim-born Bishop Donal Lamont of Umtali offered unexpected insights into the racism of some expatriate Irishmen. The Mashonoland Irish Association, he once abruptly informed its astonished officers (who had invited him to address their all-white St Patrick's Day function), should be re-named as the Orange Order of Rhodesia. Another was to Zambia, where another contact from the conciliar days in Rome, Bishop James Corboy, helped to provide the short cuts to knowledge and experience that reporters, pressed for time, so often need. A third, paid for by the Benguela Railway Company (I have a feeling that all media were much more relaxed about this kind of financial support in those days), brought me to pre-independence Angola, where the Portuguese were trying to persuade the rest of the world that their form of colonialism was colour-blind and therefore deserved a fair hearing. I managed to offend my hosts in a series of articles which pointed out that although, unlike South Africa (which I had also visited briefly), none of the housing, or public or private amenities, was racially segregated, the same could not be said about the money.

As if all this wasn't enough, there was Cuba, 10 years after the revolution. In sending me, Douglas wisely hid from me the fact that Jack White had gone there for the *Irish Times* almost a decade earlier: he simply wanted me to see things for myself

without the complication of feeling I had to match my impressions to those of the journalist who had gone before me [9]. It was as astonishing an experience, in its own way, as Rome. There was a different kind of culture shock, and the sense that—despite the depressing militarism of that society, and the lack of some freedoms that might seem commonplace, indeed essential, at home—its value system had more to recommend it (and very much less in common with Soviet-style collectivism) than traditional European anti-Communism might suspect.

Another aspect of this journey, however, was emblematic, not only of Douglas's style, but of the sort of ethos which lay behind his editorial management. In a sense, it was almost 19th century in the relaxed way in which those of us who were sent abroad were allowed to work. He didn't just send me to Cuba. He allowed—no, encouraged—me to spend three weeks travelling slowly south through the United States, taking time out to do a story about members of the Klu Klux Klan in Mississippi, who were sitting around the same table with black workers as part of a strike committee at the huge Masonite pulp mills. Another detour, arranged at short notice with encouragement from the home base, was to report a young Senator Ted Kennedy speaking from a platform in the centre of Memphis, where I was the only pink object in a sea of black, expectant faces. At the end of this, there were three weeks to be spent, at the expense of the *Irish Times*, attending Ivan Illich's language centre in Cuernavaca in Mexico for an immersion course in Spanish so that I could make the most of my impending visit to Cuba. It was not only the year, but the month, that Mexican soldiers had massacred students protesting in Mexico City's main square. There always seemed to be another story around the corner, each one more fascinating than the last.

The magic ingredient in all of this was time—time to think, time to learn, time to take the soundings and develop impressions, time to write the story. Although we were working for a daily newspaper, and there were inevitably pressures associated with this, there was never a rush to judgement. Perhaps this work ethic—speed moderated by sensibility as much as by the need for accuracy—was Douglas's greatest contribution to the journalism of his era, and is something that modern

9 For Jack White, see Donal O'Donovan's essay in this book.

journalism is in danger of losing. Along with this was the passion, which he shared with Donal Foley, for what is now called ‘fresh air journalism’. This meant getting up off your behind, forgetting about the telephone, leaving the office and the comfort station of the Pearl Bar, and actually finding out what real people were thinking, saying and doing. Today, when so much journalism has been reduced to mouse-minding, and when every story seems only to be a click away, perhaps we need to re-learn that lesson too.

In the early 1970s Douglas asked me if I would be the paper’s first full-time correspondent in Brussels. He was, as ever, ahead of his time. I was the younger man, but the more conservative, and I turned it down. I should have known better.