

“The changing of the guard at Middle Abbey Street, 1961-73”, in *Independent Newspapers: A History*, Mark O’Brien and Kevin Rafter, (eds), Dublin, Four Courts, 2012, pp. 133-146.

## John Horgan

In 1961 the *Irish Independent* underwent a number of significant changes that marked, in a way, the end of an era. Frank Geary resigned as editor (he was to die very shortly afterwards), and the newspaper put news on its front page for the first time. At the same time, a readership survey, possibly the first of its kind, was published in 1961, giving a picture of an Ireland that was still in many ways static, but on the cusp of change.<sup>1</sup> The survey was commissioned for the Association of Irish Newspapers, an organisation that, despite its name, largely represented regional and local weekly newspapers. For this reason it excluded Dublin and Cork from its purview. Nonetheless, given that urbanisation had still not got into its swing, the survey presents a fair picture of the 1,265,000 inhabitants over 16 years of age living outside these two areas (the urban population excluded was approximately 275,000).<sup>2</sup>

Television sets were owned by only 8 per cent of respondents; 72 per cent cooked with solid fuel, and 61 per cent owned a vehicle of some kind (often, one imagines, a tractor). Some 60 per cent of respondents never went to a dance or céili: the cinema was the choice of 57 per cent. Fewer than 10 per cent of respondents ‘never’ listened to Radio Éireann: the overwhelming majority listened to the station ‘regularly’ or ‘occasionally’ and in an unmistakeable sign of the times almost as many listened regularly or occasionally to Radio Luxembourg. It was, nonetheless, a public in love with newspapers. Almost three quarters of the respondents (73 per cent) read both their local weekly newspaper and a Sunday newspaper while 83 per cent read ‘one or more’ Sunday newspapers. Only 6 per cent read no newspaper at all.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Readership in Ireland: June 1961*, S.H. Benson Ltd, and Social Surveys (Gallup Pull), Ltd., for the Association of Irish Newspapers. NLI ILB 070 a 1.

The prevalence of multiple purchasing is clearly shown by the overlap in the percentages for Sunday newspaper purchasers: some 61 per cent read the *Sunday Press* against 59 per cent for the *Sunday Independent* and 33 per cent the *Sunday Review*. The relative weakness of the morning and evening newspapers outside the major conurbations, certainly compared to the Sunday papers, is graphically illustrated in Table 1, as is the strength of the *Irish Independent*.

**Table 1: Newspaper Purchasing Habits, 1961**

<i>Title</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Irish Independent</i>	34%
<i>Irish Press</i>	27%
<i>Cork Examiner</i>	10%
<i>Irish Times</i>	4%
<i>Evening Press</i>	16%
<i>Evening Herald</i>	12%
<i>Evening Echo</i>	5%
<i>Evening Mail</i>	2%

*Source: Gallop*

Change was, however, taking place, even if it was at first subterranean in character. Socially and politically, as well as economically, the tide was turning. In 1959 Eamonn de Valera, who had led his political party, Fianna Fáil, for more than three

<sup>2</sup> The sample size was 971.

decades – most of them as Taoiseach – had finally given way to his successor, Seán Lemass. James Dillon bowed out in Fine Gael, William Norton in Labour. Lemass's economic approach was to abandon the policies of protectionism and high tariffs as export-led growth and foreign investment became the twin mantras of economic progress.

The creation of the national television service on the last day of 1961 marked another epochal change. It opened up the electronic media to a new wave of journalists who had, in many cases, not come up through the ranks from the provincial and national newspapers, but straight from university. It did so, moreover, in a new structural framework, one in which national public service broadcasting was, for the first time, removed from direct political control. The whole news agenda was also changing. Ireland's new domestic policies were reinforced by a new foreign policy, as Irish troops went to the Congo at the beginning of the decade to fight for the United Nations. In 1963 the Second Vatican Council opened: for three years, it was to challenge many of the well-worn patterns of traditional Irish Catholic piety and practice. In 1965 Lemass visited the Northern Ireland prime minister, Terence O'Neill, in Stormont and a year later he gave way to Jack Lynch, the first Taoiseach from the post-revolutionary generation of Irish political leaders. In the summer of 1968, in a controversial rejection of post-Conciliar expectations, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*. Earlier in the same year, students and workers in a whole range of European countries threw off the shackles of conformity, almost toppling General de Gaulle in France as they did so; Irish university students followed suit, if more decorously. Later, in Prague, the first cracks began to appear in the Iron Curtain. For those Irishmen and women who had been schooled in the old certainties, it was all puzzling at best, threatening and deeply disturbing at worst. To journalism, it was meat and drink.

Frank Geary's successor as editor of the daily newspaper, Michael Rooney, had joined the *Irish Independent* as a sub-editor in 1931 and was appointed assistant editor in 1935.<sup>3</sup> He had, in effect, served as deputy editor for so long that he had acquired almost coadjutor status. Like many coadjutors whose accession to power is

---

<sup>3</sup> *Irish Independent*, 1 Sept. 1961.

long delayed, however, Rooney was no new broom and was to retire some seven years later without having made any dramatic changes in the paper. His generally relaxed attitude to newspapering was exemplified by the occasion on which he opted for a prior engagement with a foursome on the golf links at Portmarnock rather than meet a visiting United States senator by the name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He did, however, reassure readers that the change of editorship did not mean that there would be any change of heart, at least insofar as foreign policy was concerned. As communist China applied for membership of the United Nations in November 1961, Rooney warned his readers: 'If the Charter [of the UN] has any meaning, it must reject Red China, or go the way of the spineless League of Nations.'<sup>4</sup>

Unusually given the actual or presumed politics of the newspaper, Rooney had a republican background, and had actually been interned on a prison ship in Belfast Lough by the British authorities during the war of independence. He did, however, encourage a younger, literate group of journalists, many of them coming from the Law Library and from the universities rather than from the stuffy confines of small-town provincial newspapers, to spread their wings to some degree in the editorial and feature columns, and also in the book review section. Louis McRedmond, a young barrister who initially combined Law Library work with writing editorials, and who was eventually to succeed Rooney as editor, made a name for himself in writing about the Second Vatican Council, particularly the final session in the autumn of 1965, on which he reported personally. Frank D'Arcy was another import, from the university rather than from the Law Library, with a wide knowledge of Europe. Gerry Quinn, a young economics lecturer in UCD, took over the task of writing editorials on economic matters in succession to James Meenan, for many years professor of national economy at University College Dublin.

It is doubtful whether Geary would have agreed to print an editorial, as Rooney unexpectedly did, objecting to the banning of John McGahern's second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965.<sup>5</sup> His residual, anti-authoritarian republicanism was no doubt responsible for this decision, and indeed the *Irish Independent* was the only

---

<sup>4</sup> Editorial, *Irish Independent*, 4 Nov. 1961.

<sup>5</sup> *Irish Independent*, 31 July 1993.

Dublin morning newspaper to protest on this occasion. That said, the Abbey Street newspapers were on the whole slower to react editorially to the social and other changes ushered in by the Sixties – in particular the introduction of television – than the *Irish Times*, which, although not yet a serious rival (that role was still, and properly, reserved for the titles in the Irish Press Group) was beginning to make stealthy gains on the colossi of Abbey Street and Burgh Quay. There was no features department, properly speaking; that function was exercised by a team of editorial writers, who would also attend press conferences to familiarise themselves directly with the news of the day before commenting in leaders.

The general election in May 1965 was marked by an identifiable shift in the newspaper's editorial attitude. The idea of a national government was no longer being canvassed, and there is more than a hint of impatience with Fianna Fáil which had been in power for some eight years. Two days before the election, the editorial came down emphatically on the side of Fine Gael in relation to the health issue; Fine Gael, it averred, was the party best equipped and motivated to reform the health services.<sup>6</sup> The following day, the *Independent* emphasised that it had tried to maintain impartiality, but the mask slipped slightly even as it did so:

A newspaper exists to reflect public opinion, to inform and guide it. It has neither duty nor right to hector; if, therefore, on the eve of polling, you look to this corner for a specific recommendation on how to vote, you can stop reading now. We shall not usurp the citizen's privilege of deciding for himself.<sup>7</sup>

This did not prevent the paper from observing, in the same editorial, that Fine Gael offered 'constructive and workable alternatives to the present defective systems' in the areas of pensions and of health. Constructive or not, Fine Gael was defeated: there would be no change of government for another two elections, by which time the *Irish Independent* was itself beginning to change.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Irish Independent*, 5 Apr. 1965.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 Apr. 1965.

Part of the reason for this change came with the appointment of Louis McRedmond as editor on Rooney's retirement in 1968. McRedmond had a fondness for the eternal verities of journalism: good writing, solid research, getting it right. He was unshowy and unspectacular.<sup>8</sup> These attributes, it turned out, were in danger of becoming increasingly devalued as the brashness of television, in particular, began to make inroads into other branches of journalism. This was more evident initially in the evening market, where the *Evening Herald* was engaged in a dog-eat-dog contest with the *Evening Press*. The latter paper had, since its foundation in 1954, been making huge inroads into the *Evening Herald's* original quasi-monopoly (there had also been the *Evening Mail*, but that had been in terminal decline for years and posed no serious threat to either of the other two titles). Frank Kilfeather, whose father had worked for the Abbey Street titles and who joined the group from the *Wicklow People* in 1965, was rather bruised by the experience, and eventually left to join *the Irish Times*:

I enjoyed working on the [*Irish*] *Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*, but hated being rostered for the [*Evening*] *Herald*. Two years after I arrived a major decision was taken at the top to 'liven up' the [*Evening*] *Herald*, jazz it up and dramatise stories. A wildly enthusiastic news editor was put in charge of the operation and he terrorised the staff from early morning until 4 p.m. in the afternoon. [...] This was quite traumatic for the staff and it pressurised us all into hyping up and exaggerating even the most trivial of stories. If you were not prepared to carry out orders without question you were categorised as driftwood ... The atmosphere was, to say the least, very sour.<sup>9</sup>

Journalists working for the *Evening Herald* held a number of meetings to protest about these practices, but were effectively powerless to challenge them. This in itself underlines two aspects of mid-twentieth century national journalism. The first was the

---

<sup>8</sup> Louis McRedmond died on 16 Jan. 2011.

<sup>9</sup> F. Kilfeather, *Changing times: a life in journalism* (Dublin, 1997), p. 21.

practice of rotating journalists across titles: each title might have its designated editorial executives, but the journalistic foot-soldiers were expected to learn and practise different styles, depending on the title they were working for on any given day. This was also true for the *Irish Times* (which at one point also ran a Sunday and an evening paper) and for the Irish Press Group. More significant, however, was the degree to which power resides, in any newspaper, with the editor and the news editor. Editors, in turn, create editorial cultures, and the quotation above exemplifies the degree to which these cultures could differ, even under the same proprietorial roof.

This reality, of course, had been the case for many years, but it was, if anything, accentuated by the growing ferocity of the competition for circulation. In 1960 the *Evening Herald* was out-selling the *Evening Press* by the bare margin of 1,000 copies. The following year, that had been reversed, and the *Evening Herald* circulation had slipped by almost 8,000 to 108,845, while its rival was selling 116,077.<sup>10</sup> This was the last year in which there were three evening newspapers in Dublin. When it closed in 1961, the *Evening Mail* was selling an average of 44,577 copies an issue, and on its demise, although these went disproportionately to the *Evening Herald*, the *Evening Press* was still almost 4,000 copies ahead of its Abbey Street competitor, which was losing money. By 1969, although the *Evening Press* was 5,500 ahead, the combination of economic growth, an enhanced news agenda, more aggressive journalism, and the introduction of television, had created a situation in which the two remaining evening papers were selling more copies than the three papers combined had in 1960, and approximately three times as many evening papers as the lone survivor, the *Evening Herald*, would sell at the end of the century thirty years later.

The *Sunday Independent* was doing rather worse, relatively speaking. At the beginning of the decade, in 1960, it was selling an average of 330,919 weekly copies, compared with 364,397 for the *Sunday Press* and 164,749 for the *Sunday Review*. The *Sunday Review* closed in 1962, when it was still selling an average of 154,551 copies an issue, but those of its readers who transferred to the surviving papers did so by a

---

<sup>10</sup> All figures in this section from the Audit Bureau of Circulation, courtesy of McConnell's Advertising Ltd.

ratio of almost 4:3 in favour of the *Sunday Press*. The *Sunday Independent* counter-attacked by launching the first colour supplement ever produced for an Irish Sunday paper, in 1963, and this narrowed the circulation gap with the *Sunday Press* to a little over 40,000 copies a week. The magazine, however, folded after nine months and a loss of about £750,000, and even though the *Sunday Independent* circulation kept on increasing, the gap between it and the *Sunday Press* continued to widen. By 1968 the latter title was selling an astonishing 422,000 copies weekly, almost 90,000 more than its Abbey Street rival. Noel Browne, who still maintained distant connections with the Chance family, was to allege at around this time that the advantage won by the *Sunday Press* was in part related to the way in which it capitalised on growing political unrest in Northern Ireland by publishing series of articles about Ireland's republican past that were designed to blur the distinctions between the IRA of the war of independence and its modern successor in title. Be that as it may, and there is no doubt that the *Sunday Press*, under its energetic editor Matt Feehan, represented the wilder shores of irredentism within Fianna Fáil, all of this, and the by now declining powers of Hector Legge, prompted the Independent board to finally persuade their veteran editor to retire in 1970, at the age of almost 70. Legge's successor was Conor O'Brien, editor of the *Evening Press*, where he had been consistently keeping the *Evening Herald* in second place.<sup>11</sup>

The situation in the morning market was more complex. The *Irish Independent's* circulation rose for two years after Geary's departure, reaching a high of 180,801 in 1963. Thereafter, however, progress was very uneven, and by 1968 average daily circulation fluctuated at around 178,000 copies. At this point Rooney retired, and was succeeded by McRedmond, whom he had appointed as deputy editor the previous year and whose right of succession had been implied for at least that period of time. The *Irish Press*, on the other hand, reached its circulation high point of the decade the following year, when it sold an average of 122,844 copies. The slow burner, however, was the *Irish Times*, which by 1970 had increased its circulation by almost two thirds, from 35,024 in 1960 to its new average of 57,443. Over a period

---

<sup>11</sup> The present author owes his introduction to journalism to Conor O'Brien, who gave him his first job, as a trainee sub-editor, on the *Evening Press* in November 1960.



since 1964 this increase, which dated essentially from 1965, was noteworthy, particularly as the total circulation of the Irish morning papers had remained more or less unchanged over the decade (328,000 in 1970 as against 325,000 in 1960).

In the boardroom at Abbey Street, the figures were being noted with some concern. This was all the more so because the company had begun a process of expansion and re-design that would, in the short term, increase the company's overheads. A pivotal figure in this period was Bartle Pitcher, an accountant who joined the company in December 1958 after a period with the *Irish Times*. Pitcher was appointed a member of the board in 1960, secretary of the company in 1962 and a year later became manager following the untimely death of his predecessor, John O'Riordan.<sup>12</sup>

At the time Pitcher joined the company, the *modus operandi* of the business side of the house was characterised by values and practices that at times seemed to hark back to the Edwardian era. Clerical staff used pencils; when a pencil was finished, they had to go and see the company secretary personally to acquire a replacement. The company secretary, in those pre-Pitcher days, would produce a pencil – and then a razor blade, with which he would cut the pencil in half, before giving one half to the suppliant.<sup>13</sup> The same was true for erasers. Pitcher, who was appointed group general manager in late 1968, was to play a role of extraordinary significance in the development of the Independent Group, both before and after its change of ownership in 1973. With the encouragement of the chairman of the board, T.V. Murphy, he oversaw the first acquisition of a new title in 1967-68, when the Independent group acquired the *Drogheda Independent* for some £40,000.

In the autumn of 1969 there were two other factors that created ripples in the otherwise smooth running of the Abbey Street machine. One was an attempt, the first of its kind in Independent House, and a rarity in Irish industry at this time, to strike a productivity agreement with the pre-press employees, in particular the printers. The second was a re-design of the daily title itself, including a new masthead, and

---

<sup>12</sup> *Irish Independent*, 28 June 1962 & 2 May 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Private source.

associated up-grading of some parts of the printing operations, a decade after the installation of the newest press. This involved the installation of a new press for colour advertising.

The productivity deal, concluded early in 1969<sup>14</sup> had two substantial benefits for the company. Wage differentials between different members of the case-room staff were reduced or eliminated, and case-room overtime was, from now on, to be restricted to circumstances in which late-breaking news demanded it. The workforce got, in return, an extended range of social benefits, and agreement on a basic 40-hour week, with a 36-hour week for those on night work. The significance of this can be gauged from the fact that in 1970 there were no fewer than 122 case-room staff members between compositors and linotype operators alone, at a time when the journalistic staff for the three titles combined was approximately 147.<sup>15</sup> The total number of staff amounted to almost 1,400.

These elements all combined, in a sort of domino effect, to affect the quality of the paper itself. Deadlines were advanced, so that the paper had to be put to bed earlier. The size of the daily paper was reduced, which meant – given that advertising would not be reduced – that the amount of space available for news was being restricted. The combination of earlier deadlines and fewer column inches meant that the *Irish Independent* was now – as his deputies frequently complained to McRedmond – under-reporting some important stories, and missing others completely. Circulation was also falling: the 1969 average was down to 165,500, which, while within shouting distance of the figures for 1965 and 1966, marked a fall of some 6,500 since the previous year. The editor held the disruption and difficulties attendant on the re-organisation (about which he had frequently complained to the board, without avail) responsible for the fall in circulation: the board of directors blamed the editor.

This was, effectively, a new situation. There had been only one occasion previously on which an editor had departed unwillingly, and that had been before Geary's time. This did not mean that the board was uninterested in editorial matters –

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ireland's Press and Print*, 1:5, May-June 1969, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Personnel 1970*, Independent News and Media archives.

rather, that its interest in editorial matters tended to the superficial. In Abbey Street, where the board met every week (a chef arrived beforehand, complete with white toque and apron, to prepare lunch) editors were occasionally summoned to the post-prandial boardroom to answer queries. Most of them were of a very insignificant nature, and dealt – as often as not – with minor editorial decisions about the placing of stories or photographs that had long been forgotten by the journalists concerned. After Michael Rooney had his first experience of this mini-ordeal, he asked his predecessor, Frank Geary, what he ought to make of it. Geary replied gruffly that it had happened to him, too, and that he had learned not to pay any attention to it.<sup>16</sup> The situation in late 1969 was, however, different. After one board meeting at the end of December 1969, Pitcher came into McRedmond's office and suggested that he sit down. As McRedmond did so, Pitcher informed him that, at its meeting earlier, the board had come to the conclusion that they had made a mistake in appointing him as editor: they were now going to undo that decision.

McRedmond was shocked – and doubly shocked by a subsequent television interview that implied his editorship had not been in the best interests of the shareholders.<sup>17</sup> He was allowed to come back the following day to clear out his office. This was a rash decision on the part of management, because by then the word had spread, and the journalistic staff was up in arms. A deputation from the NUJ chapel came to see McRedmond, saying that they had decided to go on strike to protest against his sacking. McRedmond dissuaded them from this course of action on the grounds that he did not want the end of his tenure of office to be marked by a day on which the paper failed to come out: the journalists compromised by staging a brief protest walk en masse around the block before returning to work. McRedmond, despite having taken over the editorship without having a formal contract, issued proceedings both for defamation and for wrongful dismissal, which were subsequently settled.<sup>18</sup> E.M. Murphy, the director deputed by the board to do the RTÉ

---

<sup>16</sup> Private source.

<sup>17</sup> The RTÉ recording does not survive, but there is a reference to it, and a quotation from it, in Tom O'Dea's contemporaneous television column, *Irish Press*, 10 Jan. 1970.

<sup>18</sup> His barrister was Declan Costello, SC, later Attorney-General and subsequently a High Court judge.

interview about the sacking, famously remarked that the *Irish Independent* did not change policies – the newspaper just changed editors.<sup>19</sup>

McRedmond was succeeded by Aidan Pender. Pender had originally joined the *Evening Herald* advertising department, had graduated to the sub-editors' desk, and eventually became editor. It was an appointment that spoke volumes. The growth of the *Irish Times* circulation, even though it was at this stage still a massive 100,000 copies a day behind the *Irish Independent*, had been provoking some nervousness in the Abbey Street boardroom, which had heretofore seen the *Irish Press* as its main, and in effect its only, rival. It now had two rivals: which was the more dangerous? McRedmond was an editor of the old school. His concern for the quality of writing in his newspaper, and the general breadth of his education and tastes (he had been successfully nudging the *Irish Independent* away from its predilection for the crustier Catholic values in his reports on Vatican II from Rome) made him a good foil to the rising *Irish Times*. Within the Independent's management team, however, there was more scepticism. The rumour was that if a board member asked why the *Irish Independent* couldn't be more like the *Irish Times*, the stock management response was that the board could have a newspaper like the *Irish Times* if that was what they wanted – as long as they were prepared to accept an *Irish Times* level of circulation to go along with it.

Pender's appointment was a clear sign that the opposition most clearly in view was now the *Irish Press*. The goal was circulation. The means was news – and the display of news. Two of his deputies were integral to this purpose. One was Vincent Doyle, who had joined the *Irish Press* in the late 1950s, and had moved to the *Sunday Press* in 1962. He moved from there to work with the *Sunday Independent's* colour magazine, but lost his job when it folded, and did shifts and freelance work for some time before getting a job on the *Evening Herald* in 1966. He subsequently moved from the *Evening Herald* to become one of Pender's assistant editors. The other was Niall Hanley, the *Irish Independent's* assistant chief sub-editor, who went on to become editor of the *Evening Herald* and who died in an air crash along with a number of other journalists - Kevin Marron, Tony Heneghan and John Feeney -while

---

<sup>19</sup> See note 17.

taking part in a Beaujolais wine race in November 1984. Another key Pender appointee was Liam Shine, a tough, no-nonsense journalist from Co. Kerry, who had worked in London and was *au fait* with the ways of Fleet Street, including the ways in which news editors shouted at their reporters. His gruff exterior, nonetheless, concealed the proverbial soft interior: he also contributed a column to the *Evening Herald* called ‘The Man on the Bridge’, which generated a considerable quantity of gifts and money from Dublin readers for the hard-luck cases he wrote about.

The daily title was at this stage, according to Doyle, ‘a powerful paper, steeped in tradition and staffed by righteous men, many of whom were slaves to what had been ‘politically correct’ in the 1950s.’ It was also, he thought, ‘lifeless, without flair or style.’<sup>20</sup> However, it was not without younger firepower. Its leader writers included the young barrister Philip O’Sullivan, later a High Court judge. Its reporters included Michael Denieffe, who was to become editor of the *Evening Herald* and who later played a major part in management through the 1990s and into the new century; Aengus Fanning, who was to become editor of the *Sunday Independent*; James Farrelly, who was to become editor of the *Sunday Tribune*; Arthur Noonan, later political correspondent of the *Irish Independent* and of RTÉ; and John Walshe, later education editor. Walshe’s appointment was in itself something of a novelty, as he was one of the first individuals to become a journalist at the *Irish Independent* straight from university. Most recruitment in Abbey Street still came from the provinces, at a time when the *Irish Times* was moving towards a policy of dividing its intake almost equally between provincial journalists and university graduates. The features department included Joe MacAnthony, who had been among those hired by McRedmond and who was shortly to move to the *Sunday Independent* when Conor O’Brien succeeded Hector Legge. As these names indicate, it was also a virtually all-male environment. In 1970 Ita Mallon was still in her solitary glory as the ‘Lady Correspondent’. There were only three female reporters, one of whom, Lorna Reid, was once brought into the news editor’s office to be given a drop of poteen. The news

---

<sup>20</sup> I. Kenny, *Talking to ourselves: conversations with editors of the Irish news media*, (Galway, 1994), p. 18.

editor concerned, according to *Irish Independent* lore, said that he was teaching her how to drink so that she could keep up with the men in the newsroom.<sup>21</sup>

The new regime generated a lot of excitement but not, initially, much by way of circulation gains. Indeed, in 1972/3 the circulation of the daily title, at 166,000, was below its 1970 figure. The *Irish Times* was still creeping up; the pace of the *Irish Press* decline was still gradual. At the same time, Pender's new, brash editorial style was alienating some traditional readers. One Catholic bishop, alarmed at the ways in which the old *Irish Independent* was being transformed, asked Pender what he was trying to do with the paper. 'Sell it, my lord', was the answer.<sup>22</sup> The difficulties were not confined to the daily. At the *Sunday Independent*, a rise in circulation from 330,000 in 1968 to 342,000 in 1972/3, though valid in itself, had to be read in its own context. This included the spurt in circulation by the *Sunday Press* to a new high of 432,900 in 1972/3 and – more problematically, from the *Sunday Independent's* point of view – the launch of the *Sunday World* in March 1973. By the end of that year, this new kid on the block (which had been launched with an initial capital of £40,000 and a half-expectation that it might not last for longer than six weeks) was selling 200,000 copies a week. Nor was the *Evening Herald* out of trouble. Its circulation had slipped between 1968 and 1972/3 from 142,000 to 134,000: in the same period the circulation of the *Evening Press* had gone up from 147,000 to 150,000: the latter paper's small ads, in particular, were a huge selling point to which the *Evening Herald* had never found a satisfactory answer.

There was an air of considerable national economic optimism, partly generated by the successful conclusion of the negotiations surrounding Ireland's application to join the European Economic Community. The expansionary policy at Independent House embarked upon by Pitcher was moving into a higher gear. In March 1971, E.M. Murphy wrote to his son:

I have been having talks with the proprietors of the weekly newspapers in Counties Wicklow and Wexford with a view to possible acquisition. If my

---

<sup>21</sup> The other two were Mary McGoris and Miss R. O'Donoghue.

<sup>22</sup> Kenny, *Talking to ourselves*, p. 8.

bid succeeds I will have the whole of the East Cost of Ireland wrapped up from the border at Dundalk right down to the Wexford-Waterford boundary. These local papers are quite small individually but could build up into quite a big group.<sup>23</sup>

In due course the *Wexford People* group was acquired for some £140,000, with the *Kerryman* following at a cost of £378,000. The group's annual profits, announced on 4 March 1973, showed annual profits up by 120 per cent to a total of £770,100,<sup>24</sup> partly fuelled by cover price increases on both the daily and Sunday titles.

Advertising rates, the company announced, would be increased by 10 per cent to pay for the national wage agreement. One shareholder had already taken advantage of the rising tide and had sold his shares, purchased some years earlier, at a tidy profit: his name was Major T.B. McDowell, a director of the *Irish Times*.<sup>25</sup>

By that date, however, unknown to the readers and to most of the shareholders, other changes were in train, which would alter the trajectory of the group and its titles in ways that could not readily have been foreseen. A critical date in the process was 21 January 1973 when the editor of the *Sunday Independent*, Conor O'Brien, published a multi-page *exposé*, by Joe MacAnthony, on the Irish Sweepstakes. The decision was typical of O'Brien's courage as editor, and of his dedication to breaking exclusive stories, which he had carried with him to the *Sunday Independent* from his previous berth at the *Evening Press*. In MacAnthony he had a gifted reporter, who had come into journalism from the unlikely position of public relations and marketing, via a stint as a researcher on the *Late Late Show* before being hired by the *Irish Independent*. Uncomfortable with the new style being pioneered by Pender, he had moved over to the Sunday title, where O'Brien had given him his head.<sup>26</sup> The great advantage of working for the *Sunday Independent*, with a single weekly deadline, meant that reporters like MacAnthony who realised the importance

---

<sup>23</sup> E.M. Murphy to Gerry Murphy, 9 Mar. 1971. Gerry Murphy papers.

<sup>24</sup> For comparison, the profits of the McInerney building group for the same period were approximately £1.5 million.

<sup>25</sup> Private information.

<sup>26</sup> Personal information from Joe MacAnthony.

of research were not continually distracted by the need to file large amounts of copy, and could be given extended periods to work on more detailed reports.

To say that MacAnthony's report on the Irish Sweepstakes was detailed would be a profound understatement. The piece ran to 8,000 words and was originally designed to be published in two separate parts. It posed huge questions, not just for the government, which had for years licensed the private Sweeps organisation to run a highly successful lottery on behalf of Irish hospitals, but also for the Sweeps promoters themselves. The article suggested that the promoters made excessive profits and commissions and had broken the laws of other countries in which the Sweeps tickets were sold in huge numbers.<sup>27</sup> The implications were serious for the McGrath family, one of the most powerful business families in the country and substantial advertisers in the Independent group papers as well as being one of the controlling interests in the whole Sweeps operation.

When O'Brien saw what the original article contained, he realised that if he published the first instalment on 21 January, the likelihood was that the second instalment would never be allowed to appear. So, at some risk to his own career, and, as it turned out, to that of his reporter, he published the report in its entirety.

At his home in Foxrock in south county Dublin, the chairman of the board, T.V. Murphy, was totally unaware of his editor's plans. The business, personal and economic consequences of what had been published were unimaginable. Murphy had an appointment that very Sunday morning with a young Irish businessman who, fuelled by energy, charm, and an apparent blithe disregard for the serious financial obstacles to be negotiated, plainly wanted to take the whole business off his hands. As he went out to greet Tony O'Reilly in his morning coat, Murphy was in a state of exasperation, anxiety, and shock. One chapter was ending, another beginning.

---

<sup>27</sup> Some Independent Newspapers employees, in addition, added to their income by acting as 'drops' – lending their names and addresses (for monetary reward) to the Sweeps organisation, which directed ticket-sellers in the United States and elsewhere to use these addresses for the return to Ireland of money and counterfoils in ways which would not attract the attention of the US postal authorities.