

Fighting and Writing: Journalists and the 1916 Easter Rising

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Abstract

The relationship between journalists and the Irish rebellion of Easter 1916 is a complex one. While the Rising was led in large part by a miscellany of poets, editors and journalists (many of whom feature prominently in the Rising's historiography) many lesser-known journalists acted as planners and participants in the insurrection. As well as assessing the contribution of these lesser-known journalists to the events of 1916 and the Rising's impact on journalistic life in Dublin, it explores how a representative organisation – the Irish Journalists' Association – acted as a cover for the clandestine insurgent-related activities of many journalists. It finds that the IJA played a key role in facilitating the expression of radical views by this cohort of journalists who could not express their radicalism through their everyday posts on the mainstream media and, by so doing, it played a key, though hitherto unacknowledged, role in the events of Easter 1916.

Keywords

Journalism, 1916 Rising, Ireland, Press, Irish Journalists' Association, Trade Unionism

Introduction

The historiography of the 1916 Rising is well established and, amid its centenary, ongoing.¹ Home rule for Ireland was enshrined in the Government of Ireland Act 1914 but was shelved following the outbreak of the First World War – a decision that averted a clash between the Ulster Volunteer Force, formed to prevent home rule being implemented, and the Irish Volunteers which had been established to ensure the realisation of a Dublin parliament. The reaction of both organisations to the war would reverberate through Irish history for decades afterwards. While the Ulster Volunteer Force enthusiastically viewed the conflict as an opportunity to demonstrate its fidelity to the British Crown, the call by Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond for all Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army and fight for the freedom of small nations split the organisation. While the majority supported Redmond and established themselves as the National Volunteers, a sizeable minority rejected his call. And, while Redmond's fortunes became tied to a seemingly never-ending war effort, the fortunes of those who opposed enlistment became manifest in the age-old dictum that Britain's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity. On Easter Monday 1916 a number of groups – including the Irish Republican Brotherhood (a secret oath-bound organisation dedicated to the establishment of an Irish republic), the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army – seized several buildings in Dublin's city centre and declared an Irish Republic.² After a week of intense fighting, during which the city centre was shelled by a British gunboat, the insurgents surrendered.

While much has been written about how the leaders of the Rising, such as James Connolly and Padraig Pearse, plied their trade as editors of and contributors to newspapers associated with the trade union and revolutionary movements many other journalistic supporters of the independence movement worked in what might be termed the mainstream press and it is the activities of this cohort of journalists that this article examines.³ Unable, given their posts in mainstream newspapers such as the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Irish Independent*, to give voice to their political radicalism in print, these journalists instead expressed their radicalism through their activities within the Irish Journalists' Association. As a representative association it gave a veneer of respectability to their clandestine activities – activities that have, until now, remained unexamined within the historiography of the Rising.

Most likely, this omission in the journalist historiography is a result of a perceived lack of sources relating to these individuals. Indeed, beyond the works of Darrell Figgis, Desmond Ryan and Desmond FitzGerald there is very little in terms of memoir on the part of journalists who took part in the Rising.⁴

There are, however, other sources now available that shed light on the activities of these lesser-known journalist-insurgents. Many were members of a little known and long forgotten organisation, the Irish Journalist's Association (IJA), and while its records were destroyed in the Rising, some fragmented documents remain. The IJA published a monthly journal – *The Irish Journalist* – most copies of which were lodged with the National Library of Ireland. In addition, newspaper reports of its meetings frequently list the IJA's membership: this in turn allows for the press obituaries of its prominent members to be located.⁵ Some of the journalist-insurgents made witness statements to the Bureau of Military History which was established in 1947 to collect and preserve the oral testimony of those who took part in the Rising.⁶ But perhaps most useful of all there are digital newspaper archives that allow researchers to search for memoir-type articles written by these journalists. Indeed, in his correspondence with the Bureau of Military History, one such journalist, Piaras Béaslaí, informed the Bureau that all he had to say about his involvement in the Rising could be found in the various series of memoir-type articles he wrote for the *Irish Independent* between 1953 and 1957.⁷ While the dependence on newspaper articles may not be ideal from a historian's point of view, when they are added to other sources they can play an important role in shedding light on areas of historical inquiry. They are, in fact, an oft-neglected piece of the wider historiographical jigsaw and as digital newspaper archives become more prevalent and their search functionality become more refined, there are, as Bingham has observed, 'few who deny the value of newspaper content for understanding politics, culture and society'.⁸

Journalistic life in Dublin pre-1916

The political positioning of the mainstream press in Ireland in the period under consideration has been well ventilated. While the *Freeman's Journal* was linked closely with John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party and the *Irish Independent* supported constitutional nationalism and home rule, both the *Irish Times* and the *Daily Express* were strongly opposed to home rule.⁹ The idea of individual journalists expressing an opinion, in print, contrary to their paper's position on any given issue was simply not possible. As recalled by prominent Fenian, John Devoy, it was, at this time, 'one of the anomalies of daily journalism in every country (including America) that the editorials are largely written by men who don't agree with the policy of the paper, but write to order'.¹⁰ Whatever about politics, poor employment conditions and poor pay among journalists in Britain and Ireland prompted journalists to organise. In Britain the Institute of Journalists, the membership of which included newspaper proprietors, was established in 1884. This was followed in 1907 by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) which sought to represent the interests of rank and file journalists. While the NUJ sought to establish a foothold in Ireland it was quickly displaced by the establishment of the Irish Journalists' Association (IJA) in 1909. Membership of the IJA was confined to those whose 'income was, and for three years, derived from journalism as a main source of livelihood' and it specifically excluded newspaper managers, directors or proprietors.¹¹ Representing almost exclusively journalists in Dublin, by 1911 it had recruited 106 members.¹² In October 1914 it launched a monthly publication, *The Irish Journalist*, within which members debated frankly such issues as the professional standing of journalists, employment conditions, pay rates, the lack of opportunities for female journalists, the practice of senior journalists rewriting reporters' copy for London titles without sharing the fees received, and the issue of whether the organisation should be a trade union or an

independent representative body separate from the wider trade union movement. The prospect of home rule and what this would mean for journalists also loomed large. The first edition of the *Irish Journalist* observed that home rule would mean ‘much in the way of progress and prosperity in every direction for our neglected and impoverished country’ and expressed the hope that the arrangements for reporting debates in the new parliament would be given careful consideration.¹³ Such was the importance placed on this issue by the IJA that a deputation from the organisation met with Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond to discuss the issue before the First World War broke out. Indeed, as late as July 1916, despite the unsuccessful post-Rising negotiations between Redmond and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George about the immediate implementation of home rule, the IJA still envisaged a Dublin parliament that would require detailed planning in terms of ‘the scale of pay, the size of staffs, the duration of labour demanded, details such as the holding of “boxes” in the Houses and of “gallery” tickets by journalists [and] the amount of copy to be esteemed a fair day’s or night’s work in Parliament’.¹⁴

But despite the IJA’s enthusiasm for home rule, many of its members were also members of organisations that initiated the 1916 Rising and the IJA would act as an organising mechanism for these journalists to express their radicalism by utilising the respectability of the IJA to help organise the Rising. Indeed, some of the planning for the Rising took place at the IJA’s headquarters, located at 65 Middle Abbey Street, which was in close proximity to the central site of the Rising, the General Post Office on Dublin’s O’Connell Street. Both buildings – the GPO and the IJA’s headquarters – were occupied by the rebels during the Rising and both buildings were shelled and destroyed by the British gunboat *The Helga*. Among those who combined membership of the IJA with membership of the revolutionary movements that instigated the Rising were Piaras Béaslaí of the *Freeman’s Journal*, who along with being secretary of the IJA was a prominent member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the Irish Volunteers; David Boyd of the *Evening Mail*, who was a member of the IRB and the Irish Volunteers and who took part in the importation of arms at Howth (Dublin) in July 1914; Seán Lester of the *Daily Express* who, along with sitting on the IJA’s executive committee, was a member of the IRB and the Irish Volunteers; William O’Leary Curtis, who combined his sub-editorial duties at the *Irish Independent* with his IRB activities; Joseph Harrington and Michael Knightly of the *Irish Independent*, both of whom were members of the Irish Volunteers; and Larry de Lacy, IRB member and editor of *The Irish Volunteer*, who, in 1915, fled from Dublin to New York to avoid an arrest warrant issued under the Defence of the Realm Act.¹⁵ Other IJA members – such as Thomas F. O’Sullivan of the *Freeman’s Journal* – passed sensitive information to the revolutionary movement in the lead up to the Rising. The IJA members who have left most in terms of sources that outline the interplay between journalism and clandestine revolutionary activities are Piaras Béaslaí and Michael Knightly, while David Boyd and Seán Lester have left more fragmentary accounts of their activities.

Journalists and the Rising

Born into a Belfast Presbyterian unionist family, David Boyd (1892–1965) joined the IRB in 1911 ‘having come under the influence of fellow Protestant journalists active in the revolutionary movement, most notably Seán Lester and Ernest Blythe’.¹⁶ Having moved to Dublin, he joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913. While working as a journalist with the unionist *Evening Mail* he was one of a select group of Irish Volunteers sent in July 1914 to secure the Dublin coastal town of Howth so as to facilitate the landing of arms and ammunition. In his memoirs – published as a series of newspaper articles in 1961 – the officer commanding this group, future Irish president Seán T. O’Kelly, recounted how having been summoned to a house he was given charge of twenty-five men armed with crude batons

whose job it was ‘to see that neither the coast guard nor the police interfered with the landing of the arms’.¹⁷ In a 1961 interview published by the *Evening Herald*, Boyd confirmed that he was present at Howth on ‘reconnaissance’ for the revolutionary movement and that he was ‘one of a select few who had been given prior intelligence of the arrival’ of the arms.¹⁸ Recalling the events many years later, Boyd recounted that when a large party of Irish Volunteers arrived at Howth and realised that ‘gun-running was in progress they were marched at the double, and in their excitement, broke ranks’. On the return march, when the now armed Volunteers encountered a cordon of police and military personnel, Boyd witnessed the demand that the arms be surrendered and the retort from the Volunteers that they had ‘as much right to carry arms as they had in the North of Ireland’. He also witnessed the bayonet charge by the military that injured several Volunteers and dispersed the march.¹⁹ Following the Rising, Boyd went on the run and ended up in Waterford city where he secured a post on the *Waterford Standard*, a newspaper he subsequently acquired and edited until its demise in 1953.²⁰

Also from Northern Ireland, Seán Lester (1888–1959) jointed the unionist *North Down Herald* in 1905 where he established a close friendship with fellow journalist Ernest Blythe – a leading light of the Irish language movement. Having joined the IRB in 1908 Lester moved to Dublin and took up the post of chief reporter of the *Daily Express* (a sister title of the *Evening Mail* both of which were owned by Henry L. Tivy, who also owned the *Cork Constitution*). Lester did not take part in the Rising itself due to the confusion surrounding the Easter Sunday manoeuvres. But his activities within the revolutionary movement were well known and Dublin Castle ‘took an embarrassing interest in his movements, and on more than one occasion brought pressure to bear to have him dismissed by employers’.²¹ Indeed, correspondence between Tivy and Lester indicate a terse relationship. While Tivy appreciated Lester’s qualities as chief reporter he expressed frustration with Lester’s activities – especially after the Rising had resulted in damage to his Dublin newspapers’ premises. In one letter Tivy expressed his concern about Lester associating with those whom he referred to as living ‘in a sphere of high temperament’.²² In another letter, Tivy expressed consternation at Dublin Castle’s tendency ‘to class me as a Sinn Féiner whereas the fact is that I should be glad to do my bit in kicking the carcass of every Sinn Féiner and other rebel in Ireland into the [river] Liffey’.²³ When Lester informed Tivy that he has secured a new post at the nationalist *Freeman’s Journal* Tivy responded by noting that it would be ‘a relief’ if Lester left his paper.²⁴

Born in Liverpool to Irish parents, Percy Frederick Beazley (1881–1965), was better known by his gaelicised name Piaras Béaslaí. As a child he spent several summers with relatives in Ireland and as an Irish language enthusiast he was prominent within the Liverpool branch of the Gaelic League.²⁵ Throughout the month of January 1953 the *Irish Independent* published a detailed series of his recollections. Entitled ‘A Nation in Revolt’ the series gives a detailed account of his activities as an insurgent-journalist.²⁶ As a member of the Gaelic League and the IRB Béaslaí was among a group of individuals that established the Irish Volunteers in 1913. This group subsequently accepted an offer from William Sears, proprietor of the *Enniscorthy Echo*, to publish a weekly newspaper. First published in February 1914 *The Irish Volunteer* was edited by IRB member and *Enniscorthy Echo* journalist Larry de Lacy and given official recognition on the strict condition that ‘proofs of all the editorial matter be sent in advance’ to Béaslaí for approval – a condition adhered to until the paper ceased publication in October 1914.²⁷ At this time, Béaslaí was on the staff of the Irish Parliamentary Party’s organ, the *Freeman’s Journal* and was well aware that its proprietors ‘regarded the starting of the Volunteers with suspicion and disfavour’. He very soon received ‘personal proof’ of the disfavour with which his Volunteer activities were viewed:

Early in February 1914 my connection with the editorial staff of that newspaper was abruptly terminated without explanation and I became a freelance journalist. I still did occasional work for the 'Freeman' acting as substitute for members of the staff who were engaged in more lucrative 'special' work, but this of course was a private matter between myself and them, not coming under the cognisance of the Board of Directors.²⁸

But despite moving in the inner-circles of the IRB and Irish Volunteers, Béaslaí recalled that he knew nothing of the plans to land arms at Howth in July 1914 (he was on tour with an acting troupe at the time). It was, he reflected, 'galling to think that our comrades had been in action against the British while we had been down south play-acting'.²⁹ On his return to Dublin he informed senior IRB figure Seán McDermott that if the war (which had just begun) came 'to an end without any armed effort for freedom' then he would leave the IRB. In response, McDermott made it clear that 'an insurrection at a suitable date had been decided on'.³⁰ John Redmond's call for Irish Volunteers to join the British Army met with a chilly response from *The Irish Volunteer* which observed that 'England's wars were no concern of the Volunteers [which had been] established to defend the rights of the Irish people'. A repudiation of this editorial position by the now Redmond-dominated Irish Volunteers executive committee also ended official recognition of that journal.³¹ Following the split from Redmond, Béaslaí was elected to the executive committee of the reconstituted Irish Volunteers and, in October 1914, was asked by Joseph Plunkett to submit any plans that he might have for occupying and defending positions in Dublin city or county. He was also instructed to collect such plans from any other officers that he might know. Béaslaí subsequently used the IJA headquarters as a drop-off point for other officers to deliver their plans. Among those who travelled to the headquarters to do so – as early as February 1915 – was Tomás Ashe, commander of the Fingal Brigade, who dropped off maps of Fingal marked with strategic positions.³²

As his parents lived in Liverpool Béaslaí had a legitimate reason to travel to Britain frequently. In December 1915 he was dispatched to Birmingham to secure the purchase of a large consignment of rifles. However, when he arrived at the firm he was told that the deal was off because the firm had just sold a large quantity of arms to Turkey – then at war with Britain – and had been reprimanded by the British government. Béaslaí was 'amused and astonished at the whole business – on the one hand at the laxity of the British government and on the other at the combination of business honesty and unscrupulous national treachery shown by these amiable and patriotic English businessmen'.³³ In late-January 1916 he was visited at the IJA offices by Seán McDermott who asked him to go to Liverpool to pass on a coded message to a contact who was helping to organise the ill-fated attempt by Germany to supply arms for the Rising. He was also instructed to ask the contact to enquire whether the Germans could, along with rifles and ammunition, supply machine guns and officers who could use them. On Good Friday, Béaslaí used the IJA offices to host a meeting of the officers of his Irish Volunteers unit at which plans for seizing specific buildings were outlined and discussed.³⁴ The following day, Béaslaí was visited at the IJA headquarters by Michael Knightly of the *Irish Independent* who informed him that the paper had been visited by a British army officer who had instructed the editor not to print any report of the capture and sinking of a German ship off the Irish coast. Béaslaí immediately sought out Seán McDermott – but McDermott had already heard the news courtesy of another IJA member, Thomas F. O'Sullivan – a journalist with the *Freeman's Journal* who was prominent within Gaelic Athletic Association circles and who was friendly with many of the IRB leaders. O'Sullivan had also overheard military officers giving the non-publication instructions to his

editor and had passed on the information to Seán T. O'Kelly. O' Kelly, who later described O'Sullivan as 'a sympathiser with our movement', undertook to find McDermott and inform him of developments.³⁵ Nonetheless, the Rising went ahead on Easter Monday. Following the Rising, Beasley was sentenced to three years' penal servitude but was released in the amnesty of 1917, whereupon he resumed his duties as secretary of the IJA.³⁶

Michael Knightly's testimony to the Bureau of Military History throws further light on the IJA's premises being used as a location to plan the activities of 'F Company' of the First Battalion of the Irish Volunteers (Béaslaí's unit). Described in his obituary as 'a close personal friend of Mr de Valera, the late President Griffith, General Michael Collins, Mr Austin Stack and other prominent figures in the Sinn Féin movement' Knightly began his career with *Kerry News* and the *Cork Free Press* before joining the *Irish Independent* in 1913 – the same year he joined the Irish Volunteers.³⁷ In his testimony, Knightly recounted how some days prior to the Rising, he disturbed a meeting taking place at the IJA headquarters. Having arrived at the building he was denied admission. When he was eventually allowed entry he was introduced to several senior Irish Volunteers officers who had been consulting Dublin street maps. He was also pointedly asked whether he would be 'turning out on Sunday'. Knightly replied that, as he was due in Cork to report on a teachers' conference, if the reference to Sunday related to 'an ordinary parade' he would not turn out, but that if it related to 'anything worth losing a job over' he would turn out. The reply from Béaslaí – 'jobs won't count' – confirmed to Knightly that the plans being made related to an imminent insurrection.³⁸ When no mobilisation was enacted on Easter Sunday, Knightly made plans to travel to Cork on Easter Monday but when news reached Independent Newspapers that the GPO had been seized Knightly went there and, having been admitted advised Seán McDermott that he had heard in the newsroom that the British military were moving artillery to Dublin. According to Knightly, McDermott's response was 'Damn it, only for MacNeill yesterday we would have the whole country with us'.³⁹ Having remained in the GPO until Thursday, Knightly was conveyed to Jervis Street Hospital suffering from a severe throat infection. Post the Rising, Knightly was interned in Frongoch camp in Wales and, on his release, returned to his post at the *Irish Independent*, where he was asked by the paper's editor, T. R. Harrington, whether, if another event similar to the Rising were to occur, he would take part in it. Knightly's reply – that he would 'with more heart than on the previous occasion' – prompted Harrington to retort that he would 'build a special asylum for you people . . . and put you all in it'.⁴⁰

Reporting the Rising

Due to their location in Dublin's city centre some newspapers suffered damage during the Rising. The premises of Independent Newspapers on Abbey Street were occupied by the rebels though it remained relatively undamaged. In contrast, the premises of the *Freeman's Journal* on nearby Princes Street suffered extensive damage from shelling. Similarly, the premises of the *Daily Express* and the *Evening Mail* on Parliament Street were seized by the rebels after they failed to take Dublin Castle and were damaged in the ensuing fighting. Things were somewhat different for the *Irish Times* which was then located between O'Connell Street where the GPO was held by the rebels and Trinity College on College Green which was held by British forces. On the first day of the Rising, while all other newspaper buildings were seized by the rebels, production of the *Irish Times* continued as normal. But, despite being caught unawares by the Rising, the government was quick to implement censorship measures to prevent news of the Rising from spreading. On Easter Monday evening, after the *Irish Times* had been printed, its editor, John Healy, received a request from the government to delay its issue to the public with the result that 'the *Irish Times* actually issued to the public on that date was in greatly reduced form'. Its leading

article observed that it had ‘never been published in stranger circumstances than those which obtain to-day’; an attempt had been made ‘to overthrow the constitutional government of Ireland [and] to set up an independent Irish Republic in Dublin’.⁴¹ Caught between two strategic positions its staff found themselves trapped in the building for the best part of a week. To ease the cabin fever the general manager, John J. Simington, somehow secured a barrel of porter that was rationed out amongst the staff.⁴² In his later dispatches as Irish correspondent of the London *Times*, John Healy gave an insight into the production of the paper during that week:

On Monday night I went to my own newspaper, and until Friday night I was virtually a prisoner in its office. We were the only newspaper in Dublin which tried to ‘carry on’, and we succeeded until Thursday. On that day we were reduced to a ‘folio of four pages’. Dublin was utterly cut off from the outside world. Of what was happening in Dublin we knew only what could be gleaned by the brief excursions of brave men who faced death every time they left the office door. We learned afterwards that the General Officer then commanding had sent at least one brief *communiqué* to the English Press, but this was denied to the only newspaper in Dublin.⁴³

Despite being able to publish on most days, the paper’s reportage was limited by the declaration of martial law, the imposition of press censorship, the inability to communicate with its London office, the dangers faced by journalists who ventured out of the building, and the fact that the police had instructed Healy to turn off all lighting within the building. On the fourth day of the Rising it declared that there was ‘little or no news (we admit frankly) in the only newspaper; that, however, is not the newspaper’s fault, and it may claim, perhaps, as a merit that it comes out at all’. Strangely, it was forced to recommend activities other than reading a newspaper to its readers: a father could ‘cultivate a habit of easy conversation with his family . . . put his little garden into a state of decency’ or do some ‘useful mending and painting about the house’. Reading the works of Shakespeare was also highly recommended.⁴⁴

Given that its premises on Middle Abbey Street had been seized by the rebels and ‘were destroyed by the military operations’ the *Irish Journalist* did not re-appear until August 1916 and that edition noted that the IJA’s secretary Piaras Béaslaí had been sentenced to three years’ penal servitude for his role in the Rising – a sentence that the journal noted ‘has had an injurious effect on our Organisation’. It also observed that Béaslaí ‘was not the only journalist involved in the Rising, with which so many of the finest intellects of our country were associated. Numbers of other equally brilliant young Pressmen and literary men have been identified with the movement which culminated in an effort to establish an Irish Republic and are to-day bravely paying the penalty in English dungeons and British detention camps’. Among the journalists it listed as being interned in Britain were Robert Brennan and William Sears of the *Enniscorthy Echo*, Arthur Griffith of *Nationality*, John Joseph Scollan of *Hiberian*, James Murphy and Brian O’Higgins of the *Saturday Post*, William O’Leary Curtis and Michael Knightly of the *Irish Independent*, and Herbert Moore Pim of *The Irishman*. In an attempt to strike a balance between those journalists who supported and those who opposed the Rising it noted that it was the duty of the IJA ‘without committing itself to approval or disapproval of the Rising, to take steps with the object of seeing that our colleagues in convict establishments are treated as political offenders and not as common criminals’. Indeed, it noted that not all Dublin journalists had been supportive of the Rising and intriguingly, though cryptically, observed that had an Irish Republic been established ‘four journalists would have been asked to answer a charge of high treason’.⁴⁵ But whatever differences existed among Dublin journalists in relation to the Rising there existed some

solidarity also. Somewhat pleasingly the *Irish Journalist* noted that one unnamed Dublin newspaper had been offered the financially lucrative task of supplying shorthand reporters to the trial of Eoin MacNeill, the chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers who had not taken part in the Rising. However, all the newspaper's journalists 'had refused to earn the usual professional fees on the ground that the trial was of a political character, and involved the prisoner's life. They therefore felt that they would not be justified in accepting the guineas which under other circumstances they would be only too glad to earn'. As a result of this stance special reporting staff 'had to be imported to do the work'. It also criticised the censorship imposed on the press that lingered long after the Rising by noting that 'the people least qualified to censor Journalists' work are half-educated military officers and thick-skulled Co. Inspectors of police'.⁴⁶

Reporting on the Rising had been, the journal noted, 'a comparatively safe affair'. From the second day (Tuesday) onwards journalists were prevented by the military from venturing into the firing line and were not permitted to pass the military cordons for some days after the suppression of the revolt. This, the journal pointedly remarked, was just as well 'as Dublin reporters have never been paid the salaries of war correspondents'. But several journalists were killed during the Rising. The execution of Francis Sheehy Skeffington – a pacifist, ardent opponent of military recruitment in Ireland and editor of the suffragette publication *The Irish Citizen* – shocked Dublin to its core. Arrested while walking home from an unsuccessful meeting to organise a civic guard to prevent looting in the city he was taken to Portobello Army Barracks. Later that evening he was forced to act as a human shield for an army raiding party led by Captain J. C. Bowen Colthurst.⁴⁷ Amid a raid that involved the shooting of several civilians by Bowen Colthurst, two more journalists – Patrick McIntyre (who had edited an anti-union organ, *The Toiler*, during the Great Lockout of 1913, and who was then involved in a little-known organ *The Searchlight*) and Thomas Dixon (editor of a gossip-themed publication entitled *The Eye-Opener*) were arrested and, along with Sheehy Skeffington, were taken back to Portobello Barracks where, the following morning, Bowen Colthurst assembled a firing squad that executed all three journalists together. For his actions Bowen Colthurst was found guilty of murder by a court martial but was simultaneously declared to have been insane at the time of the killings. Following a short period of detention at Broadmore Mental Asylum he was released whereupon he emigrated to Canada.⁴⁸ On the killing of Sheehy Skeffington the *Irish Journalist* had strong words:

One of the saddest tragedies in connect with the Rising was the murder of Mr F. Sheehy Skeffington, M.A., by the military officer, Bowen Colthurst. Mr Skeffington was a man of the highest intellectual attainments, a brilliant writer, with a loveable personality. He was strongly opposed to physical violence in any cause, and was actively engaged in preventing looting when he was arrested by the military. The officer who ordered his execution was found guilty of murder, but held insane. By this verdict his life was saved. His death, however, or that of a dozen other military officers, would have been a poor equivalent for the loss of the brave young journalist who was the champion of all weak causes.⁴⁹

In a later issue, referring to the establishment of a Royal Commission to investigate the circumstances of Sheehy Skeffington's killing it observed that 'no report can exaggerate or minimise the appalling character of the cold-blooded atrocity'. Skeffington had, it declared, been 'murdered without the slightest justification or provocation'.⁵⁰ However, the journal made no mention of the two other journalists killed alongside Sheehy Skeffington. While it may be that their politics or journalistic activities were not to the liking of the IJA it is curious – given that they had been killed just as arbitrarily as Sheehy Skeffington – that the journal

did not mention them in the spirit of professional solidarity. Similarly, no mention was made of the executed leaders of the Rising, many of whom had been involved in various aspects of journalism: Pádraig Pearse had been editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis* (the newspaper of the Gaelic League); James Connolly had been editor of the *Irish Worker* (a trade union newspaper); Seán McDermott had been manager of *Irish Freedom* (the IRB's newspaper); Éamonn Ceannt had been a contributor to *Irish Freedom*; Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Mary Plunkett had been regular contributors to the *Irish Review* (a literary magazine); and Michael O'Hanrahan had been a contributor to Arthur Griffith's newspaper *Sinn Féin*.⁵¹ While the journal was most likely seeking to strike a balance between IJA members who supported and those who opposed the Rising, it is extraordinary that no mention was made of the fate of Pearse and his companions given their prominence in literary and journalistic life in Dublin. The *Irish Journalist* did, however, record the death of Patrick Reynolds of the *Evening Mail*, who 'received three bullet wounds in Dame St on Easter Monday'. Reynolds was, the *Evening Mail* observed, 'one of the innocent victims of the rebellion': as he had tried to make his way out of the firing line he had been caught in the crossfire between the rebels, who had seized the newspaper's building on Parliament Street, and the soldiers who had attacked it from Dublin Castle.⁵²

Discussion / Conclusion

The historiography of the 1916 Rising has tended to focus on the primary protagonists, and in so far as examining journalism and the Rising, has tended to focus almost exclusively on the primary protagonists' endeavours as editors of and contributors to literary magazines and newspapers associated with the trade union and revolutionary movements. But, as demonstrated, many lesser-known journalists who worked on the mainstream press acted as planners and participants in the insurrection and, unable to express their political radicalism in the newspapers for which they worked, they instead expressed their radicalism through their activities within the Irish Journalists' Association. While the activities of these journalists appear to have been known to the police it is clear that their involvement in the IJA provided some cover for their clandestine activities. The IJA's headquarters – which was used to plan some aspects of the Rising – were never raided by the police. If it had been raided then such an event would undoubtedly have been reported in the *Irish Journalist* and would have resulted in motions at condemnation at the IJA's annual meeting. Indeed, the police may have been aware of the adverse national – and international – press reaction should it raid the headquarters of a representative organisation for journalists.

Post the Rising the altered political landscape resulted in an altered press landscape. As public opinion swung behind the insurgents the Irish Parliamentary Party was swept aside in the 1918 general election by the physical force tradition in the guise of Sinn Féin. In a similar vein, the weaker organs of the daily press, specifically the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Daily Express*, ceased publication amid the Anglo-Irish conflict of the early 1920s. The fractious nature of the Irish independence movement was reflected in the civil war that followed independence, which in turn was followed by a specific press project – the establishment of the *Irish Press* in 1931 – which gave voice to the faction that had unsuccessfully sought the rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. In the early decades of the state's existence political battles were also press battles, with the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* supporting the pro-Treaty faction and the *Irish Press* supporting the anti-Treaty faction – with both sides differing on the state's constitutional relationship with Britain. As has been noted elsewhere it was not until the advent of an Irish television service in 1961 – a service bound in law to be objective and impartial in its coverage of news and current affairs – that the Irish press industry became less partisan in its political coverage.⁵³

As for the IJA itself, post the Rising it was riven by division over its future direction. From the surviving records it appears that there existed two distinct camps – one populated by older journalists who did not take part in the Rising which wished to keep the IJA as a representative organisation separate from the wider trade union movement, and another populated by younger journalists who had taken part in the Rising or were involved in movements such as the Gaelic League which advocated that the IJA should register as a trade union. At its February 1916 AGM a motion that the IJA register as a trade union movement had been passed but at a subsequent meeting it had been agreed – to avoid a split – that a plebiscite of all members be held. However, the final edition of the *Irish Journalist* recorded that the Rising had prevented this plebiscite from taking place.⁵⁴ Thereafter the only record of what happened to the IJA resides in newspaper archives. One newspaper report recorded that a meeting of Dublin journalists ‘unanimously decided’ to request the association to summon an AGM ‘to put into effect the terms of a resolution of 1919 [sic] forming the association into a trade union’.⁵⁵ This, presumably, should have read ‘1916’. In 1919 it affiliated to the Dublin Printing and Kindred Trades Alliance and in 1924 merged with the Dublin and Irish Association branch of the Institute of Journalists, heralding an end to a journalist representative association that played a key-role in the 1916 Rising.⁵⁶

Notes

- 1) See Caulfield, “Easter Rebellion”; Williams, “The Irish Struggle”; Edwards and Pyle, “1916”; Coogan, “1916”; Townshend, “Easter 1916”; Wills, “Dublin 1916”; McGarry, *The Rising*; Coleman, “The Irish Revolution”; Foster, “Vivid Faces” and Ferriter, “A Nation”.
- 2) Many of the IRB’s leaders were prominent in the Irish Volunteers and it was this inner-circle that instigated the Rising. When the leader of the Irish Volunteers, Eoin MacNeill, was told belatedly of the plans for a Rising on Easter Sunday, he issued an order cancelling the Sunday manoeuvres that were to be held countrywide as a prelude to the Rising. However, the IRB inner-circle decided to go ahead with the Rising in Dublin on Easter Monday. As a result of this confusion the Rising, which was meant to occur nationwide, was mostly confined to Dublin.
- 3) For more on Connolly’s journalism see Curry, “The Worker”; for more on Pearse’s journalism see Uí Chollatáin, “An Claidheamh Soluis”.
- 4) See Figgis, “Recollections”; Ryan, “Remembering Sion” and FitzGerald “Memoirs”.
- 5) The *Irish Times*, January 20, 1911 carries a comprehensive account of the IJA’s first AMG and a list of its prominent members.
- 6) See <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/>
- 7) Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, no. 675.
- 8) Bingham, “Digitization of Newspaper Archives,” 225.
- 9) For more on the *Freeman’s Journal* see Larkin, “A Great Dail Organ”; for more on the *Irish Independent* see O’Brien and Rafter 2012; for more on the *Irish Times* see O’Brien 2008. The *Daily Express*, a Dublin Unionist newspaper, ceased publication in 1921.

- 10) Foley, "Colonialism and Journalism in Ireland," 380.
- 11) *Irish Journalist*, January, 1915.
- 12) *Irish Times*, January 20, 1911.
- 13) *Irish Journalist*, October, 1914.
- 14) *Irish Journalist*, May–August, 1916.
- 15) *Irish Journalist*, November, 1915.
- 16) Keating, "Muscovite Days and Nights," 116.
- 17) *Irish Press*, July 7, 1961. This paper published a series of O'Kelly recollections throughout July 1961.
- 18) *Evening Herald*, July 29, 1961.
- 19) *Evening Herald*, July 29, 1961.
- 20) In 1929 Boyd became the first, and only, editor to be prosecuted under the Censorship of Publications Act 1929 in relation to his reporting of a court case. See Keating, "Waterford Standard."
- 21) Griffin, "The Wild Geese," 244.
- 22) Gageby, "Last Secretary General," 9 (letter from Tivy to Lester, August 19, 1916).
- 23) Gageby, "Last Secretary General," 11 (letter from Tivy to Lester, August 22, 1916).
- 24) Gageby, "Last Secretary General," 11–12 (letter from Tivy to Lester, undated). Lester later served as the last secretary general of the League of Nations.
- 25) *Irish Press*, June 23, 1965.
- 26) The *Irish Independent* later published a second series of recollections, 'A Veteran Remembers' from May 16 to June 10, 1957.
- 27) *Irish Independent*, January 6, 1953.
- 28) *Irish Independent*, January 7, 1953.
- 29) *Irish Independent*, January 9, 1953.
- 30) *Irish Independent*, January 12, 1953.
- 31) *Irish Independent*, January 12, 1953.
- 32) *Irish Independent*, January 15, 1953.

- 33) *Irish Independent*, January 13, 1953.
- 34) *Irish Independent*, January 16, 1953.
- 35) *Irish Press*, July 11, 1961.
- 36) *Irish Independent*, June 18, 1917. In 1918 Béaslaí was elected to the First Dáil and served as the IRA's director of publicity during the Anglo-Irish War 1919–21. For more on Béaslaí's later life see Maume, "Béaslaí".
- 37) *Irish Independent*, December 21, 1964.
- 38) Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, no. 833, 2.
- 39) Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, no. 833, 3.
- 40) Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, no. 834, 6. During the Anglo-Irish War 1919–21 Knightly passed information, including photographs of Dublin Castle officials, to the republican movement. He was imprisoned during the conflict, went to London as part of the staff of Treaty delegation, and served as press censor during the Second World War. See *Irish Independent*, February 19, 1955.
- 41) *Irish Times*, April 25, 1916.
- 42) O'Brien, "Irish Times," 48.
- 43) *The Times*, May 1, 1916.
- 44) *Irish Times*, April 27, 1916.
- 45) *Irish Journalist*, May–August 1916.
- 46) *Irish Journalist*, May–August 1916.
- 47) Maume, "Skeffington".
- 48) Maume, "Colthurst".
- 49) *Irish Journalist*, May–August 1916.
- 50) *Irish Journalist*, September–October 1916.
- 51) Ó Conchubhair, "Dublin's Fighting Story".
- 52) *Evening Mail*, August 4, 1916.
- 53) O'Brien, "The Fourth Estate", 116.
- 54) *Irish Journalist*, September–October 1916.

55) *Irish Independent*, October 28, 1918.

56) *Irish Times*, January 13, 1919; *Irish Times*, January 19, 1925.

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