(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 219

UNCORRECTED PROOF COPY:
The passion of particularity': Magill magazine, 1977-1990 in F. Larkin and M. O'Brien (eds) Periodicals and journalism in twentieth century Ireland Dublin: Four Courts, 2014. 219-234.

14 / *Magill* magazine, 1977–90

KEVIN RAFTER

In 1986 the *Guardian* newspaper recorded that '*Magill* has gained a political influence that has no parallel in British or indeed European magazine publishing'.[1] Some years later, the *Sunday Times* credited the magazine with 'dragging Irish journalism out of its largely comfortable, unquestioning dullness'.[2] In truth, the impact of *Magill* – which first appeared in October 1977 – lies somewhere between these two generous accolades.

As other chapters in this volume highlight, throughout the twentieth century there were always publications offering alternatives to the mainstream national newspapers. In the late 1970s, however, a series of magazine publications emerged with more radical production and content ambition. This 'alternative' media scene – but one that was, as we shall discuss, rooted in the establishment – included *Magill*, *In Dublin* and *Hot Press*; each title offering a different perspective on aspects of Irish society with content that overlapped between current affairs and popular culture.[3]

When these titles first appeared on the newsstands, the Irish Republic was moving in a 'liberalising direction'.[4] Yet, change was stop-start and visions about what this society should be were deeply – and at times, bitterly – contested. In the wonderful phrase of John Waters, who worked at various times for all three titles, 'the sixties had arrived 10 years late, but we were fast catching up'.[5] These debates about sexuality, religion and politics, among other topics, provided rich material for this emerging magazine sector.

This chapter considers the role of *Magill*, which in its first guise between 1977 and 1990 was at times 'a powerful and influential voice'.[6] But it was also a magazine very much shaped by the particular interests of its proprietor and founding editor, Vincent Browne, and to varying degrees by the other four journalists who filled the editor's chair in a rollercoaster period until publication ceased in 1990. In the first section we consider Browne and how his own career prior to 1977 impacted on how *Magill* was defined as a magazine. The second section examines the role of this new title and the influence of its founding editor. The third section discusses each of the four editors who oversaw *Magill*

1 *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 1986. 2 *Sunday Times*, 26 Jan. 2003. 3 Another publication in this space, *The Phoenix*, was first published in 1983. 4 J.J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 656. 5 *Irish Times*, 19 Oct. 1993. 6 J. Horgan, *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p. 113.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 220

after 1983 when Browne – while still owner of the magazine – shifted his attention to the role as editor of and shareholder in the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper. The final concluding section addresses the issue of the failure to sustain publication, and the legacy of this magazine title.

THE PROPRIETOR

Magill was not Vincent Browne's first foray into magazine editorship or his first involvement as an owner. Having written for the *Irish Times* while a student, contributing 'UCD Notes', he spent several months in 1967 working as a television researcher in RTÉ. His first serious break came in the summer of 1968 when he persuaded the *Irish Times* to commission articles about developments in eastern Europe. The timing was excellent. The reformist communist government in Czechoslovakia had embarked upon a process of political and economic reform. The strategy led to unease in Moscow where the Soviet Union leadership feared a threat to communist hegemony in eastern Europe. 'The Soviet Army obligingly invaded Czechoslovakia just before I went there. I was one of the last to get in over the Austrian border', Browne later recalled.[7]

Along with the *Irish Times* he also filed copy for *Nusight*, a Dublin-based publication, which had been established as a 'weekly youth and student newspaper' in late 1967 by the Union of Students in Ireland.[8] Unfortunately, insufficient students were attracted by the mix of political, foreign and sports news. The publication failed to secure sufficient advertising, and was a financial drain on the student organisation. Early in 1968 a new strategy was adopted with *Nusight* being transformed from a student publication into a national monthly one with an emphasis on political and social affairs.

Michael Keating, a future Fine Gael and Progressive Democrat politician and controversial businessman, edited the first issue in magazine format. Several experienced journalists contributed to the monthly publication, including Dick Walsh and Michael McInerney of the *Irish Times* on politics and Tom O'Dea of the *Irish Press* on television. During the 1969 general election, writers included Garret FitzGerald, Eoghan Harris and Justin Keating. Given the magazine's new national news agenda, it promoted Browne's articles from Czechoslovakia: 'Under the guise of being a student he managed to stay [in Prague] and spent his time sending back spectacular first hand-reports to the *Irish Times*. On 19th September he telexed this exclusive report to *Nusight*'.[9]

Browne took over as editor of *Nusight* in August 1969. The cover story was on the state of Irish show jumping but what would become more familiar

7 *Irish Times*, 16 Apr.1983. 8 *Nusight*, 13 Oct. 1967. 9 Ibid., Oct. 1968.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 221

Browne themes were evident on the inside pages. There was a strong emphasis on party politics. The issue included short interviews with newly appointed parliamentary secretaries (junior ministers), including Gerry Collins of Fianna Fáil. Like Browne, Collins hailed from west Limerick and the two men had sparred in student politics at UCD. Browne wrote of Collins that 'there is the sly way he tells you things confidentially and "off the record". About how carsick he has been since, due to his appointment, he is now driven everywhere. With delightful sheepiness he shows you the bottle of Milk of Magnesia he carries around'.[10] Collins would feature prominently in future Browne publications.

The violence in Derry in August 1969 dominated Browne's second issue as editor. It was claimed that the September 1969 issue sold its full print run of 40,000. Ian Paisley made the cover of the October 1969 issue while the bulk of the November issue was devoted to poverty in Ireland. It noted that 'in terms of its wealth, Ireland cares less for the weaker and poorer section of its community than any other country in Europe with the exception of Portugal. Yet the popular myth is that there is no poverty in Ireland'.[11]

Browne wrote his first big political scoop in the same issue. The article described a split in cabinet over policy on Northern Ireland and that consideration had been given to sending the army across the border. 'On at least two occasions the Government was in danger of breaking up and that it did not do so was due more to the fortuitous turn of events than anything else'.[12] The exclusive did not gain much traction: 'the political correspondents threw cold water on it', Browne later said.[13] But the *Nusight* journalist was convinced of the accuracy of his reporting: 'The primary source of the story was Charles Haughey with whom I had begun to form a friendship. Brian Lenihan was also a help as was Gay Byrne's wife, Kathleen Watkins, because her brother drove Kevin Boland to Áras an Uachtaráin after Dev called him to persuade him not to resign'.

Several months later the country was engulfed in political crisis when the illegal plot to import arms was dramatically revealed with the ministerial sackings of Haughey and Neil Blaney, and Boland's resignation. In dramatic fashion Browne returned to these events when he was editor of *Magill*. Indeed, the subjects that featured strongly in *Nusight* under Browne – party politics, redistribution of wealth and Northern Ireland – continued to preoccupy and dominate his entire career in journalism, and each would later provide cover stories for *Magill*. It would not be incorrect to describe these issues of *Nusight* as pilots for *Magill*.

Despite claims of healthy sales, *Nusight* did not appear in the first three months of 1970. It was reported that Browne and Gordon Colleary – both later share-

10 Ibid., Aug. 1969. 11 Ibid., Oct. 1969. 12 Ibid., Oct. 1969. 13 *Irish Times*, 16 Apr. 1983.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 222

holders of *Magill* and the *Sunday Tribune* – had taken a financial stake in the title.[14] The magazine reappeared in April 1970. 'We regret the suspension of publication of *Nusight* in January, February and March which was due to acute financial difficulties. We have now partially solved our problems and hope to have achieved a final solution by the end of April', Browne wrote.[15] The April issue featured what emerged as another long-time Browne interest – the Kennedy family. Robert Kennedy was on the cover with the headline 'The Kennedy Dynasty' while the following month the cover story focused on the Catholic Church with a photograph of Pope Paul VI. It was the final issue of the magazine.

After *Nusight* folded, Browne moved into national newspaper journalism, working first as a reporter with the Irish Press Group and later Independent Newspapers. He toyed with the idea of starting a new Sunday publication but it was not a realistic option: 'by that time I had a very maverick image. It would have been impossible to get the necessary backing for a Sunday newspaper. I realised I would first have to achieve something in publishing terms'.[16] That 'something' was to be *Magill*.

'MAGILL' ARRIVES

A monthly current affairs magazine, *Magill* was first published in October 1977 and appeared continuously until August 1990.[17] At its best *Magill* was home to some great journalism, and many fine journalists made their first impression on its pages. Although Browne moved between the position of editor and publisher, his editorial fingerprints were evident across the publication. Browne identified five themes for the magazine, and these dominated its editorial pages – civil liberties, Northern Ireland, women's rights, the redistribution of wealth and the issue of accountability. In focusing on these areas, Browne also defined the kind of journalism he envisaged for *Magill*:

> The whole purpose of journalism is to enforce accountability on the part not just of public bodies but on the part of all institutions of power in society. Thus journalism is concerned not just with Governments but also with police forces, bureaucrats, courts, big business, trade unions, churches, even newspapers themselves.[18]

Interestingly, however, Browne's 'manifesto' for *Magill* was published in its centenary issue in January 1985 rather than in its inaugural issue in October 1977.

14 Ibid., 14 Feb. 1970. **15** *Nusight*, Apr. 1970. **16** *Irish Times*, 16 Apr. 1983. **17** *Magill* went fortnightly between Mar. and July 1985. It closed in Aug. 1990 but re-emerged in 1997 for eleven further issues under Browne's stewardship. **18** *Magill*, Jan. 1985.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 223

The first issue arrived without editorial fanfare, although the collection of interests and issues that attracted Browne's attention throughout his journalistic career was evident. The magazine offered a varied read with a strong focus on politics backed by coverage of business and sport. In some respects a relatively niche publication like *Magill* – notwithstanding its influence, on occasions – reflected the personality of its dominant editor/owner. As Colm Tóibín observed, 'Vincent would have been, I think, a typical reader of the magazine. What he set about essentially was to design a magazine around himself'.[19]

As editor from 1977 to 1983, Browne established *Magill*'s presence with both his peers and the reading public by delivering several dramatic works of journalism. The title was not, however, an investigative magazine although throughout its period of publication *Magill* published several important journalistic investigations. This initial period in the magazine's history is probably best remembered for issues that examined the role of Sinn Féin the Workers' Party (April and May 1982) and also the publication of the 'Berry Diaries' (May, June and July 1980) which re-opened debate about the arms crisis of 1970.

There were libel threats over the arms crisis exposé based on allegations by Peter Berry, a former senior civil servant, about Jack Lynch's knowledge of the plan to import arms. Lynch insisted – as he had done since the revelations first emerged – that his first knowledge of the affair came in April 1970. But the 'Berry Diaries' presented an alternative thesis that Lynch had known from as early as October or November 1969 about the conspiracy to import arms. The allegations were explosive coming on the tenth anniversary of the dramatic affair that had led Lynch to sack two members of his government. Printers refused to deal with the magazine and distributors were uneasy. Browne was, however, determined to tell his story. Without local printers he was forced to go to the United Kingdom. The editor and his staff undertook distribution duties. Browne even sold the magazine from his car.

These arms crisis issues were undoubtedly the high point in the entire history of *Magill* and remain probably the biggest journalistic achievement of Browne's wide-ranging media career. It was also the story that moved *Magill* beyond its niche market and established the magazine with the wider public. Gene Kerrigan recalled the work involved in distributing the magazine: 'I went to some places I'd never even heard of before then. Some newsagents had never heard of *Magill* and they wouldn't take it. Others said "that the magazine they're talking about on the radio"'.[20] Sales of the June 1980 issue hit a historic high of 80,000 copies, and established *Magill* in the public mind as a publication for investigative journalism.

19 N. Kavanagh, '*Magill*: maverick or mainstream magazine?' (MA, Dublin City University, 1997), p. 4. 20 Interview with Gene Kerrigan.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 224

There were other scoops, including a series of 'exclusive' interviews with the Provisional IRA. The August 1978 issue of *Magill* included 'an exclusive authorised interview with the IRA'. A senior member of the Provisional IRA was given permission by the organisation's army council to speak to Browne on their behalf. During the wide-ranging interview the IRA man provided answers of considerable authority. He spoke about the reorganisation of the movement to prevent British intelligence infiltrating its structures, the development of new bombing making capabilities and the intention to resume attacks in Britain. Up to 1990 there were several interviews with IRA members that now provide a valuable historical record of the evolution of thinking within that paramilitary organisation.[21] These interviews offered a rare opportunity to gain a specific insight into thinking within the IRA, especially as the Section 31 broadcasting ban meant republicans were not interviewed on radio or televison programmes in the Irish Republic. Moreover, few national newspapers at the time afforded the IRA the space to outline its perspective in such an unmediated environment as the question and answer format generally favoured by the magazine. As a result, throughout the 1980s the highly nuanced debate underway in the republican movement about electoral politics and violence was played out in *Magill*. The magazine's interest, however, lay with the extremes – the IRA on one side, loyalists and hardline unionist leaders like Ian Paisley on the other. The reportage was serious and responsible, but through this limited editorial focus the wider social and political context to the conflict was generally neglected.

Beyond Northern Ireland, the magazine also gave prominence to several other subjects neglected by the national media, including the treatment of mental health patients. The pairing of reporter Helen Connolly and photographer Derek Speirs and their work on a six-month investigation delivered a powerful combination of text and image. Arising from an idea by Speirs, the investigation involved visiting twelve of the country's thirty-six public psychiatric hospitals. The extensive report noted that 'over 14,000 people, more than the population of Kilkenny, live in mental hospitals in Ireland' while the magazine observed that 'the conditions they [Connolly and Speirs] met in most of these hospitals appalled them, in spite of attempts in some of the hospitals to do a special clean-up operation prior to their visits'.[22]

In the early issues of *Magill* Browne shared editorial responsibilities with Mary Holland, a respected print and broadcast journalist. But, like many others, Holland did not last long with the new venture. She later recalled that '[Browne] was talking about stories that nobody else dared to do in what was then a very

21 K. Rafter, 'Bombers and mavericks: *Magill* magazine's coverage of Northern Ireland 1977–90', *Media History*, 17:1 (2011), 61–75. **22** *Magill*, Oct. 1980.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 225

cozy Irish society. On the other hand he could be very cruel to people and didn't seem to expect them to take it personally'.[23] This balancing of generosity and aggravation would be a defining feature of relations between Browne and those who edited *Magill* once he departed to focus his energies on the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper.

THE EDITORS

At various stages from 1983 to 1990, Colm Tóibín, Fintan O'Toole, Brian Trench and John Waters edited *Magill*. It was one of the weaknesses of the publication that no sustained period of stability prevailed once Browne exited as editor. This editorial upheaval – which was a hallmark of *Magill*'s history – was very much tied to Browne's personality and management style. Waters accurately described the reaction many felt towards Browne: 'I was baffled by him, fascinated by him, scared of him, in awe of him'.[24]

Browne was far from an easy employer. Rows and bust-ups were frequent; tears in the office were not uncommon. He gave many young reporters their first break but the force of his hostility broke others. The *Magill* editors shared similar experiences with their publisher, whose main focus from 1983 onwards was as editor of and shareholder in the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper. The nature of relations is most evident in the choice of the monthy cover image. While Browne relinquished direct editorial control – although each editor was briefed on the type of journalism that defined *Magill* – he retained a veto over the cover image.

For a news magazine the cover is an opportunity for the publication to set itself apart from its competitors on the newsstand. In this respect the cover of a magazine serves as a 'letter of introduction to its readers'.[25] Browne's commerical sense came to the fore in arguments about cover stories and images. He wanted recognisable names and photographs to attract potential purchasers. The magazine also borrowed the familiar red frame from *Time* covers which has been described as a graphic device to 'enhance the central illustration'.[26] The cornerflap also used by *Time* to promote inside content also became a favourite with *Magill*.

Paddy Agnew, who worked as a reporter on the magazine, recalled that, 'the cover was the most talked about, and the most agonised thing, every month. It was torture. If Vincent believed we got the cover wrong, sales were lost. Several versions of a cover – and several different covers – were mocked up every

23 *The Guardian*, 24 Jan. 1994. 24 Interview with John Waters. 25 N. Angeletti & A. Oliva, *Magazines that make history: their origins, development, and influence* (Gainesville, FL, 2004), p. 48. 26 Ibid., p. 44.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 226

month'.[27] Derek Speirs also witnessed these exchanges: 'When Vincent didn't like a cover you'd say to yourself – "Fucking hell, we're going to be for a few more hours yet". But he was often right'.[28]

Rows over the cover story and image dominated the monthly publication cycle. 'Vincent would appear on deadline day. He would snort and sniff at content ideas. And then his view of the cover would emerge', Brian Trench recalled.[29] On one occasion Browne, unimpressed with the cover choice, wanted the cyclist Stephen Roche as the cover story. But the decision to alter the cover was taken so late that it was impossible to change the positioning of the Roche article which – despite now being the cover story – was located at the very back of the magazine. Colm Tóibín had similar experiences: 'I wanted to put John Hume on the cover but Vincent said no. It wasn't that he didn't like John Hume, but he knew the cover would not help sell the magazine'.[30] For John Waters, a discussion over a cover image was the final source of conflict before he tendered his resignation as editor. He had planned to have the poet Brendan Kennelly on the cover with the headline 'the passion of particularity of Brendan Kenneally'. Browne was unimpressed. 'Is this a profile or what?', he asked, before adding another question about the cover headline, 'and what the fuck does that mean?'.[31]

A relatively small-scale operation such as *Magill* – and similar to other publications at that time such as *Hot Press* and *In Dublin* – survived on cover-sales revenue and advertising. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that priority was given to the choice of cover image. *Magill* was after all a commerical undertaking, and its closure in 1990 was in part due to mounting losses. Profits in previous years were helped by that fact that the magazine unlike the national newspapers in the late 1970s and early 1980s was able to offer colour pages to advertisers keen to target a medium-to-high income readership. Companies promoting financial services, alcohol, cars and other consumer and lifestyle products dominated the advertising pages. As Fintan O'Toole noted, 'it was relatively radical politically yet it survived for a long time as the darling of corporate enterprise and it survived on pretty expensive colour advertising from pretty major, respectable clients'.[32]

COLM TÓIBÍN (JANUARY 1983–MARCH 1985)

The first editorial transition took place in January 1983 when Colm Tóibín was recruited. Browne had initially offered Tóibín a job with the soon-to-be relaunched *Sunday Tribune*, but was turned down. He returned with another

27 Interview with Paddy Agnew. 28 Interview with Derek Speirs. 29 Interview with Brian Trench. 30 Interview with Colm Tóibín. 31 Interview with John Waters. 32 Kavanagh, Magill*: maverick or mainstream magazine?*, p. 3.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 227

proposal. The two men met in O'Donoghue's public house on Merrion Row in Dublin, adjacent to the *Magill* offices. 'I want to offer you a job?', Browne said. 'It doesn't matter. I'm not interested', Tóibín replied – after which he enquiry about the job on offer. 'I was going to ask you to edit *Magill*', Browne said. 'Yes, I'll take that', came the immediate reply.[33]

There were concerns for the future of the magazine with Browne's exit. Gene Kerrigan, who was a long-time writer for *Magill*, was conscious of this danger: 'there was an expectation that when Vincent left as editor that advertising would fall off and that the editorial quality would drop. But that didn't happen although it was a different magazine under Colm, and he was probably a better overall editor'.[34]

With magazine production and editorial experience acquired at *In Dublin* – and his interest in culture and the arts – Tóibín quickly put his individual stamp on the publication. As Kerrigan explained, 'Colm saw the magazine as a whole whereas Vincent could get fixated on one subject and then he wanted the definitive article on that subject. Colm was better at communicating with people about what needed to be done and he was more patient'.[35] Mark Brennock, a young reporter under Tóibín, contrasted the approach: 'Vincent had given the magazine a sharp news focus. Colm brought writing to the magazine which he grafted onto the current affairs'.[36]

Tóibín was influenced by the 'new journalism' in the work of American writers such as Tom Wolfe, Gay Telese and Hunter S. Thompson, and what has been described as 'an unprededented outpouring of creative nonfiction' in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States.[37] To the facts and figures of stories Tóibín added another dimenstion – observational writing – that was evident in numerious stories including *A Woman in Gangland* (December 1983), which was written in the narrative of a fictional work.

When Brennock pitched an idea of capturing life begging on the streets in Dublin in June 1983, Tóibín saw potential in the idea but he did not want reporters out on the street in the summer months. 'Let's wait until January', he suggested. A compromise was reached. They would hit the streets in November. The reporters had to experience the harsh reality of homelessness. In preparation Tóibín handed over a copy of *Down and Out in Paris* by George Orwell. 'He was like that. He wouldn't give you a piece of journalism. It would be a work of literature', Brennock recalled.[38] Maggie O'Kane had a similar experience. When working on a crime story in 1983, Tóibín gave her a copy of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

33 Interview with Colm Tóibín. 34 Interview with Gene Kerrigan. 35 Interview with Gene Kerrigan. 36 Interview with Mark Brennock. 37 M. Weingarten, *The gang that wouldn't write straight* (New York, 2005), p. 7. 38 Interview with Mark Brennock.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 228

Under Tóibín there was greater thought to the written piece, not just the news scoop. He would take a reporter's typed pages and, with pen, mark up changes for rewriting. 'It was a teaching hospital for young journalists. You were taught how to look at things. And that was because Colm was passionate about writing'.[39] Brennock recalled submitting his first piece for Tóibín: 'I wrote the article – it was a fairly short piece – but I rewrote it about six times. Colm was making suggestions. Eventually he sat at the typewriter. "Just tell me the story", he said. So I told him the story and he typed, and it worked'.[40]

FINTAN O'TOOLE (OCTOBER 1985–SEPTEMBER 1986)

Tensions with Browne eventually led Tóibín to resign as *Magill* editor in February 1985. A replacement was difficult to find given the particular skill set required and Browne's difficult reputation as proprietor. Fintan O'Toole eventually agreed to become editor in September 1985. He would only remain in the job for twelve months but in that time he brought an extraordinary range and depth of interests on the pages of the magazine.

Irish politics was defined in this period by political battles between Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey as well as the internal controversies in Fianna Fáil and societal debates on social issues such as divorce and abortion. O'Toole maintained the magazine's strong focus on political issues but built on Tóibín's emphasis on culture and the arts. 'Fintan had a capacity to write about a huge range of topics', Derek Speirs recalled. By way of illustrating the range O'Toole offered, Speirs recalled a 'conversation' feature in the November 1985 issue involving Seamus Heaney and Joseph Brodsky, the Russian exiled writer. Speirs was tasked with capturing images of the two poets in conversation in an upstairs room in the Tara Towers hotel overlooking the trainline and the sea. 'I don't think a single other editor in Dublin would have understood how interesting that would have been. I didn't know who Brodsky was beforehand. But, here, Fintan had got two legends into one room'.[41]

A particular strength of *Magill* in this mid-1980s period was the journalism of Gene Kerrigan, described by one editor was 'the master of narrative storytelling'.[42] Possibly the best example of Kerrigan's journalistic approach was his line-by-line anatomy of the Kerry Babies tribunal report in late 1985. Having sat through the tribunal's public hearings, Kerrigan wrote a twenty-four page article on the case as the cover story for the 30 May 1985 issue. When the tribunal's report was published, Kerrigan's reaction was immediate: 'when I read

39 Ibid. 40 Ibid. 41 Interview with Derek Speirs. 42 Interview with Brian Trench.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 229

the [tribunal] report and saw what the Irish papers made of it, I knew we had to do something more'.[43] Kerrigan's 15,000 word article – and other media commentary – prompted the tribunal chairman judge Kevin Lynch to send *Magill* a lengthy statement defending his report. Kerrigan recalled the reaction in the *Magill* office when the hand-delivered letter arrived: 'We all looked at each other. We couldn't believe it. He had given up just what we needed'.[44] In dramatic fashion, the magazine reproduced Lynch's correspondence in full, and made it the cover story in March 1986. A monthly magazine such as *Magill* had an ability to deal with these issues with lengthy articles: 'the magazine was able to send really top journalists to a story – a court case or a tribunal – and they could sit and listen for months before writing a word. Gene Kerrigan's articles on the Kerry Babies case was an example'.[45]

BRIAN TRENCH (JANUARY 1987 – JANUARY 1988)

By September 1986 O'Toole had departed and Browne was once more seeking an editor for *Magill*. The official reason for the resignation was that O'Toole wanted to 'concentrate on writing' and that he would be continue an associaton with the magazine by joining a new editorial board. But the challenge of working with Browne was also a contributing factor. Browne was also by this stage heavily involved with the survival of the *Sunday Tribune* and a number of other publishing ventures. The seeds of *Magill*'s eventual demise were in some respects being sown with less attention being given to what was still at that point a commerical success.

The new editorial board was tasked with deciding editorial policy and content until a new editor was appointed. Along with Browne and O'Toole, the other members were Gene Kerrigan, who was now described as an associate editor, Gordon Colleary, chairman of Magill Publications, and Eileen Pearson, the general manager of the company.[46] The magazine was seeking an editor with 'a record of outstanding achivement in journalism, preferably in the current affairs and politics areas'. The ideal candidate was expected to have an aptitude for investigative journalism and have an interest in sport, business and the arts, and also have organisational and production skills. The advert for the position reveals the self-image of the magzine at that time:

> The editorship of *Magill* is a unique position in Irish journalism, offering an unmatched opportunity for journalistic excellence and public impact.

43 *The Guardian*, 10 Feb. 1986. 44 Interview with Gene Kerrigan. Kerrigan's article appeared in the Nov. 1985 issue. 45 Interview with Mark Brennock. 46 *Magill*, Nov. 1986.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 230

> The new editor will be expected to continue the policy and performance which has made *Magill* one of the most outstanding magazines in this part of the world.[47]

Brian Trench – who had worked with the *Sunday Tribune* since November 1981 – was confirmed as editor in the January 1987 edition. A new editorial team was put in place including Michael O'Higgins, who had been a features writer with *Hot Press*, and regular contributors, the former editor Fintan O'Toole and Gene Kerrigan who was now described as a former staff writer. Trench was faced with a situation where there was little investment in the magazine. Advertising staff came and went. The print market was changing. The magazine's uniqueness to advertisers had gone. In 1986 the *Irish Times* took possession of a new colour press that allowed the newspaper to have colour in editorial and in advertising with an increased number of pages. Whereas previously *Magill* had the colour advertising market for high-end readers, now there was competition. Trench was also conscious of 'leakage' from the *Sunday Tribune* to *Magill* and confused brand identity: 'there must have been some confusion in Vincent's head. When was he working for *Magill* and when was he working on the *Sunday Tribune*? When he had an idea where did he direct it?'.[48]

JOHN WATERS (FEBRUARY 1988 – OCTOBER 1988)

John Waters became *Magill's* fourth editor in five years when he succeed Brian Trench in February 1988. Like his predecessors, Waters, who had built his reputation in *Hot Press* and *In Dublin*, appreciated what *Magill* represented: 'it excited, and there was great loyalty. It was never just a job'.[49] But after nearly 150 issues, Waters knew the magazine needed a complete overhaul. Ireland in 1988 was a different place from that of 1977 when Browne first published *Magill*, or indeed from 1983 when Tóibín first sat in the editor's chair. The Irish economy was still underperforming but there were some signs of growth. Moreover, the bitter social and moral debates that had dominated the middle years of the decade had reached a stalemate of sorts. Irish identity was undergoing a reassessment. Pride in Irishnesss was suddenly fashionable. U2 delivered *The Joshua Tree*, the international soccer team qualified for the 1988 European Championship, and the country embraced the tricolour and re-engaged with its national identity like at no time since the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland started two decades previously. This new sense of Irish identity was best captured by Roddy Doyle in his debut novel *The Commitements* published in 1987.

47 Ibid., Nov. 1986. 48 Interview with Brian Trench. 49 Interview with John Waters.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 231

Waters wanted *Magill* to engage with this new sense of adventure and the ambition to see Ireland prosper. The magazine under his editorship continued to focus on the ugly underbelly of contemporary Ireland – the growth of illegal drug user and the individuals and communities it ravaged; the arrival of AIDS – and there was a renewed focus on crime and the first generation of serious criminals threatening order in Irish society. Under Tóibín, the magazine had published several hardhitting articles on leading criminal figures. There was no attempt to glamourise these individuals. Waters picked up this theme. A leading criminal figure, Martin Cahill, featured as the cover story in March 1988 and again the following July. There was also an attempt to engage with the mainstream news agenda with strong reportage that provided a unique *Magill* perspective. In a similar way, the John O'Grady kidnapping and the fallout from the Gibraltar killings of three IRA members provided scope for narrative writing previously associated with Gene Kerrigan.

Waters was pleased with the work delivered by Michael O'Higgins, especially the O'Grady cover story for the May 1988 issue: 'it was as good a piece of journalism as Gene Kerrigan had ever done'. Eighteen pages were devoted to the O'Grady story. Headlined '23 days in hell', O'Higgins' article contained no shortage of detail on the kidnap and the main individuals involved: 'John O'Grady was standing at the top of his stairs when Dessie O'Hare, attired in a grey suit and black balaclava, came smashing through the wooden framed glass panels of his front door with a sledge-hammer. Up to that point it had been an unremarkable day'.[50]

CONCLUSION

Sales of *Magill*, which peaked just below 45,000 copies in 1980, had averaged in the early 30,000 range in the intial period of publication and returned to that level throughout the mid-1980s. By 1988, however, monthly sales had declined to just over 20,000 copies, and a year later they were reported as having hit a low of 13,000.[51] In February 1989 the Revenue Commissioners sought to wind up Magill Publications arising from – what Browne confirmed – was an outstanding tax bill of £41,000 and interest charges of £20,000 with a further £20,000 in dispute.[52] The magazine's cover price was increased in April 1990 from £1.10 to £1.80 to counter continuing losses. One competitor described this 60 per cent increase in cover price as 'hardly a recipe for commercial success'.[53]

Despite various legal and financial maneuverings *Magill* was no longer a viable proposition, while editorially it was an increasingly weak publication losing

50 *Magill*, May 1988. 51 *The Phoenix*, 9 Mar. 1990. 52 *Irish Times*, 18 Feb. 1989. 53 *The Phoenix*, 20 Apr. 1990.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 232

ground to competitors, including *The Phoenix* magazine. A lack of investment and continued personnel change impacted on editorial consistency, and this ultimately hit sales and made securing advertising even more difficult. The advantages that *Magill* held in its initial years – including colour advertising and long-form journalism articles – were no longer unique. In the relative calm after the party political battles and social-moral debates that defined the 1980s, *Magill* was increasingly a marginal publication. It was outflanked on one side by *The Phoenix* with its mix of business and polticial gossip and on the other by the national newspapers that had adapted their editorial offerings to include longer articles, many by names who had first emerged in *Magill*. The magazine did not appear in January 1990 and while it returned to the newsstands this was only a temporary respite – *Magill* ceased publication in August 1990.[54]

Nusight had been Vincent Browne's first venture into media ownership and, like his subsequent publications, the undertaking did not last. Over the following forty years there were other titles including *Magill, Status, Magill TV Guide,* the *Sunday Tribune, College Tribune,* the *Dublin Tribune* and *Village* magazine. An inability to sustain some of these publications may, in part, be attributed to Browne's insistence on filling the dual role of editor and publisher. He saw no conflict in operating on both the editorial and commercial sides: 'my job is not to sell newspapers. I am not a newsagent or a newsvendor. My job is to behave as a journalist. I happen to believe there isn't a conflict between good journalism and selling newspapers and magazines'.[55] There may not have been be a direct conflict but the real challenge may have been on focus, time and prioritisation of the tasks associated with the two demanding roles.

The launch of *Status,* which first appeared on the newsstands in early 1981, is an example of how *Magill* was repeatedly put under pressure by other ambitions. At first glance the idea for *Status* made sense. The overheads for a monthly magazine like *Magill* were high. One way to reduce costs was to spread the overheads across more than a single publication. Browne was taken with the idea of publishing a news magazine for women. He wanted a magazine that would deal with women's issues and current affairs generally from a women's perspective. By tapping into this market, Browne estimated that a news magazine for women would sell 30,000 copies per issue with a readership of some 150,000 women. It was a very ambitious target, and almost led to the closure of both titles.

The two magazines operated out of the Merrion Row offices. They shared staff. Robert Armstrong and Aidan Dunne designed both publications, while Gene Kerrigan and Paddy Agnew wrote for the two magazines. Browne secured

54 *Irish Times,* 16 Aug. 1990. 55 Ibid., 16 Apr. 1983.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 233

a scoop in convincing Marian Finucane to leave RTÉ to edit the new title. Pat Brennan was appointed as deputy editor. The launch was backed by a prominent radio advertising campaign, although there was some confusion over the correct pronunciation of the title. While the promise was news coverage from a women's perspective, there were occasions when the magazine responded to the general news agenda. For example, in the first issue Nell McCafferty wrote about the Stardust fire: 'the morgue, last Saturday night, was closed. Clearly visible, in the lamplight, above the red brick wall was the white tip of the canvass tent that had been pitched in the yard. Within the tent lay the forty-eight young bodies that had been brought to the city centre from the Stardust Ballroom out in Artane'.[56] The dramatic cover images in August 1981 came from the H-Block riots at the British embassy in Dublin. The demonstration on 18 July 1981 happened ahead of the next issue of *Magill* but just prior to the *Status* publication deadline. Following an intervention by Browne, a profile of Mother Teresa and a feature on night-cleaners were thrown out to make way for a five-page report on the embassy riots and analysis of the Garda response.

According to several of those involved with *Status* the concept of a current affairs magazine for women met with strong resistance from advertisers. The early 1980s was a difficult economic environment for the wider media, so the challenge was always going to be tough for such a specialised publication. The monthly magazine struggled to sell more than 18,000 copies, well below its ambitious 30,000 circulation target. There were other problems. Finucane was listed as editor for the first three issues. But relations with Browne were strained. By the fourth issue, in June 1981, she had resigned. With a difficult financial position, there were concerns that *Status* would bring down *Magill*. Towards the end of 1981, after less then twelve issues, it was decided to cease publication. Pat Brennan, who subsequently moved to become deputy editor of *Magill*, recalled: 'a trade magazine would have made sense, but we picked a magazine that was never going to make money. We didn't think it through'.[57]

One of Browne's biggest achievements was establishing *Magill* as a quality current affairs magazine with both readers and advertisers. But the ambition to extend his publishing interests – and, in particular, to own a Sunday newspaper – led him away from the monthly current affairs magazine. This drive to expand his range of publications contributed to the weakening of *Magill* and its ultimately demise in 1990. It undoubtedly also contributed to Browne's loss of control of the *Sunday Tribune* in 1992 and his removal as editor in 1994.

Explaining the closure of *Magill* in 1990 Browne identified decisions taken at the time of the editorial transition seven years earlier: 'I should have got out

56 *Status*, Mar. 1981. 57 Interview with Pat Brennan.

(01) Periodicals and Journalism:Layout 1 19/05/2014 21:05 Page 234

completely and accepted that's my era over and that's it. But because I owned it and to an extent was dependent on it, or thought I was dependent on it, I didn't sever those ties completely which I should have done'.[58] Of all of Browne's publishing ventures, *Magill* was the most successful and the longest lasting, and it clearly had the potential to continue to be successful given its readership profile and the attractiveness of these readers to advertisers. Closure in 1990 was not the finale. The magazine was re-launched in August 1997, but after only eleven issues Browne sold the title for a sum of between £100,000 and £250,000.[59]

The transition in ownership, and the move away editorially from Browne, was not a success. Despite the efforts of several editors – including the present author who edited the magazine in 2001 – *Magill* never managed to attract sufficient reader interest to ensure its continuing viability. The magazine had become closely linked to its founding proprietor, and indeed one advisor on the relaunched title in 1997 argued for the magazine to be titled 'Vincent Browne's *Magill*' so as to further strengthen the connection and assist with sales.[60] Whether the title – even if it had remained in Browne's ownership – would have survived the impact of the internet is a moot point.

58 Kavanagh, '*Magill:* maverick or mainstream magazine?', p. 49. **59** '*The Phoenix*, 23 Oct. 1998. **60** Information supplied privately.