

1917 – Aftermath of Rebellion

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The Press in 1917: Wars and Rumours of Wars

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I'd like to offer you a few conclusions based on my research, and then follow this up with some of the evidence. I have four principal conclusions, if that is not to definite a word. Even if they are only four opinions, I leave it up to you to evaluate them in the light of the evidence, some of which indeed is circumstantial, even impressionistic.

1. In a situation in which politics is in free-fall, as it was in 1917, and when nobody knows what is going to happen next, journalists and editors don't have a bigger or a better crystal ball than anyone else. This is particularly true of a period of agitation at the end of which nobody got what they wanted, and everyone had to settle for something to which they objected in some degree.
2. In any conflict involving the dispossession or dethronement of power, those who are at the risk of losing power generally have a far more accurate perception of what they are about to lose than their opponents have of what they might gain, and this applies to their newspapers as much as to the participants themselves.
3. Although partition was at the core of many of the complex and intertwined political disputes of that year, it was already an established fact in Irish journalism, in the sense that, for most Irish newspapers outside Ulster, the North-Eastern part of Ireland was merely a pawn in the game or a prize to be won. This blind spot, as big as the huge circular blip visible on the surface of the planet Jupiter, had its origins at least as far back as the 1880s, and was to last until the late 1960s.
4. 1917 was towards the end of an era, not just in Irish journalism, but in journalism generally, in which newspapers quoted generously and frequently from the contemporaries, whether for purposes of agreement, contestation or ridicule. I personally wish that this tradition was still part of our own media landscape, but many contemporary factors – including the litigiousness of journalists themselves – have in all probability put a full stop to it.

First of all, a few general remarks about the press and history, and historiography. Newspapers are generally understood to be secondary sources for historians but, I would argue, this is not always the case. Their utility as primary sources can I think be advanced in limited but not insignificant ways.

Sometimes they are the only record of things that actually happened. Sometimes they provide apparently brief items of information, unavailable elsewhere, that can

contribute important missing parts of a much larger historical jigsaw puzzle. And sometimes, precisely because they do not know what happened next, they are important witnesses to, and evidence of, the general mindset of populations and elites – and of course of journalists, who straddle both these categories. This in itself can be of considerable help to contemporary historians as they attempt to evaluate the motives, choices, decisions, context and actions of historical figures without yielding to the siren song of hindsight.

Seen in this light, the press of 1917 offers unusually rich pickings. And in the “press” I would include ephemera, which appear to have been singularly widespread and arguably important, and to extent also the written memoirs of one journalists who were on the firing line, as it were, during the turbulent period immediately following 1916.

I would like to mention, in particular, the remarkable chronology printed on a quarterly basis by one of the doughtiest journalistic opponents of 1916 and all it stood for: the quarterly Unionist newsletter “Notes from Ireland”.

The title of its quarterly compendium, “A Diary of Disaffection” was changed, in its first post-1917 regular, to “Footsteps of Sinn Fein – A Diary of Disaffection”. The incidents recorded in this diary – sometimes several incidents on the same day – reveal that in the four months up to the end of December 1917 (remembering that Thomas Ashe died in September) there were, on average, about one such incident a day, many of them violent, and voluminous reports, sometimes quite detailed, of courts martial and other successful prosecutions of Republicans. Almost all of them are sourced to other dated newspapers – often, but not exclusively, the Irish Times. In this sense it is a valuable vade mecum not only to the events themselves but to what other newspapers were saying about them.

Its issue of 26 November 1917, for instance, recorded the conviction by courts martial in Cavan of people for carrying hurleys, and in Cork of several dozen people for either “practicing movements of a military character” or “wearing uniforms of a military character”. Those convicted on the latter occasion included Terence McSwiney, and one Daniel Corkery from Macroom. Others to feature include Sean MacEntee, who had the doubtful distinction of being acquitted twice, and Cathal O’Shannon.

An earlier edition, however, draws our attention to another significant feature of the press in Dublin in this year. This is the appearance of a wide range of nationalist publications which, even though referred to by in a jaundiced fashion by the police authorities as the “mosquito press” was evidence of the internecine warfare between all Irish newspapers in this period, marked by overt attacks on each other in print, and carried on with an intensity rarely seen since.

As the *Notes* put it: “Fully half a dozen papers, mostly new, are at present being issued in Dublin, all of them being more or less abusive and derisive of the party in Parliament that once was regarded by all Irish nationalists with confidence and esteem.”¹

¹ *Notes from Ireland*, 1 May 1917.

It went on, with what was probably unintended helpfulness, to identify some of the major offenders, whom they described as “extremists” with “overseas backers”. They included *Nationality* (the official Sinn Fein paper), *New Ireland*, *The Irishman*, *Irish Opinion*, *Irish Nation*, and the *Leader*. The complexity of all of this is well illustrated that at one point the Irish Nation had to publicly disassociate itself from the organization called the Irish Nation League, whose politics were indeed markedly different.

What had primarily raised both the political and the journalistic temperature, however, was the release of those imprisoned in Britain after 1916, starting with the revolutionaries themselves at the end of 1916 and then, in June 1917, of other convicts. Here the fissure in journalistic opinion was obvious. The *Freeman's Journal* implied that it was due to the sterling work of John Redmond.² But Redmond was not even mentioned in this connection by the advanced nationalist press, including *Irish Opinion* and the *Irish Nation*. Sinn Fein's *The Irishman* attributed the prisoners' release to Dublin Corporation's direct appeal to the United States through the US Ambassador, which it said “effected more than all the ‘blethers’ at Westminster.”³

The *Phoenix*, which flourished briefly in 1916-17, struck a similar note: “The men now released never requested the least assistance from the men who had in previous years besmirched their characters, felon-set them, and openly and insidiously accused them of selling their sympathies for foreign gold.”⁴

If the policy of prisoner release had been intended by the British to calm public opinion in Ireland, or to increase support for the Irish Party, it plainly had the very opposite effect. The by-elections in North North in February, in Longford in May, in East Clare in July, and in Kilkenny in August, were evidence, if evidence were needed, that the electoral tide was turning strongly against the IPP. The Unionist press analysed this with ruthless accuracy. “The whole trouble at present in Ireland is directly due to the unconditional release of the rebel prisoners ... due to the persistent appeals of the official Nationalists” *Notes from Ireland* commented sharply as the Sinn Fein electoral bandwagon rolled. It added: “It is a curious irony of Fate that the Parliamentary Nationalists should be thus forced to lick the hands of those who are doing their best to throttle them.”⁵

Nationality, for its part, twitted Lloyd George's response to the unsuccessful claim to be admitted to any post-war Peace Conference: “What a sight it will be when he England whose Premier has declared that the Irish Nation must ever be coerced at the dictate of Aliens' (Ulster Unionists), rises in that Conference to champion the Small Nations, and Ireland knocks at the door?”⁶ And *New Ireland*, after quizzically suggesting the highly improbable possibility” that Lloyd George would “eat the leek

² Cited in *Notes from Ireland*, 1 February 1917.

³ Cited in *Notes from Ireland*, 1 February 1917

⁴ Undated extract Cited in *Notes from Ireland*, 1 February 1917

⁵ *Notes from Ireland*, 1 November 1917.

⁶ Undated reference cited in *Notes from Ireland*, 1 May 1917.

and grant Home Rule” declared that the Home Rule movement “cannot possibly survive the futility of the Irish Party and their supine conduct.”⁷

Common to all the advanced nationalist newspapers, was a passionate opposition to partition, and an equally universal judgment that the blame for partition, if it occurred, could be laid firmly at the doorstep of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and nowhere else. Unexpectedly, however, *New Ireland*, which was solidly pro-Sinn Fein, published an article by James MacNeill which included the author’s contention (with which the editor publicly disagreed) that “it would be better to have immediately a genuinely autonomous government in twenty-eight counties than to wait indefinitely, and in my opinion hazardously, for autonomy throughout the thirty-two counties.”⁸ Could James have been related to Eoin? It is difficult to see how, otherwise, such heterodox views would have been given an airing in these particular pages. Later the same month the same journal faithfully recorded Darrell Figgis’s view that “the failure of the Irish party is at root a failure to beat the Unionist in English aristocratic circles.”⁹

This is significant in that it echoed a fact which can be perceived across all the nationalist papers, including the *Freeman*: a persistent under-estimation of the tactics and strength of Ulster Unionists. Their rare eirenic words were directed towards the Southern Unionists, rather than their Northern counterparts. Commenting on Count Plunkett’s expulsion from the Royal Dublin Society, *New Ireland* mourned editorially: “We have almost given up hope of that progressive element among the unionists of Southern Ireland, which has strained every effort to bring their fellow Unionist to some sense of patriotism.”¹⁰ And its reference to Willie Redmond’s death was, by the standards of the time, generous: “The fact that he was swept off his feet by the nonsense of the profiteer press adds poignancy to his death, and does not take from the supreme sacrifice he has made....He belongs to that generation of Irishmen who claimed it as an honour to have lain in a common prison at the hands of the English enemy.”¹¹

We have to look to the mainstream press, however, and in particular the *Irish Times*, for evidence that the swing to Sinn Fein still to a degree contested, but that this opposition to Sinn Fein was related to support for Irishmen engaged in the British forces as well as to the dwindling support for the Irish Party. . Some of the events of that turbulent year have been all but air-brushed from history, and we have to read the smallest of small print to discern them. For example, Sinn Fein demonstrations were stoned in Cork during the summer election season by “a number of women and girls carrying a Union Jack.”¹² In Athlone, although there were no violent disturbances, the *Irish Times* reported that “many of the inhabitants put photographs of relatives who are at the war in their windows, and others displayed Rolls of Honour [and] during the night there was a great deal of excitement as the wives and mothers of the large

⁷ Undated reference cited in *Notes from Ireland*, 1 May 1917

⁸ *New Ireland*, 6 January 1917.

⁹ *New Ireland*, 13 January 1917.

¹⁰ *New Ireland*, 27 January 1917.

¹¹ *New Ireland*, 16 June 1917.

¹² *Irish Times* 25 June 1917.

number of men who are at the front resented the Sinn Fein display.”¹³ You will be aware, of course, that both these locations boasted substantial military barracks.

In truth, there was now only one substantial difference between the advanced Nationalist press and the *Irish Independent*, where William Martin Murphy and his editor, William Harrington, continued to beat the anti-IPP drum, particularly on the partition issue, in the context of the by-elections. The *Irish Independent*, commenting on the Roscommon result, expressed the editorial view that it, “and other recent events, confirm the view that the Irish party are not entitled to speak for the Irish people.” Who might be so entitled was a different matter, and the *Irish Independent* declined to draw the conclusion that Sinn Fein was its preferred choice. Reading between the lines of its editorial, it proclaimed (without mentioning Sinn Fein at all) “We look upon the revolt against this state of things as a healthy and hopeful sign.”¹⁴ It seemed that its author preferred the bishops to Sinn Fein as the arbiters of Irish political destiny. On east Clare, it observed that “the people will tolerate no more of the fooling, posing and humbug that for a time passed as statesmanship.”¹⁵ While not adopting Sinn Fein, its virulent opposition to Redmond on partition certainly helped to create a vacuum in nationalist public opinion which Sinn Fein were in any case better equipped to fill than anyone else.

The *Irish Times*, commenting on the South Longford result in early May, was actually the most perceptive of all on the political effect of the result, noting that “Irish Unionists are now beginning to believe that the real authority and the real majority in an Irish Parliament would be vested in the movement which has carried the Republican banner.”¹⁶ This verdict, carried so soon, clearly signaled a shift in Southern Unionist opinion, which had, up to that point, appeared to more moderate nationalism as possible honest brokers in the struggle for Home Rule. Just a few days later the same newspaper floated the rumour that genuine extremists in Ireland were few, but noted prophetically that if this were not the case, “Lord Midleton’s fears are well founded, and Irish Unionists must reject firmly any measures which would put their country at the mercy of an increasing organisation of dangerous and seditious men.”¹⁷ The myopia of the *Irish Independent* is evidenced by the fact that its long leader on the South Longford result did not avert to the attitude of the Ulster Unionists or, indeed, even to their existence.¹⁸

The Irish Convention on 25 July, in which Unionists participated somewhat doubtfully, in fact gave Sinn Fein a number of opportunities to engage in creative media manipulation by staging simultaneous counter-demonstrations, effectively piggy-backing on the increasingly desperate attempts of the Irish and British political establishments to secure a measure of agreement on anything. An Irishman writing to the London *Times* complained: “In what frame of mind will the nationalist delegates confer, when they are ever conscious of the menacing figure that may at any moment force the doors and throw the sword into the scale? [. . .] How can we respect [the

¹³ 12 May 1917.

¹⁴ *Irish Independent*, 11 May 1917.

¹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 12 July 1917.

¹⁶ 11 May 1917.

¹⁷ 19 May 1917.

¹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 11 May 1917.

Convention's powers or authority if it is out-voiced in the very city in which it meets by the agents of treason and rebellion?"¹⁹ It also allowed further opportunities for the more nationalist papers to turn their fire not only on the *Freeman's Journal*, but, also, more unusually, on the Catholic bishops, whose leader, Cardinal Logue, had publicly backed the Convention, and who later attacked the Gaelic League for having "turned into a political machine".²⁰ The *Freeman*, in the words of a former Nationalist MP John Sweetman, "has now adopted the policy of the Sinn Féiners, although it excels itself in abusing us." The bishops, he added, "seem to be so tied to the British government that, with the exception of Bishop Dwyer [of Limerick who had been converted to a more militant form of nationalism by the 1916 executions] they did not even publicly support the Pope."²¹

Even before the Convention, at a consultative meeting in Cork in June the protest was carried inside the doors, no doubt as part of a plan to attract media attention, as it did. This had one unusual aspect in that it was enlivened by class as well as by political tensions. Lord Midleton, in the chair, was interrupted by one of almost 100 Sinn Féin supporters present who shouted: "Whom do you represent? You represent only the sweaters of Cork. Let the working classes come and address us." The protester eventually left the hall under protest and was "received among his friends with loud cheer and cries of "down with the capitalists!"²²

The death of Thomas Ashe on hunger strike in September, after less than a week, was a shock to the system, indeed to the various systems competing for public and political support, and clearly marked a watershed of sorts in the media as well as everywhere else. The *Irish Independent* wrung its hands, but with a noticeable economy of effort. In a short editorial, it charged the British administration in Ireland with negligence in not hospitalising Ashe sooner. It added: "We all know how differently women convicted even of incendiaryism were treated in English prisons, when they went on hunger-strike. The people will not fail to note the differentiation against political prisoners in Irish jails who made no attack of any kind on life or property."²³ The *Irish Times* placed the blame even more firmly on the Government, but from a pro-Unionist perspective, attacking the government for changing the prison rules in the wake of Ashe's death. . "A nervous government", it proclaimed, "has the same effect on the Irish people that a nervous rider has on a spirited horse . . . Unlimited license for sedition in Ireland could hardly have worse effects than the casual enforcement of laws accordingly as the Governments temper varies between timidity and resolution."²⁴ Evidently the "surgeon's knife" of the previous year was still conveniently to hand. even if the *Leader* later suggested ironically that it had been blunted.²⁵

¹⁹ *The Times*, 17 July 1917.

²⁰ Letter to the Secretary of the Leinster College of Irish on 12 September 1917, reported in the *Irish Times*, 14 September 1917.

²¹ *New Ireland*, 21 July 1917.

²² *Irish Times*, 15 June 1917.

²³ *Irish Independent*, 26 September 1917.

²⁴ *Irish Times*, 1 October 1917.

²⁵ *The Leader*, 6 October 1917.

That paper returned to this theme if more mildly, when the subsequent inquest was marred by disagreement and disorder, suggesting that “the Government could have acted a little more promptly on the advice of the Visiting Justices” and that the situation was “complicated by blunders and indecisions at Dublin Castle”.²⁶ But It reserved its sharpest criticism for Tim Healy, the barrister who appeared for Ashe’s family, and suggested that he should be dealt with by his professional peers.

I have been dealing, up to now, with primarily the advanced nationalist press and the mainstream press, but there are two other aspects of the press in 1917 with which I would like to deal: censorship, and the role of some interesting newspapers which fall only partly into either of the categories, or indeed not at all.

The censorship was, of course, particularly active after 1916, but by 1917 it seemed to find itself to a degree baffled both by the rapidity of the spread of nationalist ephemera, and by the fact that it was becoming more difficult to draw a dividing line between political opposition and sedition. The records are patchy, but, insofar as ephemera are concerned, it is clear that one of the those chiefly involved was Fergus O’Connor, a 1916 veteran and printer who operated out of 44 Eccles Street in Dublin, and whose premises were raided, with only modest success, after a Wexford newsagent had complained to the authorities that O’Connor had sent her an unsolicited package of Sinn Fein publications for sale, together with a bill, which she passed on, evidently with some relief, to the constabulary!²⁷

Among the local papers, the authorities were particularly concerned about the *Kilkenny People* (that newspaper, incidentally also printed the *Phoenix*, mentioned earlier, between 1916 and 1917). What drew it to the attention of the authorities, however, were the frequent reports to the Censor by the County Inspector for Kilkenny. These eventually succeeded in having the paper seized. The censor, Lord Decies, notified the Attorney General that the *Kilkenny People* had “always been extreme in its policy and often violent in its expression”.²⁸

Suppression, however, did not take place immediately. A month later action was taken after it was formally advocated by Decies, who reiterated his warning about the paper and its proprietor, Mr. Keane, in the wake of inflammatory headlines to a report of De Valera’s speech to the Sinn Fein Convention in that month. Advocating suppression, Decies encouraged the authorities that this was a low-risk option, because this tactic “has not, on former occasions, produced any strong protest” and because its editor, whom he had summoned to Dublin to explain his conduct on two past occasions without much effect, was “a decidedly dangerous class of man.”²⁹ Fast forward a quarter of a century and we find the same newspaper, edited by the son of the man who had so offended Decies, irritating the hell out of Frank Aiken’s censor in World War 2.

By October, the *Irish Times* was complaining, probably with some justification from its point of view, that in the wake of the Thomas Ashe affair, “many people have

²⁶ *Irish Times*, 2 November 1917.

²⁷ NLI, Censorship papers P8467.

²⁸ Decies to Attorney-General, 25 June 1917, NLI Censorship papers P8466.

²⁹ Decies’ minute, 10 July 1917, NLI, Censorship papers P8467,

wondered whether the Censorship is still governed by the strict principles which made it an effective agent of law and order in Ireland”.³⁰

The more marginal publications under notice – necessarily briefly – for this paper include the *Irish Citizen*, *The Leader*, the *Irish Catholic*, and – perhaps most interestingly – the Church of Ireland Gazette.

Irish Citizen, although primarily a voice for the suffrage movement, supported calls by Cumann na mBan for recognition of the status of political prisoners, and described John Redmond as “the enemy Redmond” for “leaving no stone unturned to wreck the Clause giving votes to women in the Representation of the People Bill”.³¹ It later gave prominence to a letter from a Republican, Maigread ni Conaire, full of reproach for the limited suffragette agenda. “If you leave men to carry out the task of national creative endeavor, you will have no right to complain later that there are flaws in construction: ad there will be flaws grave and serious flaws, if the women of Ireland fail to demand and take their full share in the national heritage.”³²

The *Leader*, for its part, devoted as much of its attention to harrying the Irish Independent as it did to supporting the new nationalist movement, although it declared resoundingly that “the old Party and Machine have lost the confidence of the country [and] are now the real factionists”. While it argued that “in a country like Ireland struggling for freedom against a foreign country, there s only room for one organized political party”, but carefully refrained – rather like the *Irish Independent* - from suggesting the name of an such party.³³ I cannot , however, resist, quoting from one of its attacks on the Abbey Street colossus on the issue of the Irish language , after the Oireachtas had suggested sending a deputation to William Martin Murphy to make a column in Irish a daily feature. They envisaged the proprietor responding in verse:

*Not twice a week but every day
I'd let the language in for pay.
No lock-out do I here declare
Against a tongue that pays its fare.
A language that comes in with coppers
In Murphy's office meets no stoppers.*³⁴

The *Irish Catholic*, for its part, seemed to ignore the Ashe affair entirely, and was probably preoccupied in managing its balancing act supporting both the now ultra-nationalist bishop Dwyer of Limerick for adopting his political attitude as “a matter of conscience”,³⁵ and bishop Foley of Kildare and Leighlin, who had described rebellion in Ireland as “absolutely unjustifiable.”³⁶ Its distance from political reality, or at least from the controversies which dealing with that reality would have made

³⁰ *The Irish Times*, 1 October 1917.

³¹ *The Irish Citizen*, June 1917.

³² *The Irish Citizen*, November 1917.

³³ *The Leader*, 10 November 1917.

³⁴ *The Leader*, 25 August 1917.

³⁵ *The Irish Catholic*, 25 August 25 1917.

³⁶ *The Irish Catholic*, 13 October 1917.

unavoidable, and its attachment to the apron strings of the Irish parliamentary Party was exemplified by its belief that “the businessmen of Ulster cannot be ignorant of the fact that the only possible hope of permanent relief from the intolerable condition of things is the restoration to Ireland of her full parliamentary constitution of the King, Lords and Commons of this realm.”³⁷

At this remove in time, however, it is impossible to ascertain whether it was with tongue in cheek, or for some ulterior political motive, that this publication prominently published a letter from “A Sinn Feiner” complaining about an evidently new but distasteful social habit- women smoking.

“I have known”, anonymous the letter-writer complained, “good, sensible women and girls to indulge in the weed with their brothers ‘just for the fun of it’. My own objection to smoking rests in the fact that it is not what our Blessed Mother would do on earth, and that it takes away in no small measure any respect for the girl who indulges in it.”³⁸

The Church of Ireland Gazette, for its part, ploughed a rather lonely furrow, praising Tom Kettle and “AE” (George Russell)³⁹ and, although it accepted that it could not think of an alternative, was convinced that the Home Rule Act was “hopelessly out of date”.⁴⁰ It quoted a pamphlet by Tom Johnson to support its view that Southern Irish employers (many of whom of course would have been Protestant) should “foster and not prevent” the organisation of labour.⁴¹ It praised, inferentially, the Church of Ireland bishop of Killaloe’s tartly expressed opinion that his church “seemed more the Church of England in Ireland than the Church of Ireland itself”⁴² and castigated the civic conscience of Dublin for ignoring distress in the capital after Larkin.⁴³

The man behind it was the interesting Warre B. Wells, an Englishman who edited the paper from 1903 until 1919, and whose conversion to the cause of constitutional Irish nationalism (though conspicuously not to the Irish Parliamentary Party) was only thinly disguised in his editorials. Responsible opinion, he argued, “is no more minded to tolerate political sabotage under the Orange flag than under the Tricolour.”⁴⁴ – But his views were even more forcefully expressed in a verdict in his book, *An Irish Apologia: Some Thoughts on Anglo-Irish relations and the War*, published in the same year,⁴⁵ Here he addressing his readers in Ireland and England – but particularly, would suspect, in England – and, in my view, possibly identified in vivid terms the key political failure of British policy, in Dublin rather than in Belfast or London, which had been to a great extent, if not solely, responsible for what followed, especially when combined with the disastrous handling of the courts martial, jailings and hunger strikes which lit up 1917 like so many bonfires:

³⁷ *The Irish Catholic*, 8 September 1917.

³⁸ *The Irish Catholic*, 15 September 1917.

³⁹ *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 13 January 1917.

⁴⁰ *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 16 February 1917.

⁴¹ *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 2 February 1917.

⁴² *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 16 February 1917.

⁴³ *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 16 March 1917.

⁴⁴ *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, 7 December 1917.

⁴⁵ Maunsel, Dublin, 1917.

“I am not asking you to regard the executions of the rebel leaders, the sentences of penal servitude, the deportations announced baldly day after day without publication of the evidence which justified the infliction of the capital penalty, from behind the closed doors of field courts martial, from the point of view of their justice, or even of their expediency. I am simply inviting you to endeavor to observe, and to endeavor to understand, their effect on that Irish public which read of them “with something of the helpless rage with which one would watch a stream of blood dripping from under a closed door”.⁴⁶

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As a journalistic epitaph on 1917, I think this isn't half bad.

⁴⁶ Apologia, p. 63.