

**‘The best interests of the nation’
Frank Geary, the *Irish Independent* and the Spanish civil war**

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In his 1937 review of Irish newspapers Rev Stephen Brown noted that ‘The *Independent* was first and foremost a commercial undertaking. Indeed its very essence was business. To this rather than to the popularity of its political opinions it owed its remarkable success’.¹ The newspaper was, Brown continued, ‘the non-party organ of business interests in the country ... anxious to capture the support of independent readers and in particular of Irish Catholic sentiment’.² Both the *Independent*, and the *Irish Press*, he observed, ‘vie with one other to capture the favour of the Catholic public’.³ In terms of circulation the *Independent* was far ahead: Brown cites its circulation at being between 143,000 and 152,000 compared to 106,000 for the *Irish Press*. The *Irish Times*, still viewed as the mouthpiece of southern unionism, though slowly transforming itself, stood at 25,500.⁴ As regards politics, Brown observed that the *Independent* ‘had consistently supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty from the first, and ... had come more and more to be regarded as the semi-official organ of the Cosgrave party, though in fact it was independent of all party control’.⁵

Brown’s review of the *Independent* was broadly accurate: it had been established as a commercial venture and it did support Cumann na nGaedheal and later Fine Gael, but only because it viewed both parties as being more business friendly than anti-Treaty Sinn Féin or Fianna Fáil. Also central to the *Independent*’s commercial sensibility was the devout catholicism of William Martin Murphy. Unlike its politics, the *Independent* wore its catholicism on its sleeve. This policy reached its zenith during the Spanish civil war, when the *Independent*, then edited by Frank Geary, raged against de Valera’s policy of non-intervention in what the *Irish Press* dismissed as a cynical circulation building exercise. But while Geary may have amplified this editorial philosophy of uncritical support for the Catholic church, he had, in fact, inherited it from his predecessors. Both Timothy R. Harrington (1905-31) and Tim Quilty (1931-35) had, to varying degrees, established the *Independent*’s position in relation to Fianna Fáil and the Catholic church during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Setting the tone

Under the editorship of T.R. Harrington the *Independent* consistently supported Cumann na nGaedheal. As Fianna Fáil prepared to contest its first general election in 1927, the newspaper was forced to take stock of its politics. It acknowledged that, in relation to the Cumann na nGaedheal government, it had ‘dealt with the imperfections of some of its proposals and drawn attention to omissions on its part’ but had ‘always given it credit for the many splendid services it had rendered’. Such service, it concluded, ‘so far outweigh its mistakes that in appraising its record as a whole it must be admitted that it deserves a renewal of

¹ S. Brown, *The press in Ireland: a survey and a guide* (Dublin, 1937), p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴ M. O’Brien, *The Irish Times: a history*, (Dublin, 2008), p. 82.

⁵ Brown, *The press in Ireland*, p. 49.

confidence'.⁶ Mindful of commercial realities though, the *Independent* published half-page adverts for Fianna Fáil that criticised the government's record.⁷ On election day it declared that a Fianna Fáil victory would see the party 'repudiate the nation's financial obligations, tax almost every article coming into our ports, and strike a mortal blow at the whole system of finance by setting up a state bank'. In contrast, it praised the government's 'stupendous achievements in achieving peace at home and credit abroad' and concluded that 'patriotism and commonsense urge the people to rally to the side of the Government'.⁸

In terms of its coverage of ecclesiastical matters throughout the 1920s, the *Independent* devoted two full-page length columns every year to the bishops' Lenten pastorals. Such reportage was often accompanied by an editorial, such as that of 1924, which noted that the pastorals reminded Catholics 'of the fundamental truths of their religion and of their obligatory Christian duties'.⁹ Throughout the 1920s the *Independent* sent a 'special representative' to report on the Catholic Truth Society's annual pilgrimage to Lourdes.¹⁰ It welcomed the government's decision in February 1926 to establish a committee on evil literature and warned that those appearing before the committee should not 'confine themselves to vague generalities about the objectionable tone of some publications'; advocates should 'come with their proofs in black and white, giving the name of each publication, and the extracts that show its objectionable character'.¹¹ The committee's report, which framed the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, was described by the *Independent* as 'very modest recommendations {to which} no objection can be raised'¹² while the censorship bill itself was described as 'a fair and reasonable scheme for checking a grave menace to public and private morality without unduly interfering either with the liberty of the Press or the liberty of the subject'.¹³

Harrington's successor, Tim Quilty, maintained this editorial policy of supporting Cumann na nGaedheal and the teachings of the Catholic church. Quilty was appointed editor in September 1931, some five months before the 1932 general election. As in previous campaigns the *Independent* published advertisements for Fianna Fáil but gave editorial support to Cumann na nGaedheal.¹⁴ It noted that it was 'tied neither to party nor to politician', but concluded that 'in this election we unhesitatingly give our support to Cumann na nGaedheal'.¹⁵ With this caveat the *Independent* then attacked Fianna Fáil's programme for government as communism Irish-style. Its editorials raised the spectre of a land tax and 'State control and State interference' in industry.¹⁶ These declarations put Fianna Fáil on the back-foot and it was forced to deny there was anything communist in its plans. This only further fuelled the *Independent's* attack:

⁶ *Irish Independent*, 21 May 1927. (Hereinafter, the *Irish Independent* is abbreviated to II).

⁷ II, 2 June 1927.

⁸ II, 9 June 1927.

⁹ II, 3 Mar. 1924.

¹⁰ II, 7 Sept. 1927.

¹¹ II, 19 Feb. 1926.

¹² II, 1 Feb. 1927.

¹³ II, 13 Aug. 1928.

¹⁴ See II, 30 Jan. 1932 & 5 & 13 Feb. 1932. For Cumann na nGaedheal adverts see 10-13 & 15-16 Feb 1932.

¹⁵ II, 30 Jan. 1932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Mr de Valera speaking at Carrick-on-Shannon, declared that there was nothing Communistic or Socialistic in the policy of Fianna Fáil and nothing to interfere with the rights of private property. Has he forgotten what he said at the Ard-Fheis when he announced that ‘herever private enterprises fail to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the State, the Government will provide capital for a Board that will establish and conduct the industry in the public interest’? What does this mean if not the introduction of Russian methods?¹⁷

Nonetheless, when Fianna Fáil took office in March 1932, the *Independent* asserted that ‘the new Ministers have every right, moral, legal and political, to the allegiance of the community’.¹⁸ In fairness the *Independent* had no time for the antics of Eoin O’Duffy and his National Guard (Blueshirts). When the organisation was proclaimed an unlawful association, the newspaper politely devoted its editorial to matters closer to its heart – ‘Tariffs, Tea and Trade’.¹⁹ It did, however, welcome the establishment of Fine Gael as a demonstration of ‘sanity and wisdom in statesmanship’.²⁰

Quilty also maintained the *Independent’s* commitment to reporting ecclesiastical matters. Extensive space continued to be allocated to the reportage of the bishops’ Lenten pastorals. In March 1930 the newspaper devoted three full-page columns on the hierarchy’s pronouncements on topics as diverse as the dangers awaiting females who emigrated, poteen making, mixed marriages, birth control, blasphemy, modern dress and foreign fashions.²¹ It also reported on the first national pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which was accompanied by one of its reporters.²² It was, however, the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 that allowed Quilty and the *Independent* to demonstrate their commitment to the church. The arrival of the Papal Legate, Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri, was described as ‘one of the proudest days in one of the greatest weeks in our history,’²³ while the Congress itself was described as ‘one of the greatest events in the long and not inglorious history of our Catholic nation’.²⁴

A new editor

When Quilty retired as editor in September 1935 his successor was his assistant editor, Frank Geary. Born in Kilkenny in 1891 Geary began his journalistic career on the *Kilkenny People* under E.T. Keane, whose influence he later acknowledged.²⁵ He joined the *Independent* in early 1922 and on his first day covered seven coroners inquests, which was, as he put it, ‘a bit of a shock for a reporter just up from the country’.²⁶ Shortly afterwards, he was dispatched to Belfast to cover the conflict that had erupted there. Geary spent three months in Belfast - ‘spending many, many days of fear and nights of terror’ - before being

¹⁷ II, 1 Feb. 1932.

¹⁸ II, 10 Mar. 1932.

¹⁹ II, 28 Aug. 1933.

²⁰ II, 9 Sept. 1933.

²¹ II, 4 Mar. 1930.

²² II, 10 Mar. 1930.

²³ II, 21 June 1932.

²⁴ II, 22 June 1932.

²⁵ II, 22 Dec. 1961.

²⁶ II, 3 Jan. 1955.

recalled to Dublin to report on the shelling of the Four Courts.²⁷ As the civil war began Geary was assigned to cover the Free State's advance on Limerick. Having caught the train to Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, Geary had to borrow a bicycle to complete the journey to Limerick. Every alternate day he cycled between the two locations as Nenagh's post office was the only telegraph facility he could use to send his reports to Dublin.²⁸

Geary's first scoop came in August 1922. While in Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, covering the Free State army's advance on Cork he received a message that T.R. Harrington wished to see him in Dublin. When they met, Harrington ordered Geary to go to Cork, then still in the hands of anti-Treaty forces. When Geary protested that cars and trains had ceased entering the city due to blockades, Harrington told him to go by sea.²⁹ Thus began a 48-hour sea journey from Dublin to Liverpool and from there to Cork. He arrived in Cork on 3 August, five days before the city fell. His first report, 'Days of Waiting and Fearing', which outlined his journey to the city, was published on 10 August. Two days later, his full-page story, 'Capture of the City of Cork: Exclusive Account of the Operations', gave a graphic day-by-day countdown to the arrival of Free State troops. As the city's telecommunications infrastructure had been destroyed Geary had to hire a driver to take him to Waterford so that he could telegraph his story to Dublin. After a torturous 12-hour drive that involved several encounters with retreating anti-Treaty forces Geary reached Waterford and telegraphed his 5,000 word story for inclusion in the next day's *Independent*. The exclusive seven-column story caused quite a stir: it was, in Geary's own words, 'the greatest "scoop" of a generation'.³⁰ The *Independent* called it 'one of the best achievements in the annals of Irish journalism'.³¹

In 1925 Geary was one of four reporters who accompanied a group from Cork's Farmers' Union that visited Denmark to study Danish agricultural methods.³² Praise for the series and Geary's writing came from all quarters: the *Enniscorthy Echo* noted that 'the value in this country of the visit to Denmark is increased a hundred-fold by means of his readable and well-instructed narrative'.³³ The *Independent* declared that the articles had 'aroused such great interest' that it had decided to publish them in pamphlet form.³⁴ Geary's writing skills also resulted in him being sent to some tragic scenes to report on what he found. In September 1926 he was dispatched to Drumcollogher, Co. Limerick, the scene of a horrific fire that had occurred in a makeshift cinema when the reels of film had combusted. Under the subheading 'Coffins, Coffins, Coffins', Geary described the scene he encountered: 'Messages, he wrote, 'had been sent out for coffins, coffins, coffins – what a message'.³⁵ Similarly, in October 1927, he was dispatched to counties Mayo and Galway after forty-five fishermen died in a freak storm.³⁶ He also accompanied W.T. Cosgrave on his state visit to the USA and Canada in early 1928 and was on the train carrying Cosgrave to Ottawa that

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ II, 25 Sept. 1937. I am grateful to Felix Larkin for alerting me to this episode.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ II, 14 Aug. 1922.

³² The series ran on 26 & 28 Sept. and 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 17 Oct. 1925.

³³ II, 10 Oct. 1925.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ II, 7 Sept. 1926.

³⁶ II, 31 Oct. & 1 Nov. 1927.

derailed due to ice on the tracks.³⁷ Geary was promoted to assistant editor when T.R. Harrington retired in 1931, and finally editor when Tim Quilty retired in September 1935.³⁸ In most respects, while the editorship had changed hands, the editorial philosophy of the newspaper remained the same - not tied to any party, but pro-Fine Gael and unswerving loyal to the Catholic church. This loyalty reached its highpoint during the Spanish civil war.

‘a fight to the death’

In the wake of the Wall Street Crash and the resultant global depression the Spanish republic had been declared in April 1931. The republic’s new constitution established freedom of speech and association, granted voting rights to women, allowed for divorce, stripped the nobility of its special legal status, allowed for the nationalisation of essential public services and effectively disestablished the Catholic church. Articles 26 and 27 of the new constitution curtailed the right of the church to own property and its involvement in education. These developments were denounced by Pope Pius XI³⁹ and the conservative party in Spain, the supporters of which were determined to protect the power and privilege they had previously enjoyed. From there, the fate of Spain was, in broad terms, a bloody civil war between a left-leaning republican government, and a right-wing military revolt led by General Francisco Franco and supported by the Catholic church. The conflict was, as the historian J. Bowyer Bell noted, whatever anyone wanted it to be; it was a war where ‘Fascism fought Democracy or God met the anti-Christ or Tradition wrestled with Revolution’.⁴⁰

For the *Independent*, the war was solely a battle between communism and catholicism. In his 1937 review of newspapers, Brown declared that, in relation to the war, the *Independent*, ‘alone among the metropolitan dailies, took definitely the side of the Spanish national army against the Socialist-Communist-Anarchist combination. Alone it gave the Irish public the full fact about the persecution of the Church and the atrocities committed against priests and nuns’.⁴¹ Browne did not refer to the coverage of the *Irish Press*, which supported de Valera’s policy of non-intervention⁴², nor to that of the *Irish Times*, which viewed the conflict as a battle between ‘a Fascist junta which seeks to impose a military despotism upon the country and a population which has tasted, for the first time, some of the sweets of democracy, and does not want to forego them’.⁴³

For the *Independent*, however, it was not the fate of democracy or the rise of fascism but rather the fate of the Catholic church that informed its reportage and editorial policy. It carried its first report of the conflict on 20 July 1936, accompanied by a photograph of members of the Sisters of Mercy order leaving a Madrid convent.⁴⁴ Two days later, it declared where it stood on the conflict:

³⁷ II, 3 Jan. 1953. See also II, 1 Feb. 1928. Many US newspapers described the incident as a plot to kill Cosgrave.

³⁸ II, 1 Sept. 1961.

³⁹ The encyclical ‘Dilectissima Nobis’ (1933) condemned the Spanish government’s actions.

⁴⁰ J. Bower-Bell, ‘Ireland and the Spanish civil war, 1936-39’, *Studia Hibernica*, Vol. 9 (1969), 137-163 at 141.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Press in Ireland*, p. 49.

⁴² *Irish Press*, 29 Aug. 1936.

⁴³ *Irish Times*, 19 Aug. 1926.

⁴⁴ II, 20 July 1936.

It is, in fact, a fight to the death between Communism and the combined forces of the Right for control of Spain ... Either the Right will triumph and a military dictatorship will emerge and strive to bar the advance of the Bolshevistic movement which has already gained such a considerable hold upon the people of the Peninsula, or, the Left will come out victorious and open up the way for a Spanish Soviet State upon the Russian model ... All who stand for the ancient Faith and the tradition of Spain are behind the present revolt against the Marxist regime in Madrid.⁴⁵

In the early stages of the war, the *Independent* was dependent on the services of press agencies and unverified second-hand accounts of events that were lifted from other publications. For example, under the headline 'Priests Shot, Cathedral Burned', it reproduced a story from *Petite Parisien* that described a raid by republican forces on the cathedral in Figueras, Catalonia. According to the report, the cathedral was defended by priests, two of whom were shot before the cathedral was burned down.⁴⁶ Similarly, under the headline 'Priests Massacred', it reproduced an interview with a French citizen who had fled Barcelona. According to the interviewee, 'during the sacking of the convents and churches, which followed the Communists' victory, several Jesuits were massacred and their heads cut off and paraded through the streets on a huge silver salver. Nuns were also mistreated, many of them being stripped by the Reds and then turned into the streets'.⁴⁷ Whatever about the veracity of these reports, the *Independent* felt compelled to outline where it stood. It criticised the 'armchair democrats' who viewed the conflict as 'nothing more than an attempted military coup by disgruntled army men against a duly elected Government of the people'. The Spanish government had, it declared, abdicated power to 'the Red Militia – the forerunners of social revolution and the would-be fulfillers of Lenin's prophecy that Europe would one day witness the birth, in blood and terror, of the Spanish Soviet Republic'. The battle lines had, it contended, been clearly drawn:

The issue at stake in the present struggle in Spain is of infinitely more importance than a mere contest for power between two political factions. It is, in fact, a struggle to the death between Christianity and Communism. On the side of the insurgents are ranged all who stand for the Catholic and national ideals which animated the life of Spain when she was one of the greatest of European states ... On the side of Senor Giral's Government there is ranged an unholy alliance of Communists, Anarchists, and anti-Christian revolutionaries of every sort and description in Spain. The Red assassination squads who slaughter defenceless nuns and priests, who loot and burn the convents and churches, who desecrate the tombs of the dead, and who destroy the property of the living – these and the mob are the upholders of the junta which we are sometimes invited to regard as the sacrosanct democratic Government of Spain.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ II, 22 July 1936.

⁴⁶ II, 23 July 1936.

⁴⁷ II, 24 July 1936.

⁴⁸ II, 6 Aug. 1936.

Having set out where it stood in relation to the conflict's protagonists, the *Independent* then clearly set its sights on the non-interventionist policy of the Irish government.

'more Catholic than the Pope'

As the month of August 1936 progressed, the newspaper became sharper in its demand that the Irish government do something. In an editorial entitled 'Red Savagery in Spain' it began to use the 'Catholic card' in its call for government action:

Thousands of defenceless priests, nuns, and Catholic citizens have been massacred all over Spain by the Red legions; churches, monasteries, and convents without number have been looted, desecrated, and burned, and fiendish indignities have been perpetrated at the very Altar steps upon those whose only crime against 'democracy' was that they were ordained priests, professed nuns, or practising members of the Catholic Church. Even the very crypts of the churches and the cemeteries attached to Religious Houses have not been safe from the barbaric attentions of the Red champions of 'Liberal democratic thought'. The bodies alike of long dead and recently interred priests, nuns, and Catholic lay folk have been torn from their tombs and exposed in the public streets of Red controlled cities, to make a Communist holiday for jeering and degenerate savages, whom we are sometimes invited to regard with sympathetic approval as the defenders of democratic rights and liberties in Spain!

It queried why the Free State had maintained diplomatic relations with the Spanish government and called on de Valera and his government to introduce a ban on Spanish and Russian goods.⁴⁹ When one Fianna Fáil TD, Hugo Flinn, declared that the Spanish conflict was 'between Fascism and Democracy' and that 'Fianna Fáil has no use for Fascism', the *Independent* expressed concern that this position reflected the government's position. It also asked why the government did not 'raise its voice to speak out the Irish people's horror and condemnation of the fiendish Red campaign'.⁵⁰ In mid-August it returned to the fray in explicit terms:

And what an agony Catholic Spain has endured these last few terrible weeks in those areas where those sacrilegious savages of the Red Militia hold sway ... Not content with the wholesale destruction of the Houses of God throughout Spain, the Red barbarians have in many instances sacrilegiously rifled the Tabernacle on the Altars, hurled the Blessed Sacrament on the ground, and trampled upon it. They have profaned the sacred vestments of the Altar by wearing them in derision before jeering Red mobs in the public places of those cities and towns of Spain where Red Terror reigned. Could Red Barbarism masquerading as the championship of 'liberty' and 'democratic rights' against reactionary 'Fascism' go further? Yes, there were defenceless priests and nuns to be 'hunted like wild beasts' and butchered wherever found by the Red Legions of Madrid ... Certainly the Red levies of Madrid are carrying out

⁴⁹ II, 11 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁰ II, 14 Aug. 1936.

with a ruthless ferocity the dictates of Lenin, the apostle of Bolshevism, ‘to fight without mercy religion and all allies of religion’ ... Surely even the most purblind ‘democrat’ in Western Europe must be convinced by this of the fact that this struggle in Spain is nothing else but a battle between Christianity and Communism in which there can be only one victor.⁵¹

The broad European policy of non-intervention in Spain was denounced as a tactic ‘to deny any material or moral assistance to those who are fighting Catholic Europe’s battle against Red Savagery in Spain’ and it expressed the hope ‘that the Catholic Government of our Catholic land has not completely tied its hands in face of the Spanish situation’. An acceptance of non-intervention would, the *Independent* asserted, ‘not be in accord with our national traditions, or the will and desires of the Irish people, the overwhelming majority of whom look with horror and detestation upon the criminal and anti-Christian campaign which the Red militia is so relentlessly pursuing in Spain against our fellow Catholics there...’.⁵² Within the hierarchy, the *Independent* found an ally in the bishop of Killaloe, Michael Fogarty, who expressed his ‘warm appreciation’ of the newspaper’s ‘uncompromising denunciation of the brutal outrages which have been going on in Spain under the aegis of the so-call legitimate Government’. He also expressed regret that the Irish government had not declared ‘its abhorrence of the savagery of the Spanish “Reds”’ and called on the government to sever diplomatic relations with ‘the communists of Madrid’.⁵³

Having secured the public support of the hierarchy, the *Independent* stepped up its campaign. ‘Time and again’ it noted, it had ‘called on our Government to speak out the Irish people’s horror and condemnation of the Red war on Catholicism in Spain’. But the response had been ‘not a word, apparently, of condemnation from Dublin of Red savagery’. The ‘Catholic Government of the Catholic Saorstát’ was, it concluded, ‘in a better position than any government, perhaps, to give a lead to the world by expressing condemnation of the barbarous Red campaign against the Catholics of Spain’ but it had neglected its ‘obvious duty to do so’.⁵⁴ A few days later, it again called on de Valera’s government to ‘sever diplomatic relations with Madrid, and express its abhorrence of the horrible deeds committed by the forces waging war on Christianity’.⁵⁵

When the government confirmed it was adopting a policy of non-intervention the *Independent* responded with unbridled hostility. ‘In the government communication’, it thundered, ‘the defenders of Christianity in Spain are put on the same plane as the mobs of Anarchists and Communists who are murdering Bishops, priests and nuns, who are burning churches and convents, and who do not conceal that their devilish aim is to exterminate religion from Spain’. The failure of the government ‘to utter disapproval or condemnation of these ferocious destroyers of Christian civilisation’ would be, it asserted, ‘a disappointment to the Irish people’.⁵⁶ But, determined not to let the *Independent* play the ‘Catholic card’ and portray de Valera as some sort of communist fellow-traveller, the *Irish Press* criticised the *Independent* for what it called its ‘ill-

⁵¹ II, 17 Aug. 1936.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ II, 18 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁴ II, 19 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁵ II, 22 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁶ II, 26 Aug. 1936.

considered and insincere criticism of the Government'. The policy of non-intervention, it asserted, was devised to prevent 'a general conflagration in Europe'. The *Independent's* call for the severance of diplomatic relations arose, the *Press* countered, 'from no nobler motive than its customary one of attempting to embarrass Mr de Valera's Ministry'. It noted that the Vatican had not gone as far as the *Independent* was urging de Valera to go and concluded that the newspaper 'when it suits its own purpose, does not hesitate to be more Catholic than the Pope'.⁵⁷

In response, the *Independent* noted that 'the tied organ of the Government ... must, as on other topics, respond to the whip of its controlling director - who is also head of the Government - and swear that the Government must be right'. It also noted that while the *Press* had finally broken its silence on the war to support government policy, it had not printed 'a single word of protest against the blasphemous and fiendish onslaught by the Reds on Christianity'. Neither, it observed, had the government 'condemned the atrocities committed by the Reds'. Why, it wondered, did de Valera's government 'have such tender regard for the Red murders and despoilers in Spain?' Describing the government's silence as 'an expression of cowardice' it noted that, apparently, 'the correct thing for the Catholics of this nation is not to say even boo to the murderers of bishops, priests and nuns, the destroyers of churches, and the exterminators of religion'. As for being 'more Catholic than the Pope', it had no problem with such a characterisation: 'What the Pope has said', it declared, 'epitomises the attitude of the *Irish Independent* and what we have written in exposure and denunciation of the detestable godless orgy by the Reds'. For expounding this position, the *Independent* would offer 'no apology to the "Irish Press" or to the other newly-found defenders of "democracy," or to the apologists and excuse-finders for the barbarities of the Red rabble of Spain, the destroyers of Christian civilisation'.⁵⁸ When the *Press* accused the *Independent* of attempting 'to brand all those who refuse to share in its hysteria as enemies of the Church in Spain',⁵⁹ the latter replied that it would 'leave it to the people to judge whether it is hysteria to support Catholicity and Christianity against Communism and Paganism'.⁶⁰

In September 1936 the *Independent* began to publish accounts of the war written by seasoned war correspondent, Francis McCullagh. In an advert the newspaper declared that in his first article McCullagh would 'prove conclusively that a Communist plot engineered from Moscow aimed at the overthrow of the Constitution and the establishment of a Soviet'.⁶¹ The article, of course, did no such thing: it simply speculated that a contact of McCullagh's may have seen reports sent to Moscow from agents in Spain.⁶² In October the newspaper devoted a full page to one of McCullagh's articles, in which he criticised de Valera for not engaging in 'armed intervention' in Spain.⁶³ The *Irish Press* responded by pointing out that it had turned down McCullagh's offer to write for the paper

⁵⁷ *Irish Press*, 28 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁸ II, 29 Aug. 1936.

⁵⁹ *Irish Press*, 31 Aug. 1936.

⁶⁰ II, 5 Sept. 1936.

⁶¹ II, 22 Sept. 1936.

⁶² II, 23 Sept. 1936. Other articles by McCullagh appeared on 1, 3, 9 & 12 Dec. 1936 and 8 & 13 Jan and 7 Apr. 1938. For more on McCullagh, see J. Horgan 'The Irishness of Francis McCullagh' in K. Rafter (ed.), *Irish journalism before independence* (Manchester, 2011), pp 106-119.

⁶³ II, 16 Oct. 1936.

because of his use of hyperbole. It also accused the *Independent* of cynically using the war as a circulation boosting exercise:

... when the *Independent* was servilely {sic} publishing the reports of English news agencies in which those whom it now describes as ‘patriots’ were daily held up as ‘rebels’ we published independent accounts showing the real origin of the rising, setting forth the outrages and excesses which compelled the Catholic population to resort to arms ... It was after we had been doing this for some time, that the *Independent*, whose knowledge of foreign politics generally approaches zero, suddenly woke up to the fact that there were great Catholic interests involved ... and that it was a situation which could be usefully exploited for circulation purposes.⁶⁴

The following year the *Independent* sent its own reporter, Gertrude Gaffney, to Spain. Her first series of articles, ‘In War-Torn Spain’, was described by the newspaper as ‘a first-hand, authentic account of conditions behind the war-fronts in Spain’.⁶⁵ A second series of articles was published in October and November 1937.⁶⁶

When, in November 1936, Fianna Fáil’s majority defeated a proposal by W.T. Cosgrave that the government recognise General Franco as leader of Spain, the *Independent* described de Valera’s position as ‘peculiar and deplorable’. ‘Not a word’, it asserted ‘by the President or Government of this Christian nation has been uttered in condemnation of these Red brutalities, barbarities and blasphemies’.⁶⁷ In February 1937 the Dáil passed a Non-Intervention Act, and the *Independent* noted that while an Irishman was free to join the British army or the French foreign legion ‘he will be a criminal if he attempts to join the Army that is fighting for Christ against anti-Christ in Spain’.⁶⁸ After that, interest in the Spanish war declined as wider war clouds gathered. On 11 February 1939 the Irish government finally recognised Franco as the leader of Spain. It was a case of the most fortunate, or perhaps, opportunistic, timing: Pope Pius XI had died the day before and the *Independent* was too consumed with coverage of this event to even notice de Valera’s action. For two days the newspaper’s editorial page was outlined in bold black borders to indicate its grief.⁶⁹ Similarly, by the time the Spanish war ended on 1 April 1939 the newspaper’s attention had long switched to the looming conflict between Britain and Germany.

Too long at the helm

The Spanish civil war marked the *Independent*’s highpoint of Catholic conservatism. And, while there is no definitive proof that Geary wrote the quoted editorials, according to his son, he would not have disapproved of them as they rang true of his attitude.⁷⁰ Many years later, amid the Mother and Crisis of 1951, Geary would maintain an unusual editorial silence when, given the newspaper’s

⁶⁴ *Irish Press*, 17 Oct. 1936.

⁶⁵ II, 19 Feb. 1937. The series began on 22 Feb. 1937 and continued throughout Feb. and March.

⁶⁶ The second series of articles was published between 25-30 Oct. and 1, 2, and 4 Nov. 1937.

Gaffney’s death was reported in II, 12 Dec. 1959, but no obituary was published.

⁶⁷ II, 28 Nov. 1936.

⁶⁸ II, 25 Feb. 1937.

⁶⁹ II, 10 & 11 Feb. 1939.

⁷⁰ Interview with Paddy Geary, 8 Dec. 2011.

policy of supporting the church, it would have been expected to come out with all guns blazing.⁷¹ Nonetheless, four years later, when the *Independent* celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, its editorial page was festooned with messages of goodwill from leading church figures. The cardinal archbishop of Armagh, John D'Alton, told the newspaper it could 'justly claim that during the fifty years of its existence it has maintained a high standard of journalism ... {and} ... has always endeavoured to promote the best interests of the nation'. The archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, noted that the newspaper had been marked by its 'policy of distinctive loyalty towards the Church'. In his editorial, Geary declared the newspaper's intention 'to live up to our title, to be both Irish and independent, allied to no party, free to criticise or to help any or all as the interests of the nation may demand'.⁷² One may wonder, however, how free it was to critique the power of the Catholic church in Irish society. But for all that, Geary was, no more or less than any of his contemporaries, a product of the Ireland of the times. There existed a seemingly unbreakable symbiotic relationship between church and state, and catholicism was part and parcel of national identity, and reflected as such by the press, until the 1960s.

Geary was also cognisant of the commercial realities of producing a daily newspaper. He was reluctant to remove advertising from the front page, but when, in July 1961, the board insisted, the compromise reached was that the adverts and death notices be moved to the back page.⁷³ When Geary celebrated his silver jubilee as editor, he received a telegram from Cardinal Tardini, papal secretary of state, conveying the pope's 'fraternal felicitations'. He also received an autographed colour photograph of Pope John XXIII.⁷⁴ Against his own wishes, Geary retired in September 1961 and assumed the position of editorial advisor to the board of directors.⁷⁵ The following November it was announced that the pope had conferred the distinction of Knight of St Sylvester on Geary.⁷⁶ This rare distinction is awarded to lay people who are either actively involved in the life of the church or exemplify the teaching of the church in the exercise of their professional duties. He died three weeks later on 21 December 1961, his plans for a memoir unfulfilled.⁷⁷

Frank Geary undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the *Independent*, but arguably stayed at the helm for too long. During his editorship the newspaper accepted the status quo of post-independence Catholic Ireland and the safe commercial environment that an insular society provided. It never, unlike, the *Irish Press* or the *Irish Times*, advocated social or economic change or challenged any power-bloc in Irish society, with the exception of Fianna Fáil, and only then when it could make a play for demonstrating that it was more loyal to the church than de Valera. In 1960s Ireland, as economic growth and social change accelerated, Independent Newspapers was forced to make a choice about the future of the *Irish Independent*: whether to allow it to become socially aware and critically informed journal under the editorship of Louis McRedmond or have it

⁷¹ See chapter 9.

⁷² II, 3 Jan. 1955.

⁷³ Interview with Paddy Geary, 8 Dec. 2011. See II, 3 July 1961 for Geary's explanation for the change.

⁷⁴ II, 22 Dec. 1961.

⁷⁵ II, 1 Sept. 1961.

⁷⁶ II, 30 Nov. 1961.

⁷⁷ For obituaries see II, 22 Dec. 1961, & *Irish Times*, 22 Dec. 1961.

continue on its commercially successful middle-of-the road conservative path. The board ultimately chose the latter option.