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A tale of ‘womanly intuition’ - Hector Legge at the *Sunday Independent*, 1940-70.¹

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The *Sunday Independent* has with some justification acquired the reputation as Ireland’s most controversial newspaper although equally it remains the most successful publication in the national newspaper market. In more recent times the newspaper has had to withstand criticism over its editorial stances ranging from coverage of John Hume’s role in the Northern Ireland peace process, to support for Bertie Ahern during his tenure as leader of Fianna Fáil. Even the fall-out from the murder of crime correspondent Veronica Guerin in June 1996 - and claims of a ‘cult of personality and cynical controversialism’² - did not prevent the newspaper maintaining its dominant position. Weekly sales in 2011 reached over 250,000 copies - almost 25 per cent of the Sunday newspaper market. The foundations of this editorial and commercial success were laid in an earlier period during the editorship of Hector Legge. During his thirty-year tenure Legge defined the broad parameters of the weekly publication from Independent House. Yet, remarkably, given Legge’s pivotal role in establishing the *Sunday Independent* as a modern mid-market national newspaper, little attention has been paid to this period in the history of the newspaper. This chapter sets out to present a fuller biographical profile of this longstanding editor. In doing so, the chapter presents new evidence not just on Legge’s editorial style and approach to journalism also offers new evidence on what was one of the greatest exclusives in twentieth century Irish journalism.

Who was Hector Legge?

Hector Legge was born on 9 January 1901 in the Curragh, Co. Kildare. He was one of four children - their father was a bombardier in the Royal Horse Artillery at the Curragh; their mother was a teacher who encouraged reading and study. In his teenage years alongside day studies Legge also took night classes at the vocational school in Naas including introductory courses in bookkeeping and shorthand. The college principal A.J. Smyth recorded that Legge had made ‘very good’ progress and had shorthand at a rate of sixty words per minute along with the ability to transcribe the same accurately into longhand. In late 1919 Legge secured a teaching position at the Christian Brothers secondary school in Monasterevan, Co. Laois, but after six months decided that his future lay beyond the classroom. He subsequently worked as a clerk with D.E. Williams, a wholesale and retail company, in Tullamore, Co. Offaly. It was in Tullamore - by a curious route - that Legge’s knowledge of shorthand brought him into the world of newspapers. The national mood at that time was defined by insurrection. British rule in Ireland was

¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Independent News and Media in researching this chapter and, in particular, the generous help of Peter Legge in providing access to his late father’s papers and to David McCullagh for sharing research material on the first inter-party government.

² See E. O’Reilly, *Veronica Guerin: The Life and Death of a Crime Reporter* (London, 1998).

being challenged - politically by Sinn Féin and militarily by the Irish Republican Army - and Legge was drawn to the nationalist cause:

At that time [1920] the War of Independence was quickening. Members of the R.I.C. were looked upon as enemies, as agents of the British oppressors. Some of them were shot. It was obvious that the men of the D.E. Williams staff were changing from their normal after-hours relaxation and leisure habits.³

Legge joined a local republican brigade and with his work colleagues would cycle to isolated rural areas for training: 'There we would go through some drilling - all good soldiers have drilling! - and get practice in the use of firearms - rifles and revolvers. I was now a member of the I.R.A.! However, I was never to fire a shot in anger.'⁴ Two local journalists - whom Legge befriended in the town's commercial club where billiards was played to pass the time - asked if he would do some reports for them on evening time meetings and functions. 'Probably they had engagements to meet their girl friends on those occasions,' Legge surmised.⁵ The journalists subsequently brought a job notice to his attention. The *Catholic Herald* newspaper in Manchester had a vacancy for a junior reporter. The editor, Michael J. O'Neill was a native of Monasterevan, Co. Kildare - a point of discussion when Legge attended for interview in November 1920. O'Neill, who was coming close to retirement, had learned his journalistic trade during the Parnell era working with the *Leinster Leader* and the *Carlow Nationalist*. Now in Manchester the veteran editor helped Legge find his own way as a reporter:

I used to spend part of the week visiting Catholic priests in the many town throughout Lancashire - Bolton, Preston, Rochdale, St. Helens, Salford, Pendlebury, Wigan - picking up news on parish activities. The back-end of the week would find me in the office doing sub-editing, or subbing as journalists call it. It was very good training for a beginner.⁶

Legge was obviously well regarded. Not long after his appointment he secured a pay increase. He also supplemented his income by filing stories for the *Manchester Guardian* - 'I had become a kind of Catholic Affairs correspondent'.⁷ When the opportunity came to return to Ireland O'Neill sought to persuade his young reporter to remain by offering his own job as editor. Legge declined and instead joined the staff of the *Irish Independent* as a junior sub-editor in 1922 - the start of a forty-eight year relationship with Independent Newspapers.

T.R. Harrington, who had edited the newspaper since 1905, interviewed Legge for the vacant position. Legge later recalled of Harrington: 'He had no outside interests. The *Irish Independent* was given all his time. He rarely laughed or even smiled.'⁸ During the war of independence the IRA raided the newspaper offices and smashed up machinery; during the civil war Harrington's life was

³ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 4, Hector Legge (HL) papers.

⁴ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 5, HL papers.

⁵ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 3, HL papers.

⁶ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 7, HL papers.

⁷ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 7, HL papers.

⁸ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 10, HL papers.

threatened and he lived in Independent House for a period. The energetic editor did not, however, appear too distracted from his role as Legge observed:

Land mine explosions were common. [One] night we all heard a very heavy explosion. Unless you were deaf you would have heard it. Shortly afterwards, Harrington took a phone call in the sub-editors room. We heard him say: “Yes, they tell me there was a big explosion but I was very busy and I did not hear it.” We all laughed when he left the room.⁹

By the time Harrington retired as editor in August 1931 Legge had been promoted to deputy chief sub-editor at the *Irish Independent*. Harrington retained a seat on the board of Independent Newspapers and although no longer editing the national morning title he sent regular notes to Legge pointing out spelling and grammatical errors that had slipped through the subbing process. In an appropriate piece of journalistic symmetry half a century later Legge would himself send similar missives to his own successors in the editorial chair at the *Sunday Independent*.

Legge was a commanding figure and, with an outgoing and opinionated personality, he demanded - and secured - attention. He was a keen sportsman - playing a variety of sports including rugby and Gaelic games but he had a particular interest in hockey and golf. During the 1920s and 1930s success on the hockey field with Monkstown brought four Leinster Cup medals and a Leinster league title. Between balancing these sporting interests and family life¹⁰ Legge was promoted to chief sub-editor. He was a demanding boss. His personal papers contain a number of notes sent to his colleagues enquiring why stories had been missed or had appeared in rival newspapers before the pages of the *Irish Independent*. This toughness with colleagues was a hallmark of his tenure as editor. For example, in May 1948 a sub-editor who was found asleep at his desk was told to ‘clear out his desk’ and when he turned up for work as normal the following week the unfortunate fellow was met by hostility from his editor: ‘I ‘bawl[ed] him out’ and [told him to] ‘go away and stay away’.

Throughout the 1930s Legge was also writing news reports and had secured a regular by-lined column that treated subjects with a brashness that would have found a comfortable home in later manifestations of the *Sunday Independent*. For example, on 27 July 1939, Legge’s column - a recollection of a conversation with friends over dinner - was headlined: ‘How to recognise the perfect wife’.¹¹ Legge’s career progression was steady and upwards. In August 1940, eighteen years after he first arrived in Independent House, he was appointed editor of the *Sunday Independent*. He also edited the *Irish Weekly Independent* – a Thursday publication that was aimed at famers attending weekly marts and emigrants seeking a summary of news from home. Legge continued in this dual role until the weekly met its demise in 1960.

The first issue of the *Sunday Independent* had appeared on 10 December 1905. The newly formed Independent Newspapers was now publishing four newspapers – the *Irish Independent*, the *Evening Herald*, the *Irish Weekly Independent* and the *Sunday Independent*. The latest addition to the Murphy stable was the only Irish-published Sunday newspaper. The development of this new market met some initial public and commercial scepticism. Attachment to

⁹ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 10, HL papers.

¹⁰ Hector Legge and his wife Thelma had two sons, Peter and Simon.

¹¹ *Irish Independent*, 27 July 1939.

the idea of Sunday as a day of worship and rest was declining but had still not totally disappeared. William Martin Murphy, the proprietor, sought to win over advertisers with the offer of placing adverts in both weekly newspapers at a single charge.¹² There was also a clever marketing campaign setting readers the challenge of locating the ‘Missing Man’ with a £20 prize for the reader who identified and approached the man described as ‘Mr Baffler’. The competition ran for three weeks before the ‘Missing Man’ was eventually identified in Co. Donegal. The new venture had solid circulation growth. Certified weekly sales for the *Sunday Independent* in 1909 were 21,391 but within a year had climbed to 56,727 copies each week. While without a direct domestic rival until the arrival of the *Sunday Press* in 1949, the Murphy Sunday newspaper still faced competition from titles imported from the United Kingdom – the *News of the World* and the *Sporting Times* reportedly had combined Irish circulation of 250,000 in 1926.¹³

By the time Legge was appointed editor in August 1940 wartime rationing of newsprint meant he was overseeing a publication that consisted of a double sheet of paper. The lack of space did not stop the new editor battling strongly with the wartime censor (as recounted in chapter 8). In the post-war period Legge built a hugely successful newspaper subsequently defined as ‘a lively and serious broadsheet with the biggest circulation in Ireland of any national newspaper.’¹⁴ In many respects Legge’s longevity as editor - in contrast to the more frequent changes at the Press Group - can be explained by his outlook coinciding with those of the proprietors at Independent House. Legge was a devout Catholic - a regular mass-goer and a frequent confession goer - who had been educated by the Christian Brothers and who held the order in high esteem. He was also distinctly Fine Gael-leaning in his politics, and was personally close to a number of leading party figures, in particular, James Dillon, a fact which, as discussed below, was significant in the publication of the controversial exclusive story about Ireland’s declaration as a republic in 1948.

The Legge-Dillon friendship went beyond politics and was long lasting and lifelong.¹⁵ Legge’s wife Thelma had introduced Dillon to his future wife Maura while on holidays in the west of Ireland in 1942.¹⁶ The two couples had almost daily contact, enjoyed overlapping social diaries in Dublin and holidayed together. For example, in October 1945 Legge wrote a diary entry: ‘at our place, James and his future in politics’, while in April 1947 he recorded ‘had long chat on the political situation’ with Dillon, who was throughout this period an independent TD having parted with Fine Gael in 1942 over Ireland’s wartime neutrality.¹⁷ Discussion of political events continued after Dillon was appointed minister for agriculture in February 1948. For example, on 27 September 1949 Legge wrote: ‘I met J.D. in the Shelbourne + had a chat - men, women, world affairs.’ News that Dillon was rejoining Fine Gael was exclusively reported by Legge in the *Sunday Independent* on 11 May 1952 while Dillon’s decision to resign as party president (a position he attained in 1960) was noted as a ‘Bombshell’ in a diary entry on 21 April 1965. Indeed, such was the closeness of the relationship that Legge recorded calling to the Dillon house at 11.15pm on the

¹² I am grateful to Professor John Horgan for drawing my attention to this information.

¹³ Committee on Evil Literature, Minutes of Evidence, p.8. National Archives of Ireland.

¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 11 Nov. 1994.

¹⁵ Information supplied by Peter Legge, 17 Sept. 2011.

¹⁶ M. Manning, *James Dillon* (Dublin, 1999), pp 178-82.

¹⁷ All diary entries are from Hector Legge’s diaries; 1946, 1948, 1949, 1952 & 1965.

evening of the resignation: ‘sat on their bed till 12o’c. Maura all worked up. Spent nearly an hour in front of the mirror trying to put in hair clips. James sat on a stool at the end of the bed. He had collar + tie off. He put [his] coat back on when I called.’

The Murphy’s would have been content for Legge to produce a commercially successful newspaper that was Fine Gael-leaning and also sympathetic to the Catholic church. The *Sunday Independent* was not, however, a partisan party-organ like its equivalent at Burgh Quay and Legge cultivated sources well beyond these two constituencies including in Fianna Fáil where Seán Lemass has been credited as a source for leaked stories.¹⁸ In the late 1950s and 1960s he enjoyed the company of many of the new generation of ministers that emerged in Fianna Fáil and who were obviously good sources of information. During the 1940s and 1950s under Legge’s editorship the *Sunday Independent* was socially conservative - like Irish society at large - and there was serious regard for the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Irish life. The bishops held great sway and they were quick to write to the newspapers with their complaints - sometimes directly to the editor but more often than not to the chairman of the board. The outcome was, however, not always to their liking. For example, in May 1955 the *Sunday Independent* published a photograph of seven female members of the Cork Ballet Group who were in rehearsal for a forthcoming production, ‘Coppelia’, at the local Opera House. The bishop of Ossory, Patrick Collier, took offence at the photograph and wrote, along with several other clergy, in protest:

We, the undersigned, consider it a very unbecoming picture for a Sunday Catholic paper, a bad picture, dangerous for young and old. We take objection to a female figure almost nude in the group [...] We like decent pictures: the indecent we abhor, as our religion demands.¹⁹

Interestingly, the correspondence was not received with automatic acceptance of the bishop’s authority. In fact, Legge considered the protest ‘ridiculous’ and ultimately no reply was sent. But he was sufficiently concerned that he sent the correspondence for guidance to Fr. J.G. McGarry - editor of the *The Furrow* magazine - in St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth. McGarry was dismissive of the bishop’s protest:

The life of the Editor of a Sunday newspaper is no easy one. He is between the Devil and the Holy See, as the late Jimmy Montgomery [film censor] said jokingly of his job. You know well that there is an unenlightened element in clerical - and lay - opinion, purely negative, focussing its spectacles to find something that will shock it [...] in the print I see the girl is actually wearing net stockings! The roll of signatures does not impress me. A bishop might call up a hundred such.²⁰

Despite his political and social outlook Legge, personally and professionally, was no mouthpiece for any specific constituency. He had an independent streak and enjoyed the company of those whose views were not his own. In the latter regard

¹⁸ J. Horgan, *Seán Lemass: The Enigmatic Patriot* (Dublin, 1997), p.180.

¹⁹ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 45, HL papers.

²⁰ Correspondence between McGarry and Legge, HL papers.

the Legge home in Ranelagh was the venue for social occasions involving writers, Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor, and was ‘frequently the scene of vigorous and heated arguments.’²¹ Indeed, Legge took a risk in commissioning articles from O’Connor in the 1940s when the author’s work was banned: ‘We had a managing-director who was more Catholic than the Pope. If O’Connor had walked in the hall of Independent House he would probably have had it disinfected. For him to write for one of the ‘Independent’ papers would have been impossible.’²²

A clandestine arrangement saw O’Connor writing under the pen-name ‘Ben Mayo’. Legge met with the writer on Tuesdays to discuss possible column topics and they would regroup on Fridays when O’Connor would hand over his copy. Cheques were passed from the accounts department at Independent House to Legge who ensured the writer received his fee. ‘The articles created great interest. He was bringing a fresh and scholarly approach to many subjects. I remember Sean O’Faolain asking me, ‘Who is this Ben Mayo?’ I expressed surprise that he didn’t know and got away with it.’²³ The arrangement lasted for almost two years and in subsequent decades O’Connor again wrote for the *Sunday Independent* but under his own name. When O’Connor - a non-believer - died from a sudden heart attack in March 1966 there was some surprise that his funeral arrangements included mass at St Andrew’s Church on Westland Row in Dublin. Legge was in the church with James Dillon and Sean O’Faolain when former government minister Ernest Blythe approached them. Blythe expressed surprise at the religious arrangements. Legge responded: ‘Did you not know? Frank has been at mass every day for over a year.’ Blythe replied, as he moved on, ‘I never knew that’. As Legge turned again to Dillon and O’Faolain, the latter said, ‘That’s the best short story I ever heard.’²⁴

Scoops, leaks and intuition

The arrival of the *Sunday Press* saw Legge facing new pressures, although on viewing the first edition - 4 September 1949 – he noted: ‘My reaction was - a pleasant surprise. Not as good as I thought it wd be.’ The threat of the new competitor, however, remained a significant issue. Legge judged the weekly contest in terms of which newspaper was published first - allowing for early distribution around the country - and also the quality of the stories on the respective front pages. Typical examples of entries in Legge’s diaries include: ‘Got flying start on Press’ (6 September 1952); ‘Paper off in good time. To us it appeared better than the Press. Are we fair judges?’ (24 December 1955); ‘Two scoops over the Press...’ (15 February 1959); ‘Press agn 28 to our 24 - 3rd week in succession’ (10 March 1962); ‘Missed 2 stories (1st ed) both splashed on Page 1 of the Press ... such frustration and annoyance’ (18 January 1964). Legge was also vigilant in responding to any apparent threat from his competitor. When Vivion de Valera, the managing director of the Press Group, attempted to recruit one of Legge’s staff - Ita Hayes - to edit a new woman’s page Legge responded by getting her to edit a similar page in the *Sunday Independent* that would commence within two weeks.²⁵ De Valera had a measure of revenge twelve months later

²¹ Manning, *James Dillon*, pp 152-3.

²² Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 54, HL papers.

²³ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 58, HL papers.

²⁴ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 61, HL papers.

²⁵ Diary, 20 Mar. 1962, HL papers.

when he scuppered an attempt by Legge to recruit photographer Coleman Doyle to work on the *Sunday Independent's* new colour magazine.²⁶

Despite the launch of the *Sunday Press* in 1949, by the end of the 1950s weekly circulation of the *Sunday Independent* was almost 400,000. The arrival of the competitor newspaper had not damaged the Murphy publication. On 18 October 1959 Legge oversaw production of a twenty-eight page edition, the largest in the history of the *Sunday Independent*, and two weeks later he bettered that achievement with a thirty-two page edition. He noted in his diary: 'Considering the way it was got together it looked alright.' The Murphys invested in a costly colour magazine in 1963 for six months - and an equally short lived English edition that allowed Legge to write in his diary on 27 October 1963: 'Historic Day: We invade England with Sunday Inds. All went well.'

These innovations were, however, poorly considered while planning was insufficient. There was an apparent absence of any serious consultation or communication with senior editorial staff. The investments proved costly while Legge's ongoing requests for more editorial staff including a designated photographer were unsuccessful. Two separate entries in Legge's diaries provide a sense of his frustration at not being able to expand the newspaper: 'Mind very agitated abt office, late printing, bad reporting staff etc etc + awake a lot' (24 November 1962); 'We are working on the proverbial shoe string' (23 August 1963); 'Still an Angry Young Man!!! But feeling far from YOUNG these days' (4 August 1964). Yet, whatever the editorial limitations experienced by Legge his newspaper was commercially successful - circulation was holding up against the *Sunday Press* while advertising was strong. There were presentations from the board - and social functions with staff - to mark Legge's 21st (in 1961) and 25th (in 1965) years as editor. There was some talk of succession in the early 1960s but the Murphys were happy for their editor to continue on.

Legge was not just delivering for his proprietor but he was also good value for money - he continued as a working reporter throughout his entire period as editor. He wrote weekly editorials, regularly delivered front page stories (under the pen name 'Fergus Wright') and oversaw the 'Panorama' column. He was driven by a need for front-page exclusives. When the *Evening Press* reported that Edward Kennedy was expected to visit Ireland in 1962 Legge's diary response was typical of his journalistic outlook: 'I had hoped to have it Excl. in Sunday'.²⁷ Indeed, even as late as his twenty-ninth year as editor Legge was out and about gathering stories. In February 1969 Legge interviewed Terence O'Neill, the prime minister of Northern Ireland at Ahoghill near Ballymena. The two men sat in armchairs on either side of a fireplace as they spoke for half an hour. Legge's first question asked about the political situation to which O'Neill replied, 'You are like Lemass. You people in the South have no idea of how we work in Northern Ireland.' The interview - and the internal difficulties within unionism - was the front-page story in the subsequent edition of the *Sunday Independent*.²⁸

Legge made short entries in small pocket diaries throughout his career as editor. The references range from brief mentions of work meetings and office related activities to social functions and family engagements. There is no particular consistency to the entries although they offer tantalising glimpses into his professional life. Subjects and people come and go across days, weeks, months

²⁶ Diary, 14 Sept. 1963, HL papers.

²⁷ Diary, 21 Feb. 1962, HL papers.

²⁸ *Sunday Independent*, 23 Feb. 1969.

and years. Words that feature regularly in Saturday diary entries include ‘scoop’ and ‘exclusive’. Legge placed great store in what he described as ‘womanly intuition’ in seeking out exclusive stories.²⁹ He was also a risk taker – and prepared to push stories as far as possible. His brash approach was evident one evening in 1938 when Neville Chamberlain sought to prevent war in Europe. As chief sub-editor at the *Irish Independent*, Legge arranged the lead story on the basis that a peace pact would emerge. But with the print deadline approaching in Independent House urgent messages over the private wires to Reuters and the Press Association brought only negative replies.

So were we to start a complete new make-up of the page and thus be late and lose our transport connections? Hell! A steadying watchword to have is – always be calm in a crisis. Behold, at that very critical moment Chamberlain landed in London and produced what has become a famous – or infamous – piece of paper ... The relief!³⁰

There was a message of congratulations the following day from the newspaper’s editor Frank Geary who was on holidays in Tramore, Co. Waterford. As Legge observed, ‘we were the only one in Tramore that had the story of the peace pact. Womanly intuition.’³¹ Eleven years later, on 18 September 1949, Legge wrote what he considered the ‘scoop of the year’ when predicting that the British pound was about to be devalued. ‘I see you scooped the world,’ one of his colleagues remarked some days later when the story was proven to be true.³² In the article Legge placed his source as the *Irish Independent’s* London correspondent - a deliberate misstatement - and subsequently claimed journalistic intuition rather than a leak from a political source. He failed, however, to explain how he came to know that the Dublin government was, that same Saturday evening, meeting to discuss the implications for the Irish currency. Interestingly Legge was to fall back on the same ‘nose for a story’ rationale in also explaining what was probably one of the biggest exclusives of twentieth century journalism in Ireland.

Declaration of a Republic

On 5 September 1948 the *Sunday Independent* published an exclusive story - under the by-line ‘by our political correspondent’ - that Ireland was to leave the Commonwealth. Under the front-page headline - ‘External Relations Act to go’ - Legge, the author of the story, wrote with some authority that with repeal of the legislation in question Ireland would be formally declared a republic. It was a journalistic scoop that not only embarrassed Taoiseach John A. Costello - then on his first trip abroad since the formation of his inter-party government seven months previously - but also ultimately caused the formal announcement to be mired in controversy.

Legge insisted there was no leak for the story but that it had arisen from journalistic intuition arising from a close monitoring of political events. In notes prepared for an unpublished memoir Legge recalled ‘having let some week-ends pass ... intuition’ urged him to move on the story. His attitude was framed as, ‘Write it now. The daily papers may stick you for it.’ So the story was written

²⁹ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 14, HL papers.

³⁰ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 15, HL papers.

³¹ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 15, HL papers.

³² Diary, 18 Sept. 1949, HL papers.

after lunch on a Saturday afternoon.³³ There is some support for Legge's explanation – not only in terms of his record for pushing stories to the limit but also disparate information already in the public domain. Moves to take Ireland out of the Commonwealth had in fact predated Costello's government.³⁴ The previous Fianna Fáil administration had systematically dismantled links. De Valera had, however, stopped short of declaring Ireland a republic for a variety of reasons including a fear of copper-fastening partition and a wish to prevent a standoff with the British authorities. But the formation of a new republican party, Clann na Poblachta - and its declared policy of delivering beyond de Valera's 'dictionary republic' - renewed attention on Ireland's ambiguous official status. The outgoing Fianna Fáil government had, in fact, prepared draft legislation to give effect to Commonwealth withdrawal.

There were certainly differing views on membership within the new government. Clann na Poblachta's desire for change contrasted sharply with Fine Gael's public policy of wanting to maintain Commonwealth links. In a Dáil debate on the day the new government was formed in February 1948, Sean MacBride referred to the election results as not delivering a mandate to repeal the External Relations Act.³⁵ There were, however, reassuring words from within the wider Fine Gael family where alternative perspectives prevailed. In the same Dáil debate, James Dillon - then an independent TD but one with influential Fine Gael connections - clearly anticipated an early announcement when he observed that MacBride, 'contemplates a long postponement of some objective near his heart, but I am more optimistic than he.'³⁷ Significantly, the new Taoiseach, John A. Costello - also from Fine Gael stock - considered the imprecise nature of Ireland's status 'untidy and inadequate'.³⁸

There is sufficient evidence from the early months in the life of the new government to strongly suggest that an unofficial decision had been taken - what was not decided was the moment for making a public announcement. In a Dáil debate on 21 July 1948, one Clann na Poblachta TD spoke positively about taking 'steps' to establish a republic while a little over two weeks later on 6 August 1948, the Labour Party Tanaiste William Norton observed that it would do 'our national self respect good both at home and abroad if we were to proceed without delay to abolish the External Relations Act'.³⁹ Moreover, at a cabinet meeting some days later, MacBride recommended that Ireland not be represented at a forthcoming Commonwealth gathering. While no record exists to show that an official decision had been made, the evidence suggests that there was consensus within government and that an early declaration was expected. So Legge may have been very clever in reading the tealeaves. But such intuition would not explain the curious timing of his story on the weekend when Costello in Canada, which effectively bounced him into confirming the change.

Legge long protested innocence about the source for the story - insisting that he had no official or political assistance - and argued that there was no significance in the article's timing, even claiming that he could have written the

³³ Notes for draft memoir (unpublished), p. 16, HL papers.

³⁴ For a detailed examination of this period see E. Keane, *Seán MacBride: a life* (Dublin, 2007).

³⁵ Sean MacBride, Dáil Éireann Debates, vol. 110, col. 25 (18 Feb. 1948).

³⁷ James Dillon, Dáil Éireann Debates, vol. 110, col. 28 (18 Feb. 1948).

³⁸ Keane, *Sean MacBride*, p.110.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

story earlier.⁴⁰ ‘We did not talk to one member of his [Costello’s] Government, or any of his officials, on the Government’s intentions on this matter.’⁴¹ The emphatic and consistent nature of Legge’s denials of any governmental assistance remains admirable in terms of journalistic integrity in protecting sources. But the credibility of his stance has long been questioned especially given the authority of the written article, the timing of its publication, and the fact that Legge was on good terms with several members of Costello’s cabinet.

While Liam Cosgrave accepted the source as ‘More likely “journalistic inspiration”’⁴² others refused to accept Legge’s explanation. Patrick Lynch, Costello’s private secretary at the time, observed that, ‘Hector believes that it was editorial inspiration that led him to produce that headline ... I am certain he was informed from some source ... My personal view is that it was Dillon.’⁴³ Costello apparently believed that MacBride was behind the leak.⁴⁴ Louie O’Brien - personal secretary to MacBride - ultimately came to believe that the Clann na Poblachta leader was the source and that ‘MacBride had gone to Legge and cooked up this...’⁴⁵ MacBride was apparently aware of the *Sunday Independent* story prior to publication. As Louie O’Brien recalled in a 1996 interview: ‘Sean got onto Costello on the phone and told him this thing was coming out on Sunday, and Sean gave him three alternatives [most likely to confirm, to deny or issue no comment].’⁴⁶

There are no significant entries in Legge’s diary for August and September 1948 except for a single mention of Dillon, on 29 August 1948: ‘James Dillon in tonight but I did not see him.’ There is no entry on the date that the External Relations exclusive was published. Indeed, if Legge’s diaries are to be accepted, his contacts with MacBride appear to be confined to a period in 1949 when he had regular engagement with the minister for external affairs. There are several references in the early months of 1949 to Saturday evening contact when Legge had left Independent House with work complete on that week’s *Sunday Independent*. For example, on Saturday 22 January 1949: ‘Saw Sean MacB on way home. Discussed partition etc’; on Saturday 29 January 1949 ‘Saw Sean MacB on way home’; on Saturday 12 February ‘Called into J.D on way home. Before lunch saw Sean MacB’.

MacBride apparently cultivated these links. On 12 March 1949 Legge wrote: ‘Sean MacB phoned - Per. Sec. - he wd like to see me, so called in on way home. Had interesting gossip re world affairs. F.H. Boland there.’ There is an intriguing entry on 1 May 1949 that points to the minister providing material to the newspaper editor: ‘Talked with Sean MacBride at 6.45-7.15pm re. current political situation. Interesting documents and letters. James Dillon was on the phone later in evg.’ MacBride’s involvement with Legge was apparently not sustained. There are no meetings or conversations between the two men - recorded in Legge’s diaries - outside the references in 1949. If taken at face value these entries leave open the strong possibility that MacBride established links with

⁴⁰ *Irish Times*, 11 Nov. 1994.

⁴¹ *Sunday Independent*, 1 Nov. 1970.

⁴² Liam Cosgrave. Correspondence with David McCullagh, 12 Aug. 1996.

⁴³ RTÉ Archive Tape A 4184: The Republic of Ireland Act, 1948. Tx 26/3/89.

⁴⁴ N. Mansergh, *Nationalism and Independence* (Cork, 1997), p.187.

⁴⁵ Louie O’Brien. Interview with David McCullagh, 24 July 1996.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Legge in the aftermath of the External Relations Act story as he saw the *Sunday Independent* editor as a good media contact.

In assessing the origins of the External Relations Act story, significance must be placed on the fact that James Dillon was a regular source of political news for the *Sunday Independent* editor. For example, at 4.30pm on Saturday 2 February 1957 Legge called to Dillon's house. The future of the second Inter-party government was threatened after Sean MacBride - and Fianna Fáil - had tabled motions of no confidence. Legge wrote of his conversation with Dillon: 'Talked things general + political situation. Sean MacB never consulted any member of Govt re his censure motion.' Legge arrived at Independent House at 6.40pm, and by 7.30pm he had finished writing the paper's lead story based on information provided by Dillon. The regularity of Dillon as a source was such that in January 1965 when Fianna Fáil minister Donagh O'Malley met Legge in the Shelbourne Hotel he chided him about the Dillon association: 'Talked abt J. Dillon writing editorials for us!!! Said the paper showed bitterness. I pointed to cases of opposite.'

While Legge always insisted that there had been no 'leak' from any cabinet member the balance of probabilities - and evidence of ongoing provision by the politician to his journalistic friend - would suggest that Dillon was the source for the External Relations Act exclusive. Dillon had advised MacBride in the Dáil in February 1948 that movement would be sooner than he contemplated. Discussions had been ongoing in government and political circles without a formal decision being reached. Legge's exclusive forced Costello into action and secured the required outcome for MacBride - delivering a pre-election pledge and confirming his party's republican credentials vis-à-vis Fianna Fáil. Dillon got to see Fine Gael shake-off its negative image as a pro-British party. In this regard Legge's repeated denial of assistance with the story may be explained not just by a desire to protect his source but also to protect the name and reputation of his great friend. If 'womanly intuition' was involved in publishing this great scoop, it was most likely very well informed intuition.

Conclusion

Hector Legge's final night as editor on 31 October 1970 was marked by a thunderous metallic salute from printing staff that rattled throughout Independent House in tandem with a chorus of shouts of 'bravo' from colleagues on duty as the edition of 1 November 1970 was put to bed. The retirement of a man who had spent thirty years in the editorial chair was recorded in a short inside piece accompanied by a photograph of Legge addressing the staff: 'It was a unique farewell for a unique journalist ... a colossus of the Irish newspaper world if there ever was one.'⁴⁷ Drama remained with Legge even in this final period as editor. Controversially, he had declined to publish an exclusive story revealing that an unnamed government minister was involved in gun-running. Apparently 'womanly intuition' was set aside over libel fears arising from "the scoop I could not published".⁴⁸

In typical Legge style he wrote the front-page story in his final edition under his pen name, 'Fergus Wright'. He was followed in the editorial chair by Conor

⁴⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 1 Nov. 1970

⁴⁸ *Sunday Independent*, 15 June 1975

O'Brien (1970-76) and Michael Hand (1976-84). When Aengus Fanning (1984-2012) succeeded Hand another long, and equally controversial and successful, editorship commenced. The world of newspapers was transformed in these years not only in terms of size, layout and design but also editorial priorities. The Sunday market - marked by a single local newspaper from 1905 to 1949 and an effective duopoly over subsequent decades - became an intense battle between numerous broadsheet and tabloid titles. Legge maintained a watchful eye on his former publication – there was frequent correspondence with the new proprietor. In early 1985 he sent a memo to Tony O'Reilly and several other management executives at Independent Newspapers. He bemoaned a recent decision by the *Sunday Independent's* new editor, Aengus Fanning, to drop the regular cookery column, questioned the absence of an obituary page and lamented the neglect of the letters to the editor page. 'A page – plus some advertisements – devoted to letters in the Sunday Independent would be one of the most widely read and, in terms of cost, one of the cheapest.'⁴⁹ While the Sunday market had moved on from Legge's era, even in retirement he still had a sense of the priorities underpinning success at Independent House - high circulation and low costs.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Untitled memo sent by Hector Legge to A.J.F. O'Reilly, Bartle Pitcher, John Meagher, Liam Healy, Joe Hayes and Gerry McGuinness. Undated, but most likely early 1985. HL papers.

⁵⁰ Hector Legge passed away on 3 Nov. 1994.