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Bombers and mavericks: *Magill* magazine's coverage of Northern Ireland, 1977-1990.

Magill magazine was an influential current affairs magazine which was first published in Dublin in October 1977. The magazine was owned by journalist Vincent Browne, who was also its first editor. Having worked in Belfast in the early 1970s Browne saw the conflict in Northern Ireland as one of the main concerns of the news agenda. This article examines *Magill's* coverage of Northern Ireland which was largely driven by an interest in exploring thinking within the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). The magazine's coverage was comprehensive but narrow. Exclusive interviews with republican paramilitaries, who were banned from the broadcast airwaves, were a regular feature as was an interest in hard-line unionist leader, Rev. Ian Paisley. The magazine's journalism in this period has proven to be a valuable historical record of the emergence of the Irish peace process.

Northern Ireland media journalism *Magill* IRA

Introduction

The contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland was just entering its ninth year when *Magill* magazine was first published. The monthly current affairs publication was the brainchild of Vincent Browne, an ambitious and talented reporter who had worked for two of the main newspapers groups in the Irish Republic – the Irish Press Group and Independent Newspapers – during the 1970s.

The first issue of *Magill* was published in October 1977 and the magazine appeared continuously until August 1990. It was generally a monthly publication – for a short period fortnightly – and achieved average sales of approximately 30,000 in its initial years but slipping below 20,000 a month at the time it ceased publishing.ⁱ

At its best, *Magill* was home to some of the most impressive and influential journalism ever produced in Ireland. In 1986 the London-based *Guardian* newspaper recorded: “*Magill* has gained a political influence that has no parallel in Britain nor indeed in European magazine publishing [...] *Magill* is quite simply the best current affairs magazine in the British Isles...” (Berry).

Many of Ireland’s best-known journalists started their careers in *Magill*. Following Browne’s departure as editor in 1983 (although he remained as owner) the editor’s seat

was filled by Colm Tóibín, future novelist of international renown; Fintan O'Toole, a leading literary critic and writer for *The Irish Times*; John Waters, another *Irish Times* columnist; and Brian Trench, a media academic.

Browne was influenced by magazines like the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator* in the United Kingdom but also well designed American publications such as *Newsweek* and *Time*. There were no similar publications in the Irish market although *Hibernia* “flourished” in the 1970s as a fortnightly news and arts magazine (Morash 190). But in Browne’s opinion there was an obvious gap in the market which his new venture would fill. “I was impressed by the vigour of American journalism and how it contrasted to what I thought was the somnolence of Irish journalism,” he admitted (Kavanagh 35).

This article examines the magazine’s coverage of Northern Ireland from 1977 to 1990. Browne identified the conflict in Northern Ireland as one of five themes which dominated the magazine in the 1980s. The others were civil liberties, women’s rights, the redistribution of wealth and the issue of accountability. The contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland had re-emerged in the late 1960s. Over 2,100 people had lost their lives – with many more left injured – by the time the first issue of *Magill* was published.

Millar in his analysis of media management in Northern Ireland has observed that while the media are regarded as a very important element in the struggle for power and resources “there remains a profound dispute about the precise role played by the media in the Northern Ireland conflict” (Millar 246). In a review of early studies of the media

coverage of the conflict, Cottle observed that the research found that “media attention tended to be drawn towards violence, and the violence of the IRA particularly...” (Cottle 285). Subsequent studies pointed to more variation in media reporting influenced by factors such as different newspaper styles and readership expectations. Nevertheless, the evidence from *Magill's* journalism in the 1977 to 1990 period shows an attraction towards those favouring violence and a hard-line political perspective. In an era when republican voices were silent on most media outlets *Magill* provided a rare outlet for their representatives to air their views. The various editors of the magazine pursued stories for justifiable editorial reasons. But like any media organisation, *Magill* had to win readers to be commercially viable. In this battle to secure circulation there was an advantage in that the focus on the IRA and unionist hardliners delivered a sense of drama on the page. Nevertheless, the analysis of the magazine's reportage endorses Wolsfeld's more recent assessment that the news media in Northern Ireland is generally serious and responsible while avoiding sensationalism (Wolsfeld 177-79).

The discussion which follows examines Browne's own career as a reporter in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s before focusing on the main areas of *Magill's* coverage including making space for republican voices in a mainstream media publication, explaining the post-1981 policy shifts within the republican movement and giving comprehensive coverage to a number of controversial episodes.

Vincent Browne and Northern Ireland

From the latter half of the 1960s the news agenda about Northern Ireland was dominated by political instability and increasing acts of violence. The pro-British unionist majority government in Belfast had been slow to respond to the civil rights agenda of the minority nationalist community and showed signs of being unable to govern. A split in the hard-line republican movement, which favoured a united Ireland, led to the emergence of the Provisional IRA in late 1969, and the new organisation quickly proved to be a potent military threat.

In response to this situation the main newspapers in Dublin – and RTÉ, the Irish national broadcaster – all increased their staffing levels north of the border. The British media also had a significant presence which is not surprising, as analysis of journalism and conflict areas has shown that “acts of violence and terrorism were so irresistibly newsworthy” (Sonwalkar 220). The so-called Troubles was the biggest domestic story ever covered by the Irish media.

Despite, the dangerous environment the importance of the news story coupled with an associated excitement acted as a magnet for many ambitious young journalists. Veteran Channel 4 News presenter Jon Snow has described being sent to Northern Ireland as, “my first reporting adventure” (Snow 74). Kevin Myers, who was recruited as a junior reporter by RTÉ admitted to being “desperate to get up to the North before the Troubles ended” (Myers 13). Vincent Browne was also in this category. He had first ventured north on assignment in late 1969 for *Nusight*, a short-lived Dublin-based student current affairs magazine, which he edited for a handful of issues before its demise in mid-1970.

The atmosphere in Northern Ireland was hostile; deep bitterness existed between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Death, injury, bombs and bullets had become staples of daily life as well as the daily news agenda: “The assignment was tough. Hours were long and events, by definition, were unpredictable. All that the on-the-ground staff could manage to do was keep pace with news events as they unfolded,” one editor wrote (Brady 84).

Browne had no difficulty in putting his personal views about the Northern conflict on the record. In early 1970 at a meeting of the Historical Society in Trinity College, Dublin. He favoured an internal solution to the conflict but he recognised that it was an unlikely outcome due to the sectarian character of Northern Ireland. “The very existence of that entity creates and festers sectarianism and conflict – for there to be a resolution of these tensions a broader context had to be created and created in circumstances of certainty,” Browne argued (Browne January 1985: 11).

Following the demise of *Nusight* in 1970, Browne was appointed Northern Ireland Editor with the Irish Press Group. He established a reputation as a solid news reporter. He was also an opinionated commentator on television and radio programmes. Not long after his arrival in Belfast he was a guest on an Ulster Television programme along with Austin Currie of the SDLP, Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and two senior politicians from the Irish Republic, Conor Cruise O’Brien of the Labour Party and Garret FitzGerald of Fine Gael. The atmosphere in studio during the live programme was heated. Currie accused Paisley of inciting violence while was followed by an exchange of

words between the DUP politician and FitzGerald over extradition between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Paisley decided that he had had enough and walked out during the live transmission. As he exited the studio, he remarked: “Four against one isn’t fair.” Browne continued the discussion – and not for the last time in his career he sided with an unusual ally – as he argued that Paisley was right to ask the Republic to give de jure recognition to Northern Ireland “as it deserves in any realistic terms” (Anon. 1970: 4).

Browne had plenty of front page stories and inside analysis articles in this period as the Irish Press Group, like the other media outlets, attempted to explain what was happening in Northern Ireland. There was peer recognition for his work. He was named journalist of the year in 1971 – having “produced an inside story on many occasions” according to the judges of the *Hibernia* Press Awards (Anon. 1972: 6).

Controversy was never far away. In September 1971 he had appeared before Belfast’s Magistrates Court charged with possession of a firearm. Browne had written in the *Sunday Press* on 12 September 1971 about IRA allegations that machine guns were being manufactured in a Belfast engineering works by Protestant extremists. He had been shown a gun and took photographs which were also used in the newspaper. His lawyer said the journalist was “technically guilty” but that he had acted with integrity: “It was a journalistic exercise.” Browne admitted the offence. “I am not nor have I ever been a member of an illegal organisation,” he told the court. The judge fined him £20 (Anon. 1971: 10).

The bizarre episode was early evidence that he was prepared to be an unconventional reporter. The three year stint in Belfast provided a good understanding of the various issues involved. He eventually returned to Dublin and was working with the *Sunday Independent* newspaper when *Magill* was first published in 1977.

Talking to the IRA

The BBC journalist Peter Taylor has noted that in the latter half of the 1970s, “Northern Ireland was gradually relegated to the second halves of the news bulletins and the inside columns of the newspapers. Ulster ceased to be a story” (Taylor 69). There is little doubt but that there was a public weariness with the conflict, and as Morash remarked, “at times it sometimes seemed that there was too much news from Northern Ireland” (Morash 183-84). The attention of the Irish media, however, remained strong despite varying levels of domestic public interest and Taylor’s perspective on British media interest. Moreover, it has been suggested that, “the media in the Republic tended to focus less on the violence in the North than the British media, and more on the social and political context...” (Cottle 286).

The early issues of *Magill* had a strong emphasis towards the Northern Ireland conflict. By October 1977 when the magazine was first published an attempt at cross-community power sharing had collapsed in Belfast while the IRA’s military campaign continued across Northern Ireland and also in mainland Britain. The first issue in October 1977 was

dominated by Browne's assessment of the relationship between the Dublin and London governments, an interview with Senator Edward Kennedy about the United States view of Northern Ireland and opinion poll results on attitudes to a united Ireland.

At this time, the Irish broadcast media was operating under the Section 31 legislative ban which excluded republicans from the airwaves. The broadcasting ban had been introduced in 1971 and directed RTÉ, which was the sole licensed broadcaster in the Irish Republic, to refrain from broadcasting "any matter that could be calculated to promote the aims and activities of any organisation which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attaining of any particular objective by violent means" (White 37). There were intermittent objections to the Section 31 restrictions, including unsuccessful court challenges, but the ban remained in place until January 1994 (See Horgan 2001).

Not that republicans were deprived of all media opportunities as the ban did not apply to the print media. But despite this fact, in her analysis of British media coverage Curtis found "representatives of the IRA and the INLA are virtually excluded from the airwaves and rarely profiled in the press..." (Curtis 138). There was a similar hostile attitude to the republican constituency in the mainstream Dublin print media. Against this background, more than any other print publication, *Magill* provided a platform where the republican viewpoint was recorded. From 1977 to 1990 there were several interviews with IRA members which now provide a valuable historical record of the evolution of thinking within that paramilitary organisation. The Northern Ireland conflict was an obvious news story for a current affairs publication but covering the IRA also made commercial sense

especially when other news outlets were either ignoring or marginalising a major participant in the story.

The August 1978 issue of *Magill* led with what was billed as “an exclusive authorised interview with the IRA”. Browne had traveled to Belfast in mid-July where he met a senior member of the Provisional IRA who had been given permission by the organisation’s army council to speak on their behalf. The man – who was known to Browne – had joined the IRA in 1970 at the start of the contemporary conflict. During the wide ranging interview the IRA man provided answers of considerable authority. He spoke about the reorganisation of the movement to prevent British intelligence infiltrating its structures; the development of new bombing making capabilities and about the intention to resume attacks in Britain.

Browne reproduced the interview in question and answer format, a presentation style he favoured and used frequently in subsequent years. The content clearly showed that the prospects for peace were bleak: “We now regard talks [with the British] as entirely futile and the only time we will talk to the British again is when they come to us and ask our help to secure their immediate departure from Ireland” (Browne August 1978: 22). Browne asked about the IRA use of kneecapping and other forms of ‘punishments’ – “Is this a foretaste of the kind of society the Provisionals would impose if they ever came to power?” The reply received can only be described as brutal:

We don't have the options of a fair judicial system or a compassionate penal system, we necessarily have to employ crude and admittedly somewhat barbarous methods to protect the ordinary people in our areas. We have acted only at the behest of the people. It is not any good to us to be inflicting unnecessary hardship on the communities which give us most support. They call on us to do something about the rapists, the child molesters and the criminals. If we ignore these pleas and at the same time refuse to allow the conventional police forces into the areas, we lose credibility (Browne August 1978: 27).

The *Magill* interview was a rare opportunity to gain a specific insight into thinking within the IRA especially as the Section 31 broadcasting ban meant republicans were not interviewed on radio or television programmes in the Irish Republic. Moreover, few national newspapers at the time afforded the IRA the space to outline its perspective in such an unmediated environment. The question and answer format also had the advantage of allowing the IRA interviewee to comprehensively make his argument. Readers would have taken little hope from the interview that the situation in Northern Ireland was about to improve in the short term.

Browne was not an apologist for those who sponsored violence in Northern Ireland. The April 1979 issue of *Magill* featured Airey Neave and a photograph of his bombed out car outside the Palace of Westminster in London. Neave, a veteran of World War II and a Conservative Party politician, died in the bomb attack on 30 March 1979. A small republican paramilitary group, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), claimed

responsibility for the killing. Browne secured another “exclusive interview” with a representative of the illegal organisation. Billed as “Ireland’s Newest Terror Force”, Browne observed that, “with the spectacular assassination of Airey Neave within the precincts of the House of Commons, the INLA has established itself as a significant player in the Northern cauldron” (Browne April 1979a: 5).

Alongside a background piece on the emergence of the organisation formed in 1975, Browne again used the question and answer format in publishing the full text of the interview material. The INLA accepted responsibility for killing Neave. The magazine dealt honestly with its readers in flagging that the interview had been “checked for accuracy by a member of the INLA headquarters staff” although there was no indication if any changes had been sought or given during this process (Browne April 1979b: 4).

The situation in Northern Ireland led to three cover stories during the first two years after *Magill* first appeared – along with the IRA and INLA interviews, the 10th anniversary of the commencement of the contemporary conflict was marked with a 20-page feature. The text was sparse, being a straight narrative account of the period since 1968 with the bleak conclusion: “The Provisionals say the war will be further intensified in the near future. There seems no prospect of a political settlement” (Browne and Myers October 1978: 32). What was striking about the feature was the strength of the photographs – “a visual account of these ten years by some of the world’s outstanding cameramen” (Browne and Myers October 1978: 14). One poignant image captured the partially burnt face of a young child. “A generation of children had been reared in conditions of violence and

indifference to human life. The consequences are unknown,” Browne, and his colleague Kevin Myers, wrote in an accompanying article (Browne and Myers October 1978: 29).

The cover story on the August 1982 issue was headlined, “2002 – the IRA’s Twenty Year War. A sustained bombing campaign in England is part of the IRA’s plans for a war into the next century.” The issue came out only weeks after an IRA attack in London in which 10 soliders and 50 people were injured. An editorial decision was taken to respond to what was a significant news event. In the accompanying article Browne provided an assessment of the IRA strategy in targeting mainland Britain. He did not know it at that time but the authorities in Dublin were tapping his telephone. The activity emerged later in controversial circumstances when it was confirmed that a tap was on Browne’s phone for eight years from February 1975 to February 1983 (Tynan 1). When Browne was shown the transcripts they included a conversation with one leading republican although many had nothing to do with security considerations. Compensation was subsequently paid to Browne and to two other journalists who also had their phones illegally tapped in part of this period.

The Hunger Strikes and the nascent Irish peace process

In March 1981, Bobby Sands, a republican prisoner in the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland refused food. The hunger strike action was a development in a protest campaign which had been underway since 1976 when the British government introduced its policy

of ‘criminalisation’ by refusing to recognise that there was any political dimension to the crimes or convictions of republicans. Ten republican prisoners – including Sands who was elected as a Westminster MP in this period – died on the hunger strikes protest.

Browne was not content to be a by-stander on the prison crisis. He was publicly associated with the prison rights campaign and spoke at a number of meetings. “The H Block protest deserves to be supported, even if it incurs the accusation that by doing so one is supporting the organisations whose members are most directly affected,” an editorial stated (Anon. August 1980: 4). As editor and publisher, Browne determined the magazine’s editorial stance but despite his personal commitment to the prison issue *Magill* did not campaign excessively on the subject. The magazine published a considerable number of articles on the hunger strikes although the controversy was deemed to merit few cover page leads. A rare example was a cover featuring British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the headline, “H Block Crisis Thatcher sweating it out... Prisoners to go on dying.” Commercial considerations may have influenced the choice of cover image. Throughout the magazine’s history, regardless of who was editor, Browne exercised a veto over the front cover image and design.ⁱⁱ For all magazines competing on a crowded newsstand catching the eye of a potential purchaser is vital, and it is even more so for a magazine like *Magill* with a relatively small, if influential, sales and readership base. For large sections of the population south of the border, Northern Ireland was a switch-off, and this reality undoubtedly influenced the decision not to make the hunger strikes the main front cover story although throughout this period in numerous editions the prison crisis was given prominence on the magazine’s inside pages.

One of the unintended consequences of the hunger strike period was the politicisation of the republican movement and the re-emergence of Sinn Féin into electoral politics. Internal discussions about a ‘dual strategy’ of military activism and political engagement had been underway prior to the hunger strikes but without a clear sense of future direction. Brian Trench – a future editor of the magazine – wrote an insightful analysis article about the 1978 Sinn Féin Ard Fheis and the contradictory strategy of balancing electoralism and militarism.

The hall erupted in wild cheering when a delegate suggested that a British industrialist might be picked out and given 24 hours to leave; if he didn’t do so, he should be slung from the nearest ESB [electricity] pole. The same applause was given the delegate who said that freedom would only be achieved by the gun. And for everyone who described the republican prisoners as the ‘freedom fighters’, the ‘finest of our men’ or proclaimed that victory in the fight against British imperialism was imminent there was a similarly enthusiastic reception (Trench 44).

The electoral success during the 1981 hunger strike period showed a constituency of support for republican candidates irrespective of the IRA campaign of violence. Following the success of first Bobby Sands and later Owen Carron in securing election to the Westminster parliament – and other prisoner candidates in a general election in the Irish Republic – Sinn Féin reentered the electoral domain. At the Westminster elections

in 1983 Gerry Adams took a seat in West Belfast. In July 1983 – with Colm Tóibín as editor – the magazine sought to explore the dual strategy of politics and violence. A front cover led with the headline “Provos: the Next Phase. The armalite and the ballot box: the Provos Interviewed” and, in a clever twist, the two photographs used included republican leader Gerry Adams and a balaclava covered IRA member.

On this occasion, Michael Farrell spoke with the two sides of the republican movement – Adams representing Sinn Féin and two unidentified spokespersons authorised to speak on behalf of the IRA leadership. The IRA men welcomed Sinn Féin’s electoral successes: “The results have been a morale boost for the IRA and have revived the enthusiasm of any Volunteers who were enclined to flag. We see the Sinn Féin vote as a clear vote for the Brits to get out” (Farrell 7). Victory at the ballot box was not part of a strategy to replace military activism with political involvement: “The military struggle will not slow down to relate to Sinn Féin’s political activity. If anything, subject to logistical considerations, the war is likely to be stepped up” (Farrell 9). Adams was equally hardline. He foresaw little difficulty in co-existing the dual strategy.

The IRA does not need an electoral mandate for armed struggle. It derives its mandate from the presence of the British in the six counties... [Sinn Féin] stood on four clear points: against the British connection and the loyalist veto, for a democratic socialist republic and defending the right of people to engage in armed struggle (Farrell 13).

The long-term Adams' political strategy was to replace the SDLP as the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland alongside "making considerable inroads" in political life south of the border. Significantly, Farrell's interview with Adams hinted at the debate underway in the republican movement about fuller involvement in politics in the Irish Republic – Sinn Féin candidates in 1983 still adhered to a longstanding abstentionist policy in relation to taking any seats won in the Dublin parliament. The policy was widely seen as limiting the party's electoral growth as many voters were unwilling to back candidates who would not fully represent their interests through full participation in the parliamentary process. Adams was clearly moving in the direction of change:

Republicans have to come up with a strategy which accepts the fact that most people in the 26-counties accept the Free State institutions are legitimate. [...] Sinn Féin does have a position, however, that we will not give recognition to Leinster House. I can't be pragmatic about that. While that remains the position I will support it (Farrell 17).

There were, however, different perspectives within the republican leadership and *Magill* did well in reflecting the various strands of opinion. In the September 1984 issue, Gene Kerrigan reported on a belief in republican circles that Sinn Féin's electoral support had peaked and that "only a continuous and indefinitely prolonged military campaign will convince the British government that the state is ungovernable while the British remain" (Kerrigan 8).

With the benefit of hindsight it is now possible to show that the dominant faction in the republican movement was edging in the direction of political activism and that, in this period in the 1980s, what is now known as the Irish peace process was born. The leadership strategy may not have been fully developed but within a matter of years Adams and his colleagues were engaged in secret talks separately with the British and Irish governments which ultimately paved the way for the 1994 IRA ceasefire, the 1998 Belfast Agreement, and Sinn Féin eclipsing the IRA as the dominant force in the republican movement. If those republicans who Kerrigan spoke with in the summer of 1984 had any idea of the future direction of their organisation they certainly gave nothing away. Yet like other media outlets, *Magill* failed to grasp the direction in which events would move or, indeed, to get a whiff of the separate clandestine discussions taking place between senior political figures in Dublin and London and those in the republican movement associated with the IRA.

The decision to allow successful Sinn Féin candidates to take their seats in the Irish Republic's parliament was eventually taken in November 1986 but not before the organisation split and many senior members left to form a new republican organisation. The debate at a Sinn Féin Ard Fheis (conference) was covered by RTÉ in the context of the Section 31 ban which precluded interviews with the key participants. Despite the historic nature of the gathering the archive of the RTÉ television news report on the conference today has a sound track from another event entirely – resultantly, the Irish national broadcaster has no sound recordings from the event as this writer discovered when seeking to listen to reports of the conference proceedings. “Who Tried To Stop

The War? The Provos: The New Split' was the headline on the *Magill* front cover which used an image of a car bomb exploding alongside pictures of leading republicans, Martin McGuinness and Dáithí Ó Conaill. The deep divisions in the republican movement were comprehensively assessed.

The split in Sinn Féin is about much more than abstentionism. [...] the abstention debate was the final step in a power struggle for control of the political and military wings of the republican movement. Speaking for the [Sinn Féin] Ard Comhairle, and with all the authority of the IRA Army Council, Martin McGuinness made this clear (Browne and O'Toole 13 November 1986).

The official Irish government policy towards Sinn Féin remained one of marginalisation throughout the 1980s. The Section 31 broadcasting ban which kept republicans off the airwaves was the principle mechanism for implementing the policy. The focus which *Magill* put on the IRA was an attempt to rebalance this situation and also to give the magazine's readers a deeper understanding of the motivations which underpinned the evolving republican strategy. The downside of this perspective, as is discussed in the following section, was a limited focus on the overall situation in Northern Ireland.

Reporting Beyond the Republican Movement

The emphasis in *Magill's* reporting on Northern Ireland undoubtedly focused on Sinn Féin and the IRA. A profile of nationalist politician Seamus Mallon in the February 1986

issue after he won a Westminster seat was a rare example of attention being placed on the SDLP. During the same period in the mid-1980s political journalist Olivia O'Leary provided several articles which threw light on the deepening relationship of cooperation between the governments in Dublin and London. But *Magill* was more attracted to the mavericks. The magazine's interest lay with the extremes – the IRA on one side, loyalists and hardline unionist leaders like Ian Paisley on the other. The reportage was not, however, sensationalist. The content was serious and responsible but through this limited editorial focus the wider social and political context to the conflict was generally neglected.

Indeed, if the magazine's coverage of the conflict was to be faulted it was that it rarely went beyond the macro-political situation to give its readers a sense of life on the ground in Northern Ireland. The focus on the nationalist side was firmly placed on machinations in Sinn Féin and the IRA while on the unionist side Ian Paisley was a favourite of the magazine. A rare attempt to provide an insight into life for those living in Northern Ireland came when Fionnuala O'Connor wrote about intimidation against Catholic families. O'Connor's article concentrated on the plight of the Dornan family who were forced to leave their home of 22-years due to loyalist threats at the time of the annual 12th of July Orange Order marching celebrations:

First there were phone calls. Then stones through the windows, upstairs and down. On the 11th night, a mob broke the small garden fence down and beat up 48-year-old Dermot Dornan when he came out to try and talk to them. He knew

that was silly but he's a reasonable man. They threw things through the windows broke the lights, damaged furniture. And then came the anonymous letter. Printed in biro, postmark Craigavon. 'Your son is a Republican sympathiser and a Republican activist. If he is not out of the estate in seven days, we will remove him. Ulster Freedom Fighters.' The youngest boy [one of four boys] in the family grins in embarrassment rolling his eyes as he quotes the letter's description of himself. They are moving to Poleglass [in Belfast] (O'Connor September 1986).

Alongside the republican movement, Paisley was the other participant in the Northern Ireland story to receive considerable editorial attention in *Magill*. In late July 1979 Browne arrived at the Free Presbyterian Church on Ravenhill Road in Belfast to meet Paisley who as well as being leader of the DUP was also moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church. The context was a possible visit by Pope John Paul II to Northern Ireland at the time of his journey to the Irish Republic in the autumn of 1979. Paisley dominated hardline unionism and his dual role as political and religious leader provided a controversial combination of anti-nationalism and anti-Catholicism.

In Paisley, Browne met a reluctant interviewee. "I know it's another hatchet job you want to do on me, but I don't care. I've survive many a hatchet job," the hardline unionist leader warned (Browne August 1979: 35). Browne faced a difficult assignment. "We skirmish around some of the points made earlier but the responses are mainly a reiteration of what has been said. There is a personal exhortation to me to read the New Testament because 'there is no salvation without Christ' and 'I want to see you in heaven'" (Browne

August 1979: 35). Paisley opposed the idea of a papal visit to Northern Ireland based on religious, political and constitutional arguments. This version of Paisley was far removed from the apparently consensus seeking politician elected First Minister of Northern Ireland in May 2007 in the Belfast Agreement inspired power-sharing government.

When the Anglo-Irish Agreement – which increased cooperation between the Dublin and London governments – was signed in late 1985, Fintan O’Toole traveled north to get the views of DUP members. Ten pages were devoted to O’Toole’s report which made for chilling reading as DUP figures articulated the deeply conservative nature of Paisley’s cocktail of religion and politics. “Fire and brimstone, the Last Days, Armageddon, the images are deeply ingrained in the collective mind of the Democratic Unionist Party,” O’Toole wrote (O’Toole 20). One of those featured, Jim Wells – a 28 year old Queen’s University graduate and DUP public representative – offered a revealing insight into a mindset which would have been totally alien to most *Magill* readers south of the border.

I think we regard ourselves as more British than the British. I think we’re the first to stand for the National Anthem and to show respect for the Queen, even more so than many mainland British subjects, many of whom have intermarried with Pakistanis and West Indians and allowed a dilution of their Britishness. We at least have maintained our Britishness, even if other parts of Britain have wavered somewhat (O’Toole 21).

Covering Controversy

By September 1986 Fintan O'Toole had departed as Editor and Browne was once more seeking someone to sit behind his desk in the *Magill* offices in central Dublin. The position was vacant for five issues until January 1987 – familiar Browne themes got the magazine through this latest period of hiatus. “Yes the alternative government would be worse” screamed one frontpage headline while one over-masthead strap line – “a woman’s story of 10 year in jail” – hinted at what was a classic *Magill* piece of reportage.

In the October 1986 issue Jenny McGeever delivered a comprehensive off-the-news-agenda interview with Mairéad Farrell who had just been released from prison after serving a decade long sentence for involvement with the IRA. McGeever’s article, while never adopting a judgemental tone, allowed Farrell sufficient space to ensure that the reader had an insight into the mentality which drove a committed IRA member. The west Belfast woman was 19 years of age when she set out on a republican bombing mission. The target was a hotel outside Belfast, a favoured location for members of the security forces. “It was never our intention to kill anyone. That’s why we gave the warning. Hotels were political and economic targets... I was just carrying out an operation” (McGeever 9).

Farrell was carrying a colt 45 as was her colleague Sean McDermott. The third member of the IRA unit, Kieron Doherty had a magnum pistol. McGeever wrote: “They ordered everyone in the hotel to lie down, planted three [five-pound] bombs saying they were from the Irish Republican Army, shouted a warning, telling everyone they had time to get

out. And then they ran” (McGeever 8). Nobody was injured as the bombs ripped through the hotel building. But word of the attack had reached the security forces. Farrell was arrested. McDermott shot dead. Doherty was also arrested but later died on the 1981 hunger strike in the Maze Prison after having been elected to the Irish parliament.

Farrell was subsequently given a 14-year prison sentence. McKeever’s recorded Farrell’s involvement in the prison protest campaign including spending 13 months on the ‘no-wash’ protest and going 19 days without food. The article delivered a unique insight into the prison regime as experienced by republican prisoners, and more particularly imprisoned women members of the IRA. There was little sentimentality in the writing which allowed Farrell tell her story without propagandistic overtones. The piece is a good example of how a work of journalism can turn into an invaluable historical record, in this case of a regime which must have dehumanised everybody involved. “You stand there nude and freezing while they feel every item of your clothing... you know, shirt cuffs, or sleeves or hems on jeans in case you’ve hidden something. It’s a very degrading experience,” Farrell said (McGeever 12).

The McGeever interview provided *Magill* readers with insight which was not found in mainstream reporting of events in Northern Ireland. McGeever was a young journalist who a little over a year later would become embroiled in public controversy over a breach of the Section 31 broadcasting ban while working as a reporter with RTÉ. Her radio package included the voice of Martin McGuinness as the coffins of the three IRA members shot dead in controversial circumstances in Gibraltar in March 1988 were

brought to Northern Ireland (See Horgan 2002). One of those shot dead in Gibraltar was Mairéad Farrell.

A Thames television documentary *Death on the Rock* featured a witness who added a dramatic twist to the Gibraltar story. Carmen Proetta revealed that from the window of her flat she had seen three men emerge from a police car and shoot repeatedly at Farrell and at one of her colleagues in spite of their having their heads raised “like giving themselves up” (Waters 19). The description, if true, had a huge impact on the episode as told by the British side. Proetta then faced the British press, elements of which waged a campaign to discredit her as a credible witness. She was the ‘Tart of Gib’ according to the *Sun* newspaper which alleged she had worked as a prostitute, run an escort agency and was married to a drug pusher. Proetta denied the allegations.

The June 1988 issue of *Magill* featured what can best be described as good old-fashioned reporting with John Waters, who was now editor, analysing the British tabloid press stories and contacting those named as sources to confirm the version of events which they were reported as telling various newspapers. The exercise threw up some serious problems with several articles. The police officer quoted in the *Sun* article told Waters, “you can take it that the story is inaccurate.” The local freelance reporter who had assisted the British tabloid accepted that the information he had supplied was “greatly exaggerated”. The tabloid journalist who wrote the story was also confronted by Waters, and he accepted that his story might have contained some inaccuracies or misinformation.

It's all very well with hindsight to say you could have checked and rechecked the facts, and in an ideal world one would certainly like to be able to do so. But when one is up against deadlines and working against the clock this doesn't always prove possible. You have to rely on instinct and what your sources on the ground are able to tell you. Maybe it's a bit hit-and-miss but that is the nature of the business (Waters 20).

Several months later, in October 1988 Waters along with Michael O'Higgins used the evidence from a 19-day British public inquiry to retell the story of the Gibraltar killings. Derek Speirs' photography of Mairéad Farrell – taken in October 1986 for the McGeever interview – featured this time on the magazine front cover while inside Waters and O'Higgins worked through what had emerged from the inquiry to provide a comprehensive 22-page anatomy of the four key hours on the Sunday afternoon when the IRA members were shot dead. “It all comes down in the end to the twenty-odd shots, fired by three men, over an aggregate if not an actual period of ten seconds, which left three people dead,” O'Higgins and Waters wrote (O'Higgins and Waters 23).

An academic report into the media's coverage of the Gibraltar killings was reproduced over two separate issues in early 1989. The decision to publish the report in full became a recurring feature of the magazine in its final period. Early in 1989, *Playboy* magazine published an interview with Gerry Adams, Danny Morrison and an unnamed IRA member. The magazine was banned in the Irish Republic which limited its local readership although the contents were reported upon in the national newspapers. The

interview was reproduced over 12 pages in *Magill*: “We do so with some reluctance for, in our view, the interviewer was far too facilitatory and partisan. But we felt it worthwhile giving our readers the opportunity to read the piece nonetheless” (Anon. March 1989: 3). The sentiment may have been worthy but like the Gibraltar report there was a sense of filling pages in a publication increasingly lacking in staff and in resources.

In the similar vein, questions could also be asked about the decision to publish what was described as a ‘death list’, essentially a list of those who had lost their lives throughout 1989 in Northern Ireland. “We do this as a reaction against the numbed reaction of most people nowadays to those killings regarding them as merely additions to the horrific statistics of the conflict there” (Anon. March 1989: 3). No matter how well intended the exercise, there was a sense this the regular item was guaranteed to fill space. Each of the short entries provided information about the individual killed but the lack of resources at the magazine meant the biographical information – and details of the killing – never went beyond those published in the daily newspapers.

Conclusion

In its final phase of publication the focus on Northern Ireland continued but without any of the innovation of previous years. From 1983 onwards Browne was attempting to combine editing a monthly magazine with the demands of a weekly newspaper, the *Sunday Tribune*. He also had wider managerial demands as publisher of both magazine and newspaper. By the late *Magill* had become a pale imitation of its former self. The 20th anniversary of the arrival of British soldiers in Northern Ireland made the cover

story in August 1989. The material inside, however, amounted to an editorially slight two-page assessment of the British army's role in the North alongside recollection pieces from some of those involved in the civil rights campaign in the 1960s. The magazine was never to regain its editorial zeitgeist, and in this period it also faced financial pressures compounded when colour advertising – where it initially had an advantage over daily newspapers – became an option in most national publications due to technological advances. In August 1990 amid increasing financial difficulties the decision was taken to cease publication.

The magazine's coverage of Northern Ireland was narrow but comprehensive in the areas focused upon. The interviews with representatives of paramilitary organisations provided editorial material not featured in the mainstream media, and operated as a counterpoint of sorts to the restrictive broadcasting ban on republican representatives. Moreover, during the 1980s the magazine increasingly put the spotlight on the highly nuanced debate that was underway in the republican movement about the merits of the decision to engage with electoral politics while continuing to support military activism. The indepth coverage of Gibraltar case was the type of analysis which set *Magill* apart from other print media publications.

At no stage during the 1977 to 1990 period did *Magill* have the staff or the resources to provide comprehensive coverage of the situation in Northern Ireland. The magazine never had a designated Northern Ireland correspondent. It relied heavily upon work commissioned from freelance contributors and the passionate interest in Northern Ireland

held by its publisher and sometime editor. In a small publication like *Magill* the influence of a single individual can significantly impact upon an editorial line. This was the reality in *Magill* where the agenda was very much determined by Browne.

This situation is not to devalue the study of publications like *Magill*. Indeed, by examining the evolution of the magazine's editorial stance on a specific issue it has been possible to test Cottle's hypothesis about media attention being drawn towards violence – and IRA violence particularly. There is certainly validity in this assertion in the case of *Magill* although the magazine's reportage was consistently substantial which supports – from the perspective of a Republic of Ireland publication – Wolsfeld's conclusion about media in Northern Ireland being responsible in their coverage. The material devoted to Northern Ireland in *Magill* was not just of a responsible nature but also offered a continuous outlet for republican voices in a period in which they were denied access elsewhere in mainstream publications and also by broadcast stations. In this way the magazine's reportage, in particular, tracked the evolution of thinking within the IRA and Sinn Fein during the 1980s, and today its legacy is a valuable historical record of the initial days of what is now-known as the Irish peace process.

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ⁱ The magazine re-emerged in 1997 for a further eleven issues under Browne's stewardship but was sold in 1998, and since then has gone through two ownership changes. It has most recently been a quarterly publication but bearing little resemblance in content to the magazine which is considered in this article.

ⁱⁱ The relationship between Browne and his editors has been recorded in interviews conducted by the current author with Colm Tóibín, Fintan O'Toole, John Waters and Brian Trench.