

‘An American newspaperman’: transatlantic influences at the *Irish Press* in the 1930s

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Having attained its independence from Britain via the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, the Irish Free State engaged in a period of nation building to unify the nation after the independence conflict (1919–21) and the civil war (1922–23).¹ There emerged, in the words of one historian, ‘an absorption with abstractions such as Sovereignty, the Faith, Republicanism, the Language’ wherein the press ‘contented itself with the reportage of events and the propagandist reiteration of the familiar terms of Irish political and cultural debate until these categories became mere counters and slogans often remote from any actualities’.² It was not always this way: Irish journalism had initially led the way in investigative journalism in Europe. Prior to independence certain Irish newspapers embraced the ‘new journalism’ techniques of interviews and investigative journalism to highlight what was viewed as the corrupt nature of British rule. In 1878 the *Freeman’s Journal* published William O’Brien’s series ‘Christmas on the Galtees’ that exposed the plight of the rack-rent tenants of the Buckley estate in County Tipperary. By interviewing tenants and investigating their living conditions O’Brien shone a light on the negative effects absentee landlordism had on tenants.³ And, while the new journalism is inextricably linked with W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, whose pioneering investigation into London childhood prostitution in 1885 has achieved iconic status, as Margot Gayle Backus has pointed out, William O’Brien’s exposé in *United Ireland* of the Dublin Castle sex scandal, which involved sexual impropriety among government officials, predates Stead’s series. She also noted that the failed libel suits that arose from the series would have been closely monitored by editors and journalists in London. Their timing, argued Backus, ‘strongly implies a connection between . . . O’Brien’s right to publish and the new mode of investigative scandal that Stead launched the following year’. Prior to O’Brien’s series Stead’s actions ‘would have been unthinkable’.⁴

But, while using the techniques of new journalism to expose the rack-renting and sexual peccadilloes of the colonisers was one thing, after independence there occurred a sustained campaign waged by the Catholic Church against the new journalism that, in Ireland made itself most visible in the form of imported British newspapers. The new journalism’s emphasis on crime, scandal, investigative journalism, and campaigning journalism did not endear it to a religious hierarchy concerned with preserving the morality of the island of saints and scholars. In 1926 the Irish government agreed to a request from the Catholic hierarchy to initiate an inquiry into evil literature; the result of which was the Censorship of Publications Act 1929, which allowed the minister for justice to ban any newspaper that ‘devoted an unduly large proportion of space to the publication of matter relating to crime’ and also curtailed reportage of certain court cases. There followed the banning of six British newspapers and the prosecution of an Irish regional newspaper for falling foul of the new law.⁵ It was in such an environment that Irish newspapers operated in the Free State.

Owned by former Irish Party MP, William Martin Murphy, the *Irish Independent* adopted the elements of the new journalism that seemed safe – display advertising, condensed reportage, illustrations, and serialisations – but studiously rejected any element – gossip,

¹ Independence, which was accompanied by the partition of the island, was followed by a civil war in the Free State. The Free State remained a member of the British Commonwealth until a republic was declared in 1949. The six counties of Northern Ireland remained under British jurisdiction.

² Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history* (Dublin, 2004), pp 192–3.

³ Felix M. Larkin, ‘Green shoots of the new journalism in the *Freeman’s Journal*, 1877–90’ in Karen Steele and Michael de Nie (eds), *Ireland and the new journalism* (New York, 2014), pp 35–55.

⁴ Margot Gayle Backus, *Scandal work: James Joyce, the new journalism, and the home rule newspaper wars* (Indiana, 2013), pp 62–3. For an account of the Dublin Castle scandal see Myles Dungan, *Mr Parnell’s Rottweiler – censorship and the United Ireland newspaper, 1881–91* (Dublin, 2014).

⁵ See Mark O’Brien, *The fourth estate: journalism in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2017), pp 46–50.

scandal, crime reportage and investigative journalism – that might cause controversy or condemnation. Politically, the *Independent*, having supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, backed – though was never formally associated with – the pro-Treaty party that formed the Free State’s government from 1922 to 1932. Thus the title represented the worldview of those who viewed the Anglo-Irish Treaty as the freedom to achieve greater freedom. In stark contrast stood the *Irish Press* which was established in 1931 to articulate the political views of the defeated anti-Treaty side, which, in the guise of Eamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil, took power in 1932. The role played by the *Irish Press* in bringing the party to power cannot be easily measured but it played a key role in countering the negative and relentless criticism in other titles of de Valera’s rejection of the Treaty in 1921. As the organ of the political party that would, more than any other party, hold power in Ireland over the course of the twentieth century, the *Irish Press* articulated the party’s views on Irish unity, the need to revive the Irish language, the primacy of rural living, anti-urbanism, and economic self-sufficiency and established these tenets as the dominant orthodoxies of Irish political life to which all other political parties and newspapers had to react. The third national title, the *Irish Times*, was established in 1859 as a pro-union organ and as the voice of the southern unionist minority. As the voice of that minority the title took its responsibility seriously and sought to highlight and possibly mitigate any legislation that it viewed as impinging on the civil rights of the southern unionist, Protestant community. In the early decades of the Free State, the title supported the pro-Treaty faction of Irish politics simply because supporting the alternative was unthinkable.

Given the primacy afforded to the Irish constitutional question in the press, and the deference in all matters to the Catholic Church, there was no realistic prospect of mainstream Irish journalism addressing topics such as the material conditions under which Irish people lived. However, in October 1936, the *Irish Press* engaged in a sustained investigation into the conditions endured by the inhabitants of Dublin’s inner-city tenements. The brainchild of the paper’s American general manager, John J. Harrington, the series ran for six weeks and utilised investigative reporting and human interest angles to highlight the appalling conditions people endured in the slums of the Irish capital. The series promoted vigorous public discussion of the social problem that was tenement housing and helped launch a campaign to improve living conditions. But it also prompted allegations that this first attempt at investigative journalism in an independent Ireland embarrassed the Irish premier, Eamon de Valera, who had established the *Irish Press* to improve his electoral prospects – not to expose his government’s failings. The episode illustrates the unease with which new journalism techniques were received in a conservative press environment and highlights the importance of the ‘outsider journalist’ in casting a cold eye on social problems in the host society.

Dublin’s slums

As noted by historian Kevin C. Kearns, the ‘decline of Georgian Dublin from elegant abodes of the aristocracy to “human piggeries” is one of Dublin’s saddest sagas’.⁶ The Act of Union 1801, which abolished the Irish parliament, saw Dublin stripped of its status as a capital city with all the attendant flight of wealthy and prominent citizens to London, where Irish parliamentarians would thereon sit at the houses of parliament. Thus began the gradual decline of the once beautiful city centre Georgian mansions to a situation wherein ‘rack-renting landlords viewed their properties as little more than cattle sheds to be packed with humanity’.⁷ As sub-division of houses became ever more prevalent, the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century again increased the population of Dublin. By 1900 there were over 6,000 tenement properties in which tenants lived in appalling conditions as the houses, some between 100 and 150 years old, displayed the toll of successive generations of tenants.

⁶ Kevin C. Kearns, *Dublin tenement life: an oral history* (Dublin, 1994), p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Leaking roofs, sagging ceilings, rotting floorboards, broken windows and rickety staircases were the norm as was severe overcrowding: ‘Some tenement areas had 800 people to the acre, as many as a hundred persons in one house and fifteen to twenty family members in a single tiny room. A primitive toilet and water tap in the rear yard had to serve all the inhabitants of a house’.⁸

In 1901 a critical article in the *Irish Builder* demanded that the identity of all landlords be made public and noted that ‘many there would be found figuring in the list who are looked upon as eminently useful citizens and leaders of public opinion’.⁹ Following a public inquiry prompted by the collapse of two tenement buildings in September 1913 it was revealed that members of Dublin Corporation were owners of tenement buildings. The Corporation, which was responsible for enforcing housing standards, did not enforce regulations pertaining to the sector on the basis that if it did then large scale homelessness would follow.¹⁰ As the impetus for Irish independence from Britain gained momentum, the slum tenements were portrayed by the independence movement as a symptom of British rule and neglect: the Dáil Éireann Loan prospectus published in Irish newspapers in 1919 calling for people to loan money to the independence movement made a direct reference to the slums by declaring that those who contributed could ‘abolish the slums’.¹¹ Indeed, interviewed in the 1960s, one of the leading lights of the independence movement, Dublin Corporation member 1906–24, minister for local government 1932–39, and President of Ireland 1945–59 Seán T. O’Kelly recalled that ‘for many years the Corporation had endeavoured to improve matters. Scheme after scheme was presented to the [British] Government. But the Dublin Castle authorities blocked the efforts of those who worked for reform’.¹²

Political independence in the early 1920s brought very little change. Surveying the tenement problem in 1925 the radical journal *Honesty* criticised the ‘unconscionable manner of exacting “rents” from the victims of this soul and body destroying system of housing’.¹³ In a similar vein, the left leaning *Republican Congress* newspaper highlighted the continued existence of the slums after independence and organised inner-city tenant leagues that sought, with some success, to bring about rent reductions with non-payment campaigns. In places, this campaign saw significant reductions in inner-city rental rates.¹⁴ It has been eloquently argued by Mary E. Daly that Fianna Fáil’s promotion of rural life and the pessimistic portrayal of urban life by the Catholic Church meant that, in the early decades of independence, rural Ireland was viewed as the ideal. This meant that the housing crisis in Dublin, and other Irish cities, was not afforded the governmental urgency that it deserved.¹⁵ There also existed hesitancy on the part of government to overly involve itself in an area of competence that it viewed as the preserve of local authorities. Writing to Premier Éamon de Valera in 1937, his minister for finance, Sean MacEntee, observed that it was unwise to keep giving Dublin Corporation large sums of money’ and that the Corporation ‘must shoulder a large part of blame themselves for not being able to finance its housing programme’.¹⁶ It was within this environment that a trans-Atlantic influence, in the form of John J. Harrington, made itself visible in the pages of the *Irish Press*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ *Irish Builder*, vol. xliii, 1901, p. 678 cited in Kearns, p. 11.

¹⁰ Kearns, *Dublin tenement life*, pp 10–11.

¹¹ *Cork Examiner*, 12 Sept. 1919.

¹² *Irish Press*, 7 July 1961.

¹³ Anon. ‘Dublin’s slum plague’ in *Honesty*, 27 June 1925, pp 8–10. For more on *Honesty* see Anthony Keating, ‘Killing off the competition’ in *Media History*, 22:1 (2016) 85–100.

¹⁴ Richard English, ‘Socialism and republican schism in Ireland: the emergence of the republican congress in 1934’ in *Irish Historical Studies*, 27:105 (1990), 48–65. The republican congress was a breakaway group of IRA volunteers who wished to pursue left-wing politics. Among its leading lights was Peadar O’Donnell who would later help establish *The Bell* magazine.

¹⁵ Mary E. Daly, *The slow failure: population decline and independent Ireland, 1922–1973* (Wisconsin, 2006), pp 30–32.

¹⁶ National Archives of Ireland, D/T, S3642 (memo dated 4 Apr. 1937).

‘an American newspaperman’

The *Irish Press* was edited in its infancy by de Valera loyalist Frank Gallagher who did much to instil the distinctive tone of party loyalty within the paper and keep it alive with meagre resources. After expending much effort in getting the paper established, Gallagher eventually resigned on the grounds that he could no longer work with the paper’s general manager John J. Harrington who had arrived at the paper in 1933. Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut to Brooklyn parents of Irish extraction, Harrington was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance and Commerce.¹⁷ To this day it remains unclear how and why Harrington, a 36-year-old business graduate from New York ended up travelling to Dublin to work at the *Irish Press*. One newspaper account has it that he was appointed after the company chairman, Edmund Williams, went to America ‘in search of an American newspaperman and selected Mr Harrington’.¹⁸ Why the *Irish Press* required ‘an American newspaperman’ remains a mystery although one author has suggested that he was appointed to represent the sizable Irish-American investment in the paper.¹⁹

Having secured experience at ‘re-organization work’ at the Scripps-Howard newspaper organisation Harrington arrived at the *Irish Press* with the reputation of an ‘efficiency expert’ before being appointed general manager in succession to Robert Brennan who was appointed the Free State’s first minister to the United States in 1934. His presence very much grated on Gallagher, who, in a letter to de Valera declared that Harrington was ‘the worst possible man to handle staffs [as he had] the American view of workers – that they must be shown who is the boss and the best way to show them this is to sack somebody important’. In another letter, Gallagher informed de Valera that Harrington had been banned from the case room after his repositioning of the Linotype machines had resulted in two of them becoming un-useable.²⁰ The end for Gallagher came in July 1934 when Harrington transferred a member of staff before eventually firing him. Gallagher served his six months’ notice and then agreed to remain until his successor was appointed, eventually leaving in June 1935. When de Valera canvassed his opinion on who would be best to replace him, Gallagher nominated the paper’s chief leader writer Bill Sweetman whom he described as having ‘great strength of character’.²¹

However, Gallagher was replaced not by Sweetman but by John Herlihy, a 71-year-old journalist who had begun his career on the radical Irish newspapers of the late 1800s and had spent the latter part of his career working for the Press Association in London.²² Whatever skills he brought as editor, Herlihy may have had difficulty controlling the enthusiastic Harrington. As recalled by one senior Fianna Fáil figure: it was ‘a tragedy not only for the paper but for the country when Gallagher ceased to be editor. From that time the whole tone of the paper gradually deteriorated. A new and undesirable streak crept into its columns’.²³ This ‘undesirable streak’ may well have been Harrington’s enthusiasm for investigative and campaigning journalism – helped in no small part by another overseas journalist then working at the *Irish Press*, Chris O’Sullivan from Australia.²⁴ It was during Herlihy’s short three-year editorial tenure that Harrington, supported by O’Sullivan, launched his Dublin slums investigation.

¹⁷ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 24 June 1938, pp 1 & 3; 2 July 1938, p. 3.

¹⁸ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 2 July 1938, p. 3.

¹⁹ See Tim Pat Coogan, *A Memoir* (London, 2008), pp 35-6. In one of the many quirks of history, while general manager of the Irish Press, Harrington was involved in a serious altercation with a deputy police commissioner, Eamonn Coogan whose son, Tim Pat Coogan, would edit the Irish Press between 1968 and 1987.

²⁰ Frank Gallagher Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 18361.

²¹ Frank Gallagher Papers, MS 18361.

²² See Irish Press, 4 Jan. 1941, p. 7 for Herlihy’s obituary. Gallagher and Herlihy would have known each other from the time they both worked together at the *Cork Free Press*.

²³ Joseph Connolly, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly (1885–1961)* [J. Anthony Gaughan, ed.] (Dublin, 1996) p. 283.

²⁴ O’Sullivan, an Australian journalist of Irish parentage, visited Ireland during the Irish war of independent and returned to Dublin in 1932 where he secured a position on the Irish Press.

There was precedent for such an investigation: in 1889 Jacob A. Riis, a Danish-born immigrant, had published an eighteen-page photo article capturing the squalor and abject poverty of tenements of Manhattan in *Scribner's Magazine*.²⁵ As a New Yorker, Harrington could not but have been aware of this ground-breaking journalistic feat. Coming from a newspaper environment steeped in the traditions of new journalism, the slums were like manna from heaven for Harrington. The *Irish Press* was a young newspaper trying to establish itself, and the slums represented a very visible social evil that needed rectifying. In effect they represented a crusade on which the paper could utilise the techniques of new journalism to make an impact journalistically and socially. Looking back on his motives for initiating the series, Harrington observed that 'he knew something about slums before he came to this country . . . and he was only in the country a couple of weeks when he was ashamed of the land of his ancestors. Because of that he had tried to do something about it'.²⁶ Thus, as Harrington saw it, the objectives of the series were clear:

From the very first we invited the co-operation and support of all those who were in agreement with the object which we set before ourselves, because we recognised the problem was one of enormous dimensions and we were only too conscious that it could only be solved by something in the nature of a mass movement on the part of all the citizens, irrespective of religious or political affiliations. We made it our object to mobilise public opinion at the back of our campaign, as we felt that it was only an absolutely irresistible volume of support which could break down the barriers and obstacles of all kinds which will have to be overcome before the field would be clear for the legislative and administrative action which will be necessary to extirpate the slums and provide better houses for their present occupants.²⁷

Thus, throughout August 1937, 'in the heat of summer *Irish Press* representatives who were inquiring into this matter found by day and night, in the heart of the city, sickening corroboration of the worst descriptions that exist in the pages of reports dealing with Dublin slums over the last 150 years'.²⁸ Beginning on 1 October 1936, the paper devoted one page every day for six weeks to investigating the slums and, in terms of utilising elements of new journalism theretofore ignored in Ireland, it framed the series of articles as a campaign, referred to its series as an investigation, referred to the journalists who contributed to the series as 'investigators', and utilised new journalism's emphasis on human interest and personal testimony by highlighting the suffering of the slums' inhabitants through the use of photographs and by focusing on individual case studies of families trapped in the slums. The photographs used in the series bore a striking resemblance to those of the New York slums published in 1889 by *Scribner's Magazine*: subjects were framed within the appalling conditions in which they lived their lives and the testimony, such as that from slum inhabitant Winifred O'Rourke, who, aged 35, had lost five of her eight children to slum diseases such as tuberculosis, gave an air of realism to the a subject that was often discussed in more abstract forms.²⁹ The headlines – 'Take us out of this Terrible Place'; 'Massacre of the Innocents'; 'Five Children Her Slum Sacrifice'; 'Slum Landlordism Extracts a Huge Tax from Human Anguish' – also framed the series as a campaign. Referring to previous coverage of the slums the paper noted that 'it is not the want of inquiry that can be complained of, rather want of action, of driving power of the determination at any cost to abolish an evil, the existence of

²⁵ The article was subsequently expanded and published in book form as *How the other half lives: studies among the tenements of New York* (New York, 1890).

²⁶ *Irish Press*, 20 Dec. 1937, p. 3.

²⁷ *Irish Press*, 15 Oct. 1936, p. 8.

²⁸ *Irish Press*, 2 Oct. 1936, p. 14.

²⁹ *Irish Press*, 7 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

which had been so abundantly demonstrated' and it was this lack of action that the paper was determined to challenge.³⁰

'Dublin's slum evil'

The series began with a 'call to arms' editorial. Describing the slums as 'a discredit and a menace to the Irish capital' it observed that the slums were 'a legacy of alien rule' and 'the fruit of generations of neglect and civic blindness'. Noting that the government had informed Dublin Corporation that it would refund the Corporation two thirds of any expenditure used to replace the slums, the paper nonetheless declared that, given the scale of the problem, resolving it was beyond the scope of the Corporation alone. This conclusion had been reached 'after 'a careful survey of what has been done in the past, of what is being done now, and of what will remain to be accomplished'. Determined not to alienate any person or organisation from its campaign it declared that its series was based on 'official statistics, medical officers' reports on the slum evil in particular localities, reports of Royal Commissions, and the testimony of many trustworthy bodies and persons'. The series was not 'an attack on any person, slum owner or otherwise, individually' but was rather 'an exposure and an indictment of a system' and 'an attempt so as to focus public opinion'. The editorial also laid bare the scale of the slum problem. It revealed that 33,000 families lived in tenement dwellings – of these 27,000 families lived in one-roomed tenement dwellings, and 1,600 families lived in basements prone to fumes from the city sewers – and estimated that 21% of Dublin citizens (93,000 people) lived in slums. It also contrasted the 1934 infant mortality rate of the most overcrowded slum area (119 per 1000 births) with that of Dublin overall (79 per 1000), London (67 per 1000), the Free State (63 per 1000) and England (59 per 1000) and urged its readers to think of the children 'who come into existence in these fetid, squalid haunts of horror for whom there is no chance of life as compared with the children born in the rest of the country'. What was needed, it concluded, was 'an enlightened and aroused public conscience' to demand a scheme of building to 'wipe out the slum horror of Dublin'.³¹ Over the subsequent six weeks the paper devoted a page per day on articles that outlined the historical context to the slums, current statistics, slum infantile death rates, slum landlordism, and the lack of regulation enforcement by Dublin Corporation, which the paper maintained was 'one of the biggest, if not the biggest, slum landlords in Dublin'.³² It also published an interview with the city's medical officer, Matthew J. Russell, in which he declared that he would condemn the slums as uninhabitable but for that fact that this action would result in huge numbers of people becoming homeless.³³

In its attempt to build a consensus of public opinion that action needed to be taken the series provided a platform for the leaders of all major religions to express their position. The head of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, Cardinal Joseph MacRory 'expressed his surprise at the revelations concerning Dublin's lack of housing facilities as published in the *Irish Press*'. Curiously, the statements did not include one from Dublin's Catholic Archbishop, Edward Byrne. This lack of engagement from the city's Catholic hierarchy is odd though it was later alleged that the Catholic Church owned several tenement buildings. As recalled by Tim Pat Coogan, who joined the paper in the early 1960s, some of the journalists who had worked on the series told him that 'many of the slum properties excoriated by the series were owned by "important personages"; including those of the Church'.³⁴ Other religions were not as mute, possibly to the chagrin of the Catholic hierarchy. The Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Rev. John Gregg, declared that he agreed 'with the *Irish Press* that the problem must be tackled courageously and comprehensively in our

³⁰ *Irish Press*, 2 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

³¹ *Irish Press*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 8. The paper later extended its series to other cities but for reasons of space this chapter is confined to its Dublin investigation.

³² *Irish Press*, 9 Oct. 1936, pp 9 & 16.

³³ *Irish Press*, 5 Oct. 1936, pp 7 & 2.

³⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hutchinson, 2003), p. 721.

time and not left to posterity' while the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community, Dr Isaac Herzog declared that if the public purse could fund the abolition of the slums, then an appeal should be made to Irish-America to 'contribute generously towards a fund which aims at removing so serious a blot from the capital of Ireland, which is, to all Irishmen, the historic symbol of the Irish spirit and whose historic and national glamour is dimmed in no small measure by these wretched slums'.³⁵

In terms of campaign journalism the series pushed the boundaries of what was the norm for journalism at the time, and indeed, what was the norm at the *Irish Press*. On one occasion the paper published an open letter to Dublin's lord mayor and Corporation in which it declared that the Corporation's housing construction figures 'published in reply to the *Irish Press* campaign for the elimination of the slums of Dublin are the best evidence we could produce in support of our case, namely that construction in Dublin is hopelessly behind the need'. The city's residents were, it noted 'forced to live amid heartrending scenes of squalor, suffering, and slow-tortured death' and concluded 'We need action not words'. In a side column, under the headline 'Record of Futility', it listed the various commissions of inquiry into the slums that had been convened between 1798 and 1936. On the same page it published an open letter to the minister for local government, Seán T. O'Kelly, in which it noted that 35% of Dublin Corporation dwellings built since the foundation of the state in 1922 had occurred since the election of the Fianna Fáil government in 1932. While this 'splendid record of achievement' demonstrated that the government understood 'the need for ameliorating the lot of the national capital's tenement dwellers' it maintained that progress was far too slow and that 'additional powers must be invoked and additional groups set up to handle the crisis'.³⁶

This, in essence, was Harrington's position: the problem was on such a scale that the Corporation could not alone resolve the issue and, in a very unusual move for any newspaper's general manager, Harrington himself took to the pages of the *Irish Press* to articulate his thinking. In another open letter, this time to the newly appointed local housing department housing inspector, Harrington declared 'there is a New Deal in Ireland – one of open dealing, so that the citizens may know what steps are being taken to lift them from the depths to which they have descended as a result of indifference or worse'.³⁷ In a subsequent, detailed, article Harrington noted that the national public works programme that had been introduced in the US had provided much public infrastructure, employment, and a move towards economic recovery and called for a similar programme to be introduced in Ireland.³⁸ What premier Eamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil made of all this can only be speculated on: towards the end of the series the paper published an open invitation to the delegates attending the party's national conference in Dublin to visit the slums. While it conceded that the slums were a legacy of British rule, it noted, in what could only be interpreted as a criticism of Irish independence, that the year 1936 represented 'the fourteenth year of a self-governed state, when the babies of Easter 1916 are still, as men and women, crying for a happier life for their babies, crying for simple shelter'. It also noted that 70,000 children had been born in Ireland's slums since the state's creation in 1922.³⁹

Given the sustained prominence given to the slum problem by the paper it is unsurprising that it observed that it had been inundated by 'the receipt of letters containing suggestions on slum clearance and rehousing and many related questions, as well as offers of personal help by health and housing specialists' and that it was co-ordinating all the enthusiasm and special knowledge available for this campaign of war on slumdom and rehousing of its people'.⁴⁰ It also noted the support received for its campaign from competitor

³⁵ *Irish Press* 9 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

³⁶ *Irish Press*, 21 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

³⁷ *Irish Press*, 22 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

³⁸ *Irish Press*, 29 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

³⁹ *Irish Press*, 3 Nov. 1936, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Irish Press*, 14 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

newspapers such as the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Evening Herald*, and the *Evening Mail*.⁴¹ In mid-November 1936 it announced the formation of the Citizens' Housing Council to continue the campaign. The council was chaired by John J. Harrington (described as publisher and general manager of the *Irish Press*) and among its members were Chris O'Sullivan (described as joint secretary), W. Lombard Murphy, proprietor of Independent Newspapers, H.F. Tivy, proprietor of the *Evening Mail* and John Herlihy, editor of the *Irish Press*. The council also had a sizable religious presence, including Rev. John Gregg, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Isaac Herzog, Chief Rabbi, and Rev. M. Murphy, administrator of Catholic Pro-Cathedral of Dublin, who presumably represented Dublin's Catholic Archbishop.⁴² In December 1936 there occurred a joint meeting of Dublin Corporation and the council after which the *Irish Press* again declared its belief that the slum problem was beyond the Corporation's solving and that effective change could only occur 'by treating the evil as a national one and by applying national resources, in conjunction with those of the Corporation, to its extirpation'.⁴³ This was Harrington's core belief: he later reiterated his belief that 'they should have three hard-hitting experts and give them all the authority they needed to get the job done – get rid of the red tape which had strangled many a good man – and then say "either get results or get out"'.⁴⁴

There then followed a series of editorials arising, presumably, from the editorial intrigue that centred on who would eventually succeed the elderly Herlihy as editor. One critical editorial, in December 1936, observed that 'there must be a feeling of wonderment among the people of Dublin at the complete disappearance from public view of the Citizens' Housing Council which had taken under its control the question of finding the best methods of providing a solution of the slum problem in the metropolis'. It noted that while the council had undertaken to compile a report on the problem, such a course of action 'savours somewhat of the political amateur' and public opinion was 'steadily cooling and evaporating'.⁴⁵ Two months later the paper noted that the council had 'not been heard of for months and we have no option but to come to the conclusion that it has vanished into space'.⁴⁶ Given that the council was chaired by Harrington and that Herlihy was a council member it is conceivable that the critical editorials were written by the paper's chief leader writer Bill Sweetman, who would replace Herlihy as editor in 1938.

Nonetheless, when the council's report, which called for the creation of 'a statutory board with the broadest powers' to deliver 5,000 houses per annum for ten years and called for the government to provide finance, was published in May 1937 the paper praised it as containing 'positive, practical recommendations that, in our judgment, go to the root of the matter and provide a basis for measures that will in due time extirpate this great social evil'.⁴⁷ And while coverage of the slums issue continued – including coverage of the councillors' reaction to the report and the Corporation's consideration of the report – it was clear that the paper's campaign was over.⁴⁸ When, in February 1938, the Corporation described the Citizens' Housing Council's report as 'impracticable' and released its own plan to build 12,000 homes over five years, the paper welcomed the plan as demonstrating that the Corporation had 'at last come to grips with the slum problem in the Irish metropolis'.⁴⁹ Given that the Corporation had built 8,601 dwellings between 1922 and 1936 this was a significant step-up in building activity, albeit not on the level that slum series had called for.⁵⁰

⁴¹ *Irish Press*, 22 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

⁴² *Irish Press*, 14 Nov. 1936, p. 1.

⁴³ *Irish Press*, 5 Dec. 1936, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Irish Press*, 20 Dec. 1937, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Irish Press*, 18 Dec. 1936, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Irish Press*, 10 Feb. 1937, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *Irish Press*, 31 May 1937, pp 8 & 7.

⁴⁸ *Irish Press*, 1 June 1937, p. 8; 2 Nov. 1937, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Irish Press*, 1 Feb. 1938, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Figures quoted in *Irish Press*, 21 Oct. 1936, p. 9.

Fallout

While, in the words of one historian, the slum series ‘resulted in real improvements in the living conditions of the Dublin poor [and] gave a jolting insight into how people really lived’ it was marked towards the end of 1937 by allegations that the paper was instructed by its political masters to drop the issue.⁵¹ While the slum campaign series was radical, campaigning journalism that hit home with readers it is arguable that the series, in terms of its content and presentation, did not sit well with Premier Eamon de Valera and his party, Fianna Fáil. The campaign’s constant refrain – that Dublin’s slum problem constituted a national rather than a local crisis and required a national rather than a local response – was at odds with Fianna Fáil’s position that responsibility for resolving the slum issue rested solely with the local authority. Similarly, the creation of the Citizens’ Housing Committee represented a para-political force that sought to convince public opinion that the government should play a greater role in resolving the problem – again at variance with the party’s position. The platform given by the series to minority religions was at odds with the party’s fidelity to the Catholic Church. And, the manner in which Harrington took to the pages of the paper to outline the policies he believed the government should adopt hardly endeared him to Fianna Fáil politicians. Whether or not de Valera requested that the paper tone down its slum campaign can never be definitively answered though there exists some vivid testimony that he did.

In late 1937, former *Irish Press* journalist and Harrington supporter, Chris O’Sullivan, alleged such interference had indeed occurred. O’Sullivan had been a strong supporter of the slum series and had served as secretary of the Citizens’ Housing Council. Many decades later, O’Sullivan recalled that the Catholic Church had made life difficult for him in Ireland on the basis that he ‘was not a conformist, not a Catholic, wasn’t seen going to church’. According to O’Sullivan, the Catholic Church ‘was the biggest landlord in Ireland and rack-renter [and] put pressure on de Valera to get rid of me’. Indeed, O’Sullivan’s appointment as managing editor, while approved by the company’s board of directors, was vetoed in late 1936 by de Valera who ultimately dismissed him for sending a reporter abroad without first clearing the expenditure involved with senior management.⁵² Having become editor of the Labour Party weekly paper, *Labour News*, O’Sullivan published a full page of extracts from the slum series on its first anniversary. Headed ‘Winter Comes on Dublin: Ministers & Corporation Accuse Each Other While the Mass of the People Suffer’ it claimed that the Fianna Fáil government had ‘silenced’ the slum campaign ‘because it became too revealing and might compel courses that bureaucrats hate or fear to adopt’.⁵³ This charge was rejected by the *Irish Press* which declared that ‘the man who wrote those lines had the best reason to be aware that there was not a scintilla of foundation for what he alleged against the government’. There was, it declared, ‘no intervention by the government in any shape or form’. As the *Press* saw it, the campaign had been ‘thwarted and defeated – unconsciously and unintentionally we admit – by men who did not understand Irish conditions, who had no conception of how political action for a great humanitarian object should be conducted, and who deliberately, and in the face of repeated warnings, chose to adopt a course that resulted in the futility and fiasco which had been predicted’. Specifically, it blamed the Citizens’ Housing Council’s six months’ absence from public view (while it prepared its report) for the collapse of the campaign: by the time of its release ‘public interest in the question was practically dead’.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Coogan, *Ireland in the twentieth century* (London, 2003), p. 719.

⁵² National Library of Australia Oral History and Folklore Collection: interview of Chris O’Sullivan conducted by Andrew Reeves, 26 July 1978.

⁵³ *Labour News*, 27 Nov. 1937, p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Irish Press*, 27 Nov. 1937, p. 8.

O'Sullivan begged to differ. In the following week's *Labour News*, he noted that his article had 'burned into the Government's political conscience' and outlined, in great detail, what he saw as having transpired:

The *Irish Press* was responsible for the 1936 slum investigations and for bringing into existence the Citizens' Housing Council as an auxiliary in the fight. But from the moment the Council met official pressure was used towards bottling up the affairs of that body or canalising its stream of effort into a quarter that would pass a grand resolution at a public meeting and conveniently leave the whole matter into the hands of government. This was more than once openly and directly urged on the Council. When the Housing Council did not take that line but formed its own technical committees, it incurred the editorial disfavour of the *Irish Press*, which has thrice gratuitously attacked it. The parent found the child had ideas of its own. Even when the Department of Local Government was invited to appoint an observer, the Minister declined. At a certain stage of the campaign, when the Housing Council was still quartered on Burgh Quay [headquarters of the *Irish Press*], when the campaign had brought the people to the height of expectation of government action and there were demands from all cities and towns for extension of the campaign, it was intimated to a leader of the Citizens' Council that in a certain government quarter the view was held that the campaign threatened to bankrupt the country with its increased demands for housing. When that warning sign did not take effect, other action was promoted in the interest of dampening the campaign and getting it to cry off.

The *Irish Press* drive for slum-clearance and rehousing had failed, O'Sullivan concluded, 'simply because certain interests did not want it to go on. Too many vested interests were being disturbed by the demand for simple reforms necessary to accomplish the change. And the government was not seriously prepared to disturb those interests further'.⁵⁵ Responding, the *Irish Press* declared O'Sullivan's statement as 'a gratuitous and malevolent invention' and announced that it had 'no intention of playing his game by contradicting whatever he may write and shall for the future take no notice under any circumstances whatever of a scribe who is not ashamed to resort to such controversial methods'.⁵⁶ Given that *Labour News* had a small circulation it may be that the *Irish Press* decided that reacting to O'Sullivan's allegations simply gave them wider publicity.

An American returns home

Nonetheless, O'Sullivan's allegations did permit opposition politicians to criticise the manner in which the *Irish Press* paper had gone quite on the slum problem. At a public meeting, Dublin Councillor James Larkin observed how the paper's slum series had continued 'until somebody came down with a hand . . . and said this thing has gone far enough' – an observation denied by Harrington at the same meeting. As recalled by Harrington his intention was to 'run the campaign for two weeks [but] we carried on for six, and then we stopped to see what . . . the members of the Corporation and the national government housing department were going to do about it'.⁵⁷

In June 1938 it was announced that having invested in a New York newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Harrington had resigned from the *Irish Press*. The announcement of his decision to return to New York prompted effusive praise from *Irish Press* company board chairman, Edmund Williams who described the slum series as 'the greatest single achievement of the Irish Press'. As a result of Harrington's 'pioneering work', Williams contended, Dublin Corporation had 'been forced to launch a housing programme calling for

⁵⁵ *Labour News*, 4 Dec 1937, pp 4 & 8.

⁵⁶ *Irish Press*, 4 Dec. 1937, p. 8.

⁵⁷ *Irish Press*, 20 Dec. 1937, p. 3.

the expenditure of £750,000'.⁵⁸ For his part, Harrington, publicly at least, had no qualms with de Valera who was, Harrington avowed, 'the greatest statesman in Europe'.⁵⁹

Thereafter the issue of Dublin slums effectively disappeared from the mainstream press though *The Bell* magazine (established by Sean O Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell) published several articles on Dublin's slums including one that starkly noted that political independence had changed little for those trapped in the tenements; the only difference the author could identify was that the names of the streets had been changed from English into Irish.⁶⁰ In the 1950s the slums were gradually replaced by high-rise apartment complexes in the city centre and large-scale housing development in suburban Dublin. It was at the *Irish Press* itself where the slums series had the most long-lasting impact – though as an example of the type of journalism that should be avoided. When appointed as the title's editor in 1968, Tim Pat Coogan met with the company's managing director Vivion de Valera who told him that the slum series, which had been published thirty-two years previously, was the type of journalism to avoid as it upset advertisers and created 'a bad image, an impression of socialism'.⁶¹ The series was journalism's first engagement with investigative journalism in independent Ireland and involved outsiders casting a cold eye on Irish society. With the exception of *The Bell*, investigative journalism would not reoccur in Ireland until the 1960s when a new generation of outsider journalists, including Mary Maher from Chicago and Michael Viney from England, would lead the charge in placing investigative journalism at the forefront of modern Irish journalism.⁶²

⁵⁸ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 24 June 1938, pp 1 & 3.

⁵⁹ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 2 July 1938, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Sheila May, 'Two Dublin Slums' in *The Bell*, 7:4 (Jan. 1944), 351–6 at 354. For more on *The Bell's* investigative journalism see Mark O'Brien, 'Other voices: *The Bell* and documentary journalism' in Mark O'Brien & Felix M. Larkin, *Periodicals and journalism in twentieth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2014), pp 158–72.

⁶¹ Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the twentieth century* (London, 2003), p. 721.

⁶² See O'Brien, *The fourth estate*, pp 152–55.