

Reporting the Rising: Press Coverage of Easter 1916

By Mark Duncan

Frank O'Connor was 13 years old in 1916, but decades later, as a then celebrated short-story writer, he would recall the impression that the newspaper coverage of that year's Irish insurrection would have on his teenage self. It was, he remembered, as if the wreckage of the European war had been brought home. In *An Only Child*, his memoir published in 1958, O'Connor told of how 'the daily papers showed Dublin as they showed Belgian cities destroyed by the Germans, as smoking ruins inhabited by men with rifles and machine guns. At first my only reaction was horror that Irishmen should commit such crime against England.'¹

In a time before radio, television, the internet or instant messaging, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the printed press as a vehicle of communication. Newspapers functioned as vital conduits of news and information, as instruments of propaganda and as agencies through which public opinion could be moulded and formed - transformed even.

Their importance to the social and political life of the country was as extraordinary as the expansion of Ireland's newspaper market in the half century preceding the Rising. This was a process driven by technological innovation, improved production processes and enhanced literacy – by 1911, 88% of Irish population were literate and their readerships for newspapers was reflected in the extraordinary proliferation of titles which encompassed national dailies, weekly provincial and local newspapers and a lively mosquito press which stringent censorship laws, introduced after the outbreak of European war in August 1914, helped to frustrate without ever fully suppressing. The general character of Irish reportage was altered by the circumstances of war and the restrictions imposed by the Defence of the Realm Act, yet the influence of newspapers, as events prior to and following the Easter Rising of 1916, remained significant.

For a start, newspapers were crucial to the curtailment of the Rising, to its deferment by a day and, ultimately, to its truncated character. It was in the pages of the *Sunday Independent* that Eoin Mac Neill, the leader of the Irish Volunteers, placed his notice cancelling manoeuvres for Easter Sunday after learning that they were being used as a cover for an armed rebellion

¹ Frank O'Connor, *An Only Child* (1958) p. 170-83; Quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (2005) p. 150

by a faction of extremists within the Irish Volunteer movement. It was here too, in the very same edition, that news was carried concerning the arrest of Roger Casement in Kerry (though he was identified only as a “man of unknown nationality”) as well as the accidental drowning of three men in Killorglin when their car careered off the road into a river – the men, it later transpired, were en route to set up transmitter for signalling the Aud, the fishing vessel which was carrying arms from Germany for distribution to Irish Volunteers to participate in the Rising.²

This was as close as newspapers came to reporting the events of Easter week faithfully and fast. Once the Rising commenced on Easter Monday, silence and confusion were the principal markers of the newspaper coverage. Or what there was of it. On April 25th a bulletin written by Patrick Pearse was published as the *Irish War News* which, sitting alongside previously prepared content, offered an account of the first twenty-four hours of fighting that mixed fact with fancy. ‘At the moment of writing this report (9.30 a.m. Tuesday)’, readers were informed, ‘the Republican forces hold all their positions and the British forces have nowhere broken through. However, they were also informed that Republican forces were being ‘everywhere cheered as they march through the streets’, an attempt, no doubt, to colour the perspectives of those who were not witness to those very events.³ Only a single issue of *Irish War News* was published, yet over the course of Easter Week, as fighting raged at various locations across Dublin city centre and a number of small-scale skirmishes’ beyond, little else appeared to fill the news vacuum. Of the main Dublin dailies, only *The Irish Times* was published throughout that week, yet the impact of censorship was such that it provided little by way of an accurate account of daily events. The result, as the historian Joe Lee has observed, is that there is ‘no strictly contemporary newspaper reporting from the actual scene.’⁴

The Dublin Dailies

By April 28th, all the same, *The Irish Times*, then very much an organ of southern unionism, was able to report that the ‘back of the insurrection’ had been broken, with all the buildings occupied by the rebels rescued from their control. The paper trumpeted the defeat of an insurrection that would ‘pass into history’ alongside similarly doomed ventures from the past.

² *Sunday Independent*, 23 April 1916

³ *Irish War News*, Vol. 1 No.1, 25 April 1916

⁴ J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics & Society* (1989) p. 29

If there was grudging acknowledgement of the ‘desperate courage of many of the wretched men’ who led it, the ultimate judgement on the rebellion and those who staged it was damning: the loss of life, the destruction of property and the general distress caused (‘mainly felt by the poor’) ensured that the Rising’s legacy would, it was confidently predicted, be a ‘long trail of sorrow, misery and shame’⁵ As the days passed and the court martials and executions of the rebel leaders began, there was no softening in *The Irish Times* position. If anything, its stance hardened in a way that distinguished it from more nationally-minded publications like the *Irish Independent* and the *Freeman’s Journal*. On May 6th, an editorial in *The Irish Times* stressed that ‘justice, patriotism and commonsense demand that Ireland be redeemed from the menace of sedition once and for all.’ In rejecting criticism levelled at it by the *Freeman’s Journal* - which had accused it of ‘clamouring for a bloody assize’ - the paper went on to do just that. In answering its own question as to whether the Sinn Féin rebellion was to be ‘killed or merely scotched’, the editorial was unambiguous in recommending the most merciless course of action.

‘We said, and we repeat, that the surgeon’s knife of the State must not be stayed “until the whole malignant growth has been removed”...Our demand that the elements of rebellion should be finally extinguished...We have called for the severest punishment of the leaders and responsible agents of the insurrection; but we have insisted there should be no mere campaign of vengeance’.⁶

As far as the *Freeman’s Journal* was concerned, the editorial line pursued by *The Irish Times* was both ‘bloody-thirsty’ and ‘destructive of all hopes of peace and order’ in Ireland.⁷ Not that the *Freeman’s*, whose printing works were badly damaged by fire to its Prince’s Street premises, were in any way sympathetic to the Rising’s aims or principal actors.⁸ It wasn’t. Its own editorial line, outlined in its first post-Rising edition, on May 4th 1916, was unequivocal in its denunciation of the rebellion and those who planned it. The insurgents were condemned for acting ‘without authority’; they were ‘reckless’ and engaged in what was what was variously described as a ‘mad enterprise’ and an ‘insane revolt’. But in lamenting the loss of life and the paralysis caused to a city that had seen the ‘finest street in Europe...reduced to a smoking reproduction of the ruin wrought in Ypres’, the *Freeman’s Journal* launched

⁵ Irish Times, 28 April 1916

⁶ Irish Times, 6 May 1916

⁷ O Dudley Edwards and Fergus eds., *1916: The Easter Rising* (1968) Appendix 11: Press Reaction to the Easter Rising, p. 261

⁸ See Ian Keneally, *The Paper Wall: Newspapers and Propaganda in Ireland 1919-1921*; also Mark McCarthy, *Ireland's 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-Making, Commemoration* (2012)

broadsides against those who, in their reporting before and after Easter week, had failed to do what was necessary and provide an analysis that might serve to cool rather than inflame the political temperature. In championing the case for 'savage coercion' against those responsible for the revolt, it charged *The Irish Times* with peddling 'sinister and fatal advice', the only effect of which might be to 'set flowing new rivers of hate and bloodshed between England and Ireland'. Meanwhile, the *Irish Independent* - 'William Murphy's bogey-makers' - stood accused of having, over time, whipped up unfounded fears that Conscription was set to be imposed upon Ireland and for contributing to the undermining of the 'power and authority' of the constitutional movement.⁹

There was good reason for the *Freeman's* barb towards the *Irish Independent*, not least because the two papers were in open competition for a moderate nationalist readership - a competition in which latter had already established a clear upper hand. By the time of the Rising, the *Irish Independent*, owned by the controversial businessman William Martin Murphy and launched in 1905, had established itself as Ireland's best-selling newspaper. Cheap to buy at halfpenny and modelled on the 'new journalism' of Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* in London, the growth of the *Irish Independent* was such that it acquired a mass-market appeal - a newspaper directory for 1915 put its circulation at 110,000.¹⁰

This rise in the paper's fortunes was accompanied by a conservative, non-party aligned editorial policy which aimed to be as inoffensive as possible to broad swathes of its largely Catholic, nationalist and middle class readership. In the words of one critic, the paper's editor, T.R. Harrington, sought merely to 'ascertain in what direction the mob was moving and to grovel to its decrees'.¹¹ In one very clear sense, then, the initial response of the *Irish Independent* to the 1916 Rising can be viewed as both consistent and conformist: in denouncing it in the harshest of terms, it swam with rather the against mainstream of press and public opinion.

Out of circulation from April 24th until May 4th 1916, the paper editorialised on its return that the insurrection had been an act of 'criminal madness', from which it would take Ireland many years to recover. It added that the shame and honour of Dublin stood in stark contrast

⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 May 1916. The FJ served as the effective mouthpiece of the Irish Parliamentary Party and pointed out that the rebellion could not have taken place had Home Rule been in place and John Redmond positioned as Prime Minister.

¹⁰ Felix Larkin, T.R. Harrington and the 'new' Irish independent, 1905-31, in Mark O'Brien and Kevin Rafter eds., *Independent Newspapers: A History* (2012), p. 30

¹¹ A.M. (Serjeant) Sullivan, *Old Ireland: Reminiscences of an Irish KC* (1927) p. 202. Quoted in Mark O'Brien and Kevin Rafter eds. *Independent Newspapers: A History* (2012), p. 34

with the heroism and honour of Irishman in France, Flanders or the Dardanelles. Indeed, the 'outpouring of Irish blood' on the various fighting fronts of the First World War was, the *Irish Independent* had it, 'as expiation for the acts of unfilial ingrates who have besmirched the honour of their native land.'¹²

This was just for starters. Over the days that followed the *Irish Independent's* rage intensified and it was directed, amongst other places, towards the *Freeman's Journal* and James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army, which had played a leading role in the Rising. The antipathy towards both was as predictable as it was ferocious: where the former was a commercial competitor, the latter evoked memories of the bitter Lockout of 1913 that had pitted striking workers against a William Martin Murphy-led cohort of business employers. The paper accused the *Freeman's* of being soft on the Connolly's Syndicalists and then, as the execution of the Rising's leaders gathered pace and the clamour for clemency grew louder, it argued that only the rebel rank and file should be allowed avail of such leniency. The leadership, in contrast, were considered different and their deaths were deserved. On May 12th 1916, for instance, the *Irish Independent* called for executions of the only two leaders then still alive, James Connolly and Seán MacDermott.¹³ 'Some of these leaders', it declared, 'are more guilty and played a more sinister part in the campaign than those who have already been punished with severity and it would hardly be fair to treat these leniently because the cry for clemency has been raised...Let the worst of the ringleaders be singled out and dealt with as they deserve, but we hope there be no holocaust or slaughter.'¹⁴ On the day this article was published, Mc Dermott and a badly wounded Connolly were executed, the latter shot by firing squad as he was seated on a wooden box in Kilmainham Gaol.

The Provincial Press

Unlike many of their Dublin counterparts, the provincial and local newspapers published as normal throughout the Rising. However, these were weekly rather than daily publications and they proved no more informative on the day-to-day flow of events in the Capital where the insurrection was principally focussed. If anything, Ireland's regional papers were confronted with greater problems of reportage than

¹² *Irish Independent*, 4 May 1916

¹³ This call came the day after John Dillon delivered a lengthy speech in the House of Commons in which he both denounced the hard-line response of the British authorities and lauded the 'courage' of the rebels, however misguided their actions.

¹⁴ *Irish Independent*, 12 May 1916

their city counterparts and there was no disguising their sense of being remote, removed and apart from the action. On Saturday April 29th, when many provincial papers began to appear, the *Anglo-Celt* reported that since Easter Monday (April 24th), Dublin had been effectively 'cut off from the rest of Ireland, there being no train, telegraphic, telephone, or road service.' In other words, there was no proper communications in or out of the city. The seriousness of the insurrection was still understood and acknowledged, but such information as emerged was hopelessly poor and unreliable. The *Anglo-Celt* was reduced to remarking upon the 'thrilling narratives' being provided by those who got out of the city, as well as the prevalence of 'all sorts of rumours' which filled a void created by the absence, by then, of any 'official notification'.¹⁵

What papers such the *Anglo-Celt* were left with were, in the main, reports of contributions in the Houses of Commons and Lords and official statements issued by Ireland's Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary. These provided only skeletal detail on what had actually transpired, noting, amongst other developments, the buildings that had been occupied by the rebels and the arrival into Dublin of 1,000 troops from England with artillery, engineering and medical corps.¹⁶ For many publications, however, a lack of information and hard fact did little to slow the rush to judgement. *The Cork Examiner* openly acknowledged that little of 'the truth has filtered through', yet still felt sufficiently confident to describe the insurrection as a 'communistic disturbance rather than a revolutionary movement.' The newspaper exonerated Sinn Féin of responsibility on the basis that armed rebellion was 'out of keeping' with its declared intention to act only in defence. For *The Cork Examiner*, responsibility lay elsewhere and it informed its readership not only that the 'mad project' had 'apparently originated in Liberty Hall' but that it had resulted in the complete financial ruin of Dublin and added to hardship of the city's poor, whose plight, already miserable, had already compounded by the privations of war.

But the finger of blame was pointed not only at those who had perpetrated the Rising; it was also directed at those who had created the precedence for armed resistance to the law - Edward Carson, his Ulster Unionist followers and their champions in military and religious life. It was they who 'sewed the wind and for the moment it looks as if it is we who must reap

¹⁵ *Anglo-Celt*, 29 April 1916

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the whirlwind.’¹⁷ Many of the *Examiner’s* complaints found an echo in its local counterpart, *The Cork Free Press*, as it did in the Jasper Tully-edited *Roscommon Herald* which explained that the vision set out in the Proclamation was that of a ‘socialistic republic’ – a term that was invoked by way of a charge rather than a commendation.¹⁸

Indeed, across the great diversity of Irish regional and local titles, the message propounded was largely the same: the Rising was wrong-headed, irresponsible, unrepresentative and dangerous. Moreover, it was committed by men who, as the *Wicklow People* had it, were no more than ‘feather-heads and dreamers’. Or, as the *Roscommon Herald*, preferred: a lot of ‘crazy poets’.¹⁹ Such analysis was to be expected. By and large, the provincial press was Redmondite in character and conviction: it had supported the campaign for Home Rule and sided with the Irish Parliamentary Party leader when, in September 1914, he urged the Irish Volunteers to support the British war effort. Even so, denouncing the Rising was not the same as supporting the manner of its suppression. To this extent, the provincial press holds a mirror to the shifting currents of Irish nationalist opinion in the weeks that followed the insurrection. Rather than baying for the insurgents’ blood – as elements of the Irish press undoubtedly did – many newspapers argued the case for leniency. On 1 May 1916, before the executions of the Proclamation’s signatories even began, the *Cork Examiner* was advocating amnesty, a refrain it was still sounding on what would turn out to be the last day of the executions, May 12th, when it urged the authorities to exercise restraint on the grounds that a ‘policy of clemency...is also a policy of wisdom’.²⁰ These were notable, if not unique, interventions. For where Ireland’s newspapers - national dailies and local weeklies alike - failed in providing full contemporaneous reportage of the events of Easter Week, they succeeded as weathervanes of shifting public attitudes and sympathies in the Rising’s aftermath. Even the *Irish Independent*, which had encouraged the executions of Connolly and McDermott, was wise to the pitfalls of excessive British repression. On 15 May 1916, it warned that the ‘reign of reprisals and the punishment by penal servitude of hundreds of youngsters who were only dupes’ would lead to ‘deplorable’ results. It further prophesied,

¹⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 28 April 1916

¹⁸ J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics & Society* (1989) p. 33

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 35. This found an echo in the *Daily Express* (a Dublin-based morning paper favoured by the Dublin Castle established but few others) which alleged that the Rising was the work of men ‘of no position, of no reputation...of no stake in the country.’ Likewise, Jasper Tully’s *Roscommon Herald* claimed that the ‘Crazy Rebellion

²⁰ *Cork Examiner*, 1 May 1916, 12 May 1916

accurately as it turned out, that ‘a feeling of revulsion would set in, and sympathy would arise in favour of the prisoners who are now gone.’²¹

International Press

If, in the days and weeks after the Rising, Irish press coverage was to divide between hard and conciliatory lines, the same might be said of the reportage it attracted internationally. And there was a lot of it: the events in Dublin during Easter week made for news splashes in titles across Europe and in locations as far flung as Australia and New Zealand.²² The treatment was, in places, extensive: in France, incredibly, the Paris-based *Le Petit Journal* ran sixty-five pieces on the Rising (including thirteen illustrations, three maps and two cartoons) at a time when French newspapers were shrunken versions of their pre-war selves and when coverage of internal British affairs was usually limited to key parliamentary debates.²³ In the United States, the insurrection ran as front page news on the *New York Times* for fourteen consecutive days. It began on April 25th with a low-key report on Roger Casement’s capture after his ‘madcap enterprise’ to land arms and ammunition on Ireland’s south-west coast and it continued through until May 8th, the coverage building as it widened to encompass the seizure of buildings in Dublin, the imposition of martial law, the surrender of rebels and the eventual restoration of order. This front page reportage was supplemented inside by additional reporting and editorial commentary, which was kind to neither the insurgents nor, indeed, to the Irish character. On April 29th, a characteristically sensationalist and pro-British *New York Times*’ editorial mocked what it believed was an ingrained Irish passion for freedom. ‘What these present rebels want is not to be free of England. They pursue an ideal of freedom. England is the symbol of restraint. If it were not England, it might be a King. If it were not a King, it might be fairies that go about in Ireland, assuming fantastic shapes, to frighten people and make them do all the things they do not want to do.’ A similar note of condescension and bewilderment was struck in the *Chicago Tribune* which spoke of the ‘romantic futility’ of the uprising, whereas the *Washington Post*, in focusing on the rebels’ reliance on a ‘harebrained if not insane agitator’ in Roger Casement, at least made the wider

²¹ Irish Independent, 15 May 1916

²² For instance, the New Zealand Herald on 2 May 1916 condemned the rebels as ‘...manifestly without any idealistic inspiration...The wholesale robberies, the callous murders, show us what sort of men were engaged in this mad outbreak...[The Rising] was destructive, not constructive; the craving for loot, and not the love of freedom, evidently sustained its instigators and inflamed its dupes.’ Quoted in Rory Sweetman, Antipodean Irish-Catholic Responses to the Rising, in Ruan O’Donnell ed., *The Impact of the 1916 Rising: among the nations* (2008) p. 75

²³ Ian McKeane, Journées Sanglantes/Days of Blood: The French Press and the Easter Rising, in Ruan O’Donnell ed., *The Impact of the 1916 Rising: among the nations* (2008) p. 65

point that the ‘abortive’ rising provided a ‘reminder that the Irish question remains to be settled.’²⁴ On this matter at least, the John Devoy-founded *Gaelic American* would surely have agreed. This organ of Irish-American fenian opinion, which had been whipped into a lather at the ‘mouthings’ of an ‘Anglomania press’, cheered the Rising for establishing ‘Ireland’s claim to nationhood...before the world.’²⁵

If the American press coverage of the Rising was overwhelmingly critical of the Rising and drawn to personalities with colourful biographies like Casement and Countess Markievicz, it was also frequently wrong. *The New York Times*, for instance, incorrectly spelled the name of Patrick Pearse and ran a front headline declaring James Connolly ‘killed’ on April 30th, twelve days before his execution.²⁶ Then there were stories of German soldiers being found among the rebel dead, a fiction of unionist newspapers repeated as fact for American readerships.²⁷ These were not isolated errors and inaccurate and confused reporting were a feature of reportage in an international press whose editorial lines were coloured by a reliability on official channels and conservative British press sources.²⁸

But what of those British press sources? Their take on the Rising was unsurprisingly critical but not excessively so – at least not in all cases. Certain British newspapers provided more level-headed coverage of the events of Easter week than their Irish counterparts and urged moderation on the part of the British government in their response to the Rising. Indeed, in deciding upon its course of action, the Dublin-based *Freeman’s Journal* expressed the hope that the Government would draw its inspiration, not from such native organs as *The Irish Times*, but from such British titles as the *Daily Chronicle*, which, ‘on the whole has displayed a most creditable spirit of calm and discernment’.²⁹ The same might also be said of the *Manchester Guardian* which likewise issued pleas for restraint.³⁰ On the far end of the spectrum of opinion was *The Times*, which channelled much of its criticisms at the failings of the Irish administration and queried whether the positions of key office-holders like Birrell

²⁴ Quoted in Bob Schmuhl, Peering through the fog: American Newspapers and the easter rising, in *Irish Communications Review*, Vol. 12, 2010, p. 43

²⁵ *Gaelic American*, 6 May 1915

²⁶ Schmuhl, Op. Cit., p. 38. The NYT’s error in reporting Connolly’s death was repeated in the *Washington Post*.

²⁷ O Dudley Edwards and Fergus eds., *1916: The Easter Rising* (1968) Appendix 11: Press Reaction to the Easter Rising, p. 254.

²⁸ On 2 May 1916, the NYT commented: ‘No Irish newspapers have reached here since the rising, and passenger traffic has been for the most part suspended. The only information comes through official channels.’

²⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 May 1916

³⁰ See *Manchester Guardian*, 12 May 1916

were tenable. They weren't, it decided. Birrell, after all, had 'ample warnings of coming trouble' and had been found 'napping in the face of strongest evidence that seditious rebellion' was being prepared under his eyes.³¹ Birrell's downfall was secured by a combination of mounting political and press pressure and the sheer logic of the situation in which he found himself. His resignation as Chief Secretary, announced in the House of Commons on 4 May 1916, went unlamented in *The Times*, the paper quipping that 'Like the puppet in the old-fashioned barometer, his disappearance was always a sign of stormy weather in Ireland.'³² While *The Times* was hard on the Britain's Irish administration, it was equally uncompromising on the subject of the Irish rebels, urging British political and military leaders to apply the firmest of hands. 'Nothing can be more cruel or unwise in insurrections than half-hearted measures of suppression.' To prevent 'dupes' from drawing example from the rebels and to deter 'men hovering on the brink of treason', it recommended that 'for the sake of all loyal classes in Ireland...complete, strong and drastic measures... against the insurgents without hesitation and without delay'.³³

What impact all this had on the drift of official policy is difficult to discern, but in the case of Roger Casement its influence was certainly as much real as perceived. The trial of Casement for treason following his arrest in Kerry on April 21st and his subsequent removal to England was overshadowed by rumours over his private life that were gladly recycled and given fresh life in the pages of a hostile British press. On 30 June 1916, the *Daily Express* said of the so-called black diaries that they were 'monuments of a foul private life' and that Casement himself was a 'moral degenerate', a man with 'no sense of honour or decency'.³⁴ The purpose of this was clear: to dehumanise Casement, to tarnish his name and to alienate public support for his defence. 'Ireland does not make martyrs of such people', the *Daily Express* observed after referencing the 'unprintable', 'sordid vices' to which he had allegedly succumbed. Roger Casement was hanged in Pentonville Prison on 3 August 1916 and Irish nationalist newspapers like *The Irishman* were in no doubt that British press propaganda had helped seal his fate. They had 'distorted details concerning the private character of the man, in order to prejudice public

³¹ The Times, 27 April 1916

³² The Times, 8 May 1916 Quoted in Mark McCarthy, *Ireland's Rising: Explorations of history-making, commemoration and heritage in modern times* (2012) p. 90

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Quoted in Angus Mitchell, *Roger Casement – Extract in Dublin Review of Books*, <http://www.drb.ie/new-books/roger-casement>

feeling against him.³⁵ In many ways, Casement's arrest and death signalled the beginning and end of the Rising period. More than that, however, these events underlined how the role of the press was not only about the reportage of events, but the influencing of them.

³⁵ The Irishman, 15 August 1916, Quoted in Mark McCarthy. *Op cit.* p. 116