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Terence Brown's history of the *Irish Times* is one of a number of similar texts published recently which indicates an upsurge of interest in the Irish media landscape – Kevin Rafter's *Irish Journalism Before Independence* (1), Ann Andrews' *Newspapers and Newsmakers* (2) and Mark O'Brien and Felix Larkin's edited collection *Periodicals and Journalism in Twentieth Century Ireland*.(3) This is a welcome development in terms of increasing contributions to our understanding of media and journalism history, both areas in which major knowledge gaps remain.

The *Irish Times* was established in 1859 by Laurence A. Knox, MP for Sligo, as an avowedly 'Protestant and Conservative newspaper' (p. 6). Despite the existence of some 3,000 Anglo-Irish families in the country at this time, the constituency the newspaper was aiming its moderate unionist message at was mainly the Dublin Protestant middle classes. The rapid developments in the mechanisation of newspaper production coincided with the earliest years of the paper and assisted it in transforming itself from a Dublin-centric four page organ to an internationally respected and progressive commentator on world affairs. Brown's book appears some seven years after Mark O'Brien's *The Irish Times: a History* (4) and seeks to underline the author's thesis that the newspaper has occupied a unique position of influence in Irish society. The inclusion of the word 'influence' in the title appears rather presumptuous at first but Brown manages quite skilfully to both persuade and problematise the idea of such an impact. The book was written for the Irish Times Trust which Brown openly acknowledges at the outset and combines both institutional history and a history of reporting at the paper.

The material is organised both thematically and fairly chronologically into 12 rather lengthy chapters, each focusing on a facet of the newspaper's history and the history of the country itself. This is an appealing quality in the book as the reader gets a strong sense of the newspaper developing as the society around it progresses, although it can have a somewhat Whiggish quality as a result. Most historians would dispute the notion that history is a series of positive progressions into the future and the deliberate yoking together of the history of the *Irish Times* and of Ireland runs the risk of creating this impression. Nonetheless, the parallels between the newspaper and the country are often striking and the gradual alignment of a newspaper originally aimed at the Protestant upper and middle classes and the emergence of a multi-cultural and secular Ireland provides a solid foundation for the book.

The question of influence is one that remains troubling and evasive throughout, however. Media historians and critics have struggled to prove causal links between media consumption and public opinion for decades and the book lacks any empirical evidence on which to base its assumption of such influence. There is little direct consideration of the evolution of the relationship between the *Irish Times* and its readers. There are few instances of quotation from readers' letters as a measure of its influence or lack of it. Measuring and proving an influence remains

elusive which raises questions about the wisdom of including such a contentious term so prominently in the book's title.

This is far from hagiography though – Brown is at his most authoritative when critiquing the paper's stance on an issue or a misjudgement of the public mood. These instances provide some of the most interesting and readable moments in the text. The paper's stance on the situation in Northern Ireland was often problematic and, at times, considerably out of step with the public mood. A January 1957 IRA attack on a police station in Brookeborough, Co. Fermanagh left two IRA men dead. The *Irish Times* editorial offered a harsh critique of the two men's actions that seemed in Brown's words both 'chilly' and 'condescending' (p. 223). This remoteness from the majority public opinion had also been evident in the paper's response to the Easter Rising in 1916 which it described as a 'criminal adventure' (p. 90).

The gradual transition of the paper's stance from minority Protestant to a liberal and outward-looking voice may be seen to be mirrored in the journey of Ireland itself from a country dominated by a severe and unflinching Catholicism to a more secular and progressive state. Brown makes a mostly powerful case for this throughout the book, delving into the many social and political upheavals that characterised Ireland during the late 20th century such as campaigns to introduce divorce and to provide for abortion on limited grounds. Both issues were extremely polarising and the resulting controversies exposed many unpleasant attitudes and anxieties about Ireland's transition from a religious to a secular society. This progress was not always consistent and was often characterised by a cautious and conservative government response. The *Irish Times'* liberal and progressive voice on both abortion and divorce was strongly and frequently articulated and it formed the nucleus around which many forward-looking Irish people cohered. This would have been an ideal opportunity to interrogate the idea of influence from the book's title but this is missed as Brown's argument gets quite lost in the detail of the campaigns themselves and the various pressure groups involved. The book is especially strong in its examination of the development of the literary and cultural criticism for which the *Irish Times* retains an enviable reputation. Its commitment to these issues was evident from its earliest history when it praised the construction of the National Library and the Science and Art Museum in Dublin in 1890. This marked the beginning of the paper's determination to engage with cultural life in Ireland and it represents perhaps its most consistent trait. The introduction of the Censorship of Publications Act by the Irish government in 1929 aimed at controlling pornography and also the import of English yellow journalism into the state. The *Irish Times*, as might be expected, responded with some alarm to this legislation fearing that it was proposed 'to smash a dung-beetle with a sledge-hammer' (p. 119). This was not, as Brown points out, simply a response to the strictures of the Act but a fear that Irish cultural life might be damaged as a result and that it represented the imposition of Catholic values onto a Protestant minority.

The 1920s and 1930s were especially fruitful decades for Irish cultural life and the *Irish Times* sought to put this material at the heart of its publication. The inclusion of poetry in the paper on a regular basis reminded readers of the importance of the literary as well as the news and celebrated the wealth of talent emanating from the country. The work of younger, emerging poets was emphasised and the paper issued an anthology called *Poems from Ireland* in 1944 under its own imprint. In 1940, the *Irish Times* recruited a poet named Brian O’Nolan as a columnist. He wrote a thrice-weekly column in the Irish language under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen. O’Nolan became a key figure in the Irish-language literature revival of the 1940s deploying irony, satire and a cunning sense of humour to excavate the many absurdities of language and national identity.

The extension of the paper’s cultural writing into the softer areas of feature writing followed in the 1960s with writing about fashion, cookery, travel and gardening all appearing in its pages. Cultural criticism expanded to include regular coverage of popular music from 1970 and the continual flourishing of the literary content of the paper during the later 20th century receives much detailed attention in the book’s later chapters.

A particular strength of the book is its in-depth examination of the writers and journalists who worked for the paper in the 20th century. Those working for the paper earlier in its history remain thinly outlined, possibly due to a lack of archival material, a problem that faces many of us with interests in journalism history. Many more recent and familiar names (Conor Brady, Conor O’Clery, Mary Holland and Christina Murphy) are scrutinised and their working relationships explored. Tensions with management and between journalists and editorial staff are openly acknowledged and the incident of alleged nepotism that occurred in 1994 when it was proposed to appoint the daughter of the *Irish Times* chairman and chief executive, Major Thomas McDowell, to the board of the newspaper is an interesting expose of often-invisible pressures behind the scenes. Somewhat surprisingly, there is little material on the relationship between the *Irish Times* and the other Dublin-based newspapers, principally the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Press*. Competition between them was often fierce and an exploration of these connections would have been fruitful for a deeper understanding of the context within which the *Irish Times* operated.

Throughout, the *Irish Times* is treated as both a commercial and journalistic enterprise. Its various periods of financial success and peril are documented in some detail but the economics never dominates overly and the emphasis remains on the paper’s determination to explore new journalistic territory, especially with regard to its overseas reporting. The establishment of a Moscow office in 1987 towards the end of the Cold War proved to be a pivotal decision and was a consequence of the recent appointment of a new editor, Conor Brady in late 1986. Brady was the first Catholic to edit the paper and took over after the long editorship of Douglas Gageby who had been in the post since 1963 (with a three year break). The less successful editorship of Fergus Pyle (1974–7) is also

explored in some depth, revealing a rare mis-step in the process of editor appointments at the paper. Geraldine Kennedy's accession as the first female editor in 2002 does not get as much attention as one might have expected but her rapier wit does come through via a number of especially acerbic quotations.

It is difficult to ascertain what level of co-operation and engagement Brown received from many of the journalists and editors of whom he writes. There is an occasional reference to a personal communication with a member of staff and both James Downey and Geraldine Kennedy are mentioned in the acknowledgements section. The bibliography is only of works cited and does not contain any references to interviews or emails with many of the people mentioned in the text.

The lack of photographs directly related to the newspaper in the book is a surprise. Most of the 28 black and white illustrations are of general events in Irish history, such as the damage to buildings in Dublin as a result of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the arrival of the Beatles in 1963. Only one cartoon taken from the *Irish Times* is used – Martyn Turner's response to the X case abortion controversy in 1992. Turner, an adroit political cartoonist at the paper since 1974, receives scant attention in the book which is a disappointment. His ability to develop succinct rejoinders to the issues of the day is a valuable part of the paper's appeal to its audience and could have been foregrounded more. The omission of any photographs of the various buildings and newsrooms occupied by the *Irish Times* since its inception is puzzling as are the lack of photographs of the many journalists who practised their craft within its walls. These would provide a vital insight and focal point, especially for readers who are less familiar with the paper and its writers.

Overall then, this is a compelling read with a wealth of detail from the newspaper's long reporting history that strongly emphasises the paper's response to the key moments in Irish social, political and economic history. It represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of a newspaper in national public life.

Notes

1. Kevin Rafter, *Irish Journalism before Independence: More a Disease than a Profession*, (Manchester, 2011).
2. Ann Andrews, *Newspapers and Newsmakers: The Dublin Nationalist Press in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Liverpool, 2014).
3. *Periodicals and Journalism in Twentieth Century Ireland*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Felix Larkin (Dublin, 2014).
4. Mark O'Brien, *The Irish Times: A History*, (Dublin, 2008).