

Tracing the evolution and influence of journalism in Ireland

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*In a time of rapid technological change, journalism has been plagued by questions that prod at its core tenets and practices. **Irish Journalism before Independence** provides a timely and accessible examination into the heart of the profession as it developed under Ireland's seismic political and cultural shifts. Reviewed by **Danielle Moran**.*



Irish Journalism before Independence. Kevin Rafter. Manchester University Press. October 2011.

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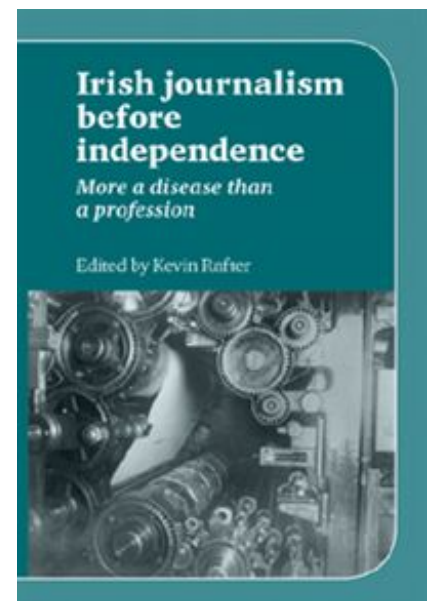
Considering the evolution of Irish journalism through an interdisciplinary lens, this book does not follow any thematic or chronological approach and while this description may sound hectic, it is this quality that allows the book to stay true to the core of journalistic practice. It is, as editor, [Kevin Rafter](#) writes, "like good journalism, this is a volume of stories."

Rafter has chosen to book-end the text with two dates of major importance in Irish history; the Act of Union in 1800 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922. Earlier publications are acknowledged in the opening chapters, notably by Mark O'Brien, however as the profession developed into a regular and recognisable form through the 19th century it is a wise decision to focus on this period.

The varied backgrounds of the well-chosen contributors span both journalism and academia. The variation of authors and chosen topics enables the relatively short text to traverse astounding ground; from offering an extended discussion about the power of the Irish press to influence the political and cultural identity of the emerging nation, to detailed accounts of the role of journalists at local and national level alongside some of the more prominent Irish journalists further afield in London and the US.

Following the trail of Irish journalism at local, national and international level, a valuable inclusion is Matthew Potter's contribution, 'Keeping an eye on the Tsar: Frederick Potter and the *Skibbereen Eagle*', in which the author illustrates the various roles played by Potter – those of entrepreneur, employer, propagandist, politician and social reformer. Potter's addition adds an enjoyable narrative (and perhaps some lessons for those of the tabloid press) and highlights how the "outlandish, exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek tone" of the Editor served to ensure the local newspaper's survival for over forty years.

The volume is also richer for the detailed personal histories of the journalists singled out. Peter Murtagh's discussion of William Howard Russell of *The Times* and his dispatches during the Crimean War provide a valuable window into the timeless struggles of journalism and are of particular relevance



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when considering the failings of some traditional media during the recent Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The value of the full-time journalist travelling either independently or with armed forces across military zones while not being subject to military discipline is something that risks being forgotten in the rush to embrace citizen journalism.

Of course, the text would not be complete without Terence Killeen's perusal of James Joyce's early forays into journalism and an examination of his 'world of words', *Ulysses*, as a sometimes painfully honest, but overwhelming embrace of the newspaper world of 1904.

The journalists singled out can be unified by the exercise of a sense of public purpose in their careers, however, an examination of the cultural and political power of the press is the strongest thematic link throughout many of these stories. In particular, as Ireland moves towards a new cultural identity and a new political rule the role of the press becomes quietly paramount.

Regina Uí Chollastáin's questions of the role of minority language media in a society where the minority is recognized as the national language for all could hold interesting thoughts for others working to increase the use of a minority language, for example the growing use of Catalan in Spain. It could be noted that Uí Chollastáin's criticisms would be better served alongside an examination of the full minority language media, such as Irish-language broadcaster, TG4, but her argument regarding print media is worth consideration.

The closing chapters of the book offers an interesting portrayal of Ireland's shift from colonial to post-colonial society and the activities of the press that accompanied this change in political climate. Felix M Larkin charts Arthur Griffiths' activities as editor of the *Freeman's Journal* and his relentless and viciously polemical journalistic writings which in part, contributed to the decline of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Ciara Meehan considers Griffith as 'most effective in his editorial chair' whose writings shaped a generation of young separatists while he often filled the roles of editor, columnist and typesetter. Griffith's journalism reflected public opinions but also shaped them and Meehan notes that while the events of Easter 1916 came as a surprise to many in both England and Ireland, the readers of *Sinn Féin* (amongst other publications) would have been somewhat familiar with the rumblings of discontent.

Issues of censorship were faced by all publications – not just the more radical papers – in 1919 and 1920 as Irish press were hit with a series of legislative attacks from Dublin Castle. Ian Kenneally's concluding piece provides an original and fascinating account of the role of the three main newspapers of the time, the *Freeman's Journal*, *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times*, as peacemakers. The role of the *Freeman's Journal* in negotiations for a truce and the *Irish Independent's* publishing of a telegram from acting President of Sinn Féin, Micheal O'Flanagan to Lloyd George did not lead directly to peace but did lead to the creation of tentative contacts between the Dáil and Dublin Castle administration that would result in talks leading to peace. *The Irish Times* too had pushed endlessly for a peaceful settlement in Ireland since its conversion to Home Rule in 1920.

This text is ultimately a valuable collection. At once it details and deflates the power of the press in the most volatile of political and cultural environments and its role in determining public opinion. The role of the main newspapers in secretly assisting with political negotiations and in publically pressuring the government of the day is thoroughly examined alongside a series of detailed and fascinating illustrations of the careers of some of the most prominent Irish journalists. Consistently engaging and informative, this text remains true to the journalism that lies at its core and is truly a volume of stories for academics, students but perhaps most of all for those who have caught the journalistic bug.

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