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IRELAND AND THE BIRTH OF THE IRISH-AMERICAN PRESS, 1842–61

Cian McMahon

A new kind of newspaper appeared on American newsstands in the 1840s: the Irish-American weekly journal. Newspapers representing the concerns of Irish immigrants, such as the *United States Catholic Miscellany* and *Truth Teller*, had existed before the 1840s. In deference to the Church, however, these journals had defined themselves as more “Catholic” than “Irish,” while their circulations tended to be regional. For example, in 1833, the New York *Truth Teller* was the dominant Irish-oriented American-Catholic newspaper at the time, and yet its circulation was only 3,000.¹ Two factors sparked the advent of an *Irish-American* press. First, the Great Famine sent hundreds of thousands of Irish (approximately half of whom were literate) streaming into American towns and cities.² A new readership was formed. The second important factor, and the focus of this article, was the arrival of radical republicans from Ireland who brought with them years of newspaper experience back home. These were the exiled Young Irelanders who had been forced to flee Ireland following their failed rebellion of 1848. In the 1840s and ‘50s, these new editors and their readers combined to give birth to a popular press that identified itself first and foremost as Irish.

But what was *Irish* about this new Irish-American press? This article breaks new ground by unearthing the personal, commercial, and ideological connections between the nineteenth-century Irish-American press and Ireland. It argues that links with home played a critical role in shaping the Irish-American press during its genesis in the late 1840s and ‘50s. Irish-American newspapers drew the United States into an integrated, transatlantic Irish conversation. It is only when we understand the living connections between the home country and its far-flung emigrant communities that the full picture of American immigration comes into sharp relief. This is, in other words, a story of people who were both *immigrants* and *emigrants*.

There were several reasons why the mid-nineteenth-century weekly newspaper was well-suited to be a medium of transoceanic exchange. Anyone with some paper, pens, ink, and enough money to pay the local printer could start his own weekly rag. If newspapers were cheap to produce, they were also cheap to buy. Terms were negotiated according to what the local market could bear, and the proliferation of reading rooms meant that literate folk could read the Saturday papers at a cost of next to nothing. Lower stamp duties combined with innovations in steam power to make the mass production and transportation of weekly newspapers more affordable and easy. On a more private level, newspapers offered succinct, detailed reports on what was going on in one's local community while also acting as personal tokens of remembrance between distant friends and relatives.

This essay looks at two case-studies to examine how ties with home influenced the progress and development of these new Irish-American newspapers. The article is divided into three parts. It begins in Ireland with the spectacular success of the Young Ireland weekly newspaper, the *Dublin Nation*, between its founding in October 1842 and suppression in July 1848. During those years, the editorial office of the *Nation* served as a training-ground for people who would later play critical roles in the Irish-American press. Part Two follows one of those Young Ireland editors, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, into exile in the United States, where he soon became an important player in the Irish-American periodical scene. Part Three focuses on the trials and tribulations of another Young Irishman, Thomas Francis Meagher. After his arrest and transportation in 1848 to the British penal colony of Van Diemen's Land, Meagher escaped to America in 1852 where he eventually founded his own Irish weekly in New York City. The experiences of these men offer clear examples of how connections with home shaped the Irish-American press.

I

In the summer of 1842, a clique of young, educated, middle-class Irishmen sat under an elm tree in Dublin's Phoenix Park and founded a political weekly newspaper that they called the *Nation*. All were experienced newspaper writers and all were under the age of thirty. Over the next six years, these men and their newspaper would serve as the locus of what would come to be called the Young Ireland movement, a radical segment of Daniel O'Connell's Loyal National Repeal Association (LNRA). The LNRA was one of Europe's first political movements based on mass mobilization. It sought to gain Irish legislative independence by dissolving the Act of Union (1801) that had constitutionally enshrined Ireland in the United Kingdom. Between the founding of the *Nation* in 1842 and the outbreak of their brief and ineffectual

rebellion in 1848, the Young Irelanders evolved from loyal followers to polite critics to sworn enemies of O'Connell's constitutional and moral-force agitation. The Young Irelanders were far too republican, too secular, and too prone to the then-fashionable rhetoric of violence for O'Connell's conservative movement. Within a few years, their newspaper, which began as an auxiliary of the LNRA, had become its enemy.

The gap between O'Connell's "Old Ireland" and the radical "Young Ireland" ran deeper than mere disagreement over policy. O'Connellism was rooted in eighteenth-century English Enlightenment and its goal for Repeal of the Union was the achievement of Irish equality within a loosely defined British federation. The Young Irelanders, on the other hand, were cultural nationalists heavily influenced by German Romanticism.³ Their goal for Repeal was the complete independence of the Irish *volk*. For Young Ireland, national sovereignty was justified by the cultural individuality of the Irish nation, and they sought to use their newspaper, the *Nation*, to construct and disseminate a feeling of ethnic distinctiveness amongst the Irish people. Their journal was to be the central thrust in a multi-pronged campaign to will a nation into existence. This program was reflected in the paper's motto: "To create and foster public opinion in Ireland and make it racy of the soil."⁴ The notion of the cultural uniqueness of the Irish people relied heavily on historical awareness of the country's Gaelic roots, and strong emphasis was placed on the glorification of traditional music, literature, history, and vernacular. "A nation should guard its language more than its territories," exhorted Thomas Davis, the leading ideologue of the clique, "'tis a surer barrier and more important frontier than fortress or river."⁵ This emphasis on the essential, cultural distinctiveness of the Irish people would later resound popularly with immigrants in America.

The *Nation* was a massive hit when it arrived on Irish newsstands on the morning of October 15, 1842. Despite having printed far more copies than was usual for the most popular journals in Dublin at the time, the first edition was sold out by noon. In their frenzy to procure more copies, news vendors broke a window of the *Nation's* office.⁶ Describing itself as physically "the largest paper ever published in Ireland," the *Nation's* circulation ballooned within a few months to over 10,000. With an average estimated readership of twenty-five per copy, the paper was being read by about a quarter of a million people each week.⁷ These were unprecedented numbers in Ireland at the time, and the success was thanks in large part to its rural popularity.⁸ John Blake Dillon, a co-founder of the organ, was surprised by how well the paper was received in his remote hometown of Ballaghaderreen. "I was quite astonished to find how successful the *Nation* has been [here]," he wrote to the head-editor Charles Gavan Duffy from the village. "You would not guess how many *Nations* came in to it on Sunday last—no less than 23. There are scarcely so many houses in the town...!"⁹ The

Nation also established an exchange list with other newspapers at home and abroad, swapping free copies of its own issues with those of other papers. With the success of the paper came expansion. New editors and contributors were hired, including committed young men like Thomas Francis Meagher, a law student from County Waterford, and Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a County Louth Catholic who had had newspaper experience in both the United States and England.

Ireland's rapturous applause for the Dublin *Nation* was echoed in America. In Boston, an entrepreneur named Patrick Donahoe was in the midst of fashioning a national circulation for his sputtering *Boston Pilot* (which had been renamed in honor of the pro-O'Connell weekly Dublin *Pilot*). The keystone of Donahoe's plan for expansion was the decision to pitch the paper as an Irish-American rather than an American-Catholic one.¹⁰ He published much more Irish news, loudly supported O'Connell's Repeal, and established contacts with newspapers in Ireland.¹¹ The maneuver paid off. Circulation numbers that had stood at 680 in December 1838 reached 7,000 by 1844.¹² An important part of this push to become more "Irish" was the establishment of closer contact with Repeal newspapers in the home country. When the Dublin *Nation* appeared in 1842, it seemed to offer much of what Donahoe had been looking for.

Six weeks after the Dublin *Nation*'s inaugural number, the *Boston Pilot* proudly announced that it had received "the three first numbers issued" of the Dublin paper, "and unhesitatingly award to it the highest merit." Eager to foster the fledgling network of transatlantic Irish news and opinion, the *Pilot* was happy to add the *Nation* to their exchange list "and should be pleased to do the same with every liberal Repeal paper in Ireland." The Bostonians expressed annoyance that the Dublin *Freeman's Journal* was the only Irish paper they "received regularly as an exchange." All others had to be paid for. This was "a great expense" to which the *Pilot* went "in order to furnish our readers with the fullest possible intelligence from that country." Building on the momentum of a new exchange agreement with the Dublin *Nation*, the *Pilot* wanted to encourage a network of free exchanges between Irish and Irish-American newspapers and declared their trust that "a more liberal and *Irish* spirit will in future govern the Irish Press in their intercourse with the Repeal Press of America," especially at a time when "the United States holds the relation it now does, to the popular movement in Ireland." The potential "mutual advantages" of exchange and intercourse should never be lost sight of "in any selfish desire for pay."¹³

What were these mutual advantages to which the *Boston Pilot* alluded? Close ties with periodicals on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean certainly gave newspapers social capital in their own home-countries. For example, Irish papers with connections in America had access to the ears (and pockets) of the gathering force of Irish America

at a time when Irish nationalism was beginning to look abroad for its strength. Friends in the free republic of the United States were an important asset in the politics of nineteenth-century Ireland. Similarly, strong ties with the old country gave Irish-American newspapers a mantle of cultural authenticity. They could claim to have their finger on the pulse of the motherland. This was especially important at a time when news from abroad was subject to both long travel times and distortion by others. Irish and Irish-American newspapers could transmit to each other reliable, "Irish" versions of stories and events that would otherwise be subject to the prejudice of the London press. Young Ireland recognized the importance of having an Irish view of the world and rued the tendency to look "at all the rest of the world through the spectacles of Anglican prejudice."¹⁴ Of course, having news transmitted across the ocean also saved money. It was much cheaper to subscribe to or exchange with other newspapers than to hire and maintain foreign correspondents. Finally, newspapers from across the ocean presented no threat to each other's subscription lists. The *Boston Pilot* was in the process of becoming the national paper of Irish-America and its proprietor, Patrick Donahoe, recognized the crucial role newspapers from home played in the realization of that goal.

Back in Ireland, the outbreak of the Great Famine in 1845 radicalized the Young Irelanders even further. They formally split from the LNRA in 1846, and, a year later, O'Connell died in Genoa while on a pilgrimage to Rome. Finally, in 1848, a number of Young Irelanders fomented an armed rebellion that amounted to little more than a skirmish with the police in a tiny village in County Tipperary. The *Nation* was immediately suppressed and most of its staff arrested, but a few managed to escape and make their way to safety in the United States. One such escapee was Thomas D'Arcy McGee, who stole away, dressed as a priest, in August 1848.

II

McGee's escape to exile was not his first time in America. Six years earlier, aged seventeen, he had immigrated to Boston where a combination of natural talent and fortuitous family connections had landed him a job at the *Boston Pilot*, then beginning its meteoric rise. McGee started off not as an apprentice in the print-shop but as a junior in the editorial office of the paper. His tasks were many and varied, including cutting and pasting columns from newspapers lately arrived from around the country and abroad. He also spent time as a traveling agent and as a special correspondent for the paper, experiences that gave him wider contacts in the world of American journalism, as well as Irish America. In less than two years, he had worked his way up to become head-editor of the paper, a position he held for a year between

April 1844 and May 1845. McGee longed for home, though, and in the summer of 1845, returned to Dublin and immediately joined the *Nation* staff under the editorship of the fiery Presbyterian John Mitchel. Soon, divisions would begin to appear within the newspaper's office, with one branch siding with John Mitchel and the other supporting the more moderate line of McGee and Charles Gavan Duffy.

Following the Young Ireland rebellion three years later, McGee was back in the United States, this time as a bona fide political exile. With very little money to his name, he decided to keep himself gainfully and honorably employed by founding a newspaper. Events in Ireland played a critical role in his new enterprise. His leadership in the *Dublin Nation* and his association with the 1848 rebels, for example, gave McGee great social capital in America and made him an important person in the New York Irish scene. Any venture was guaranteed a decent readership. His experiences with the Dublin journal had also convinced him of the need in America for a secular, republican newspaper dedicated to Irish freedom. He would leave pro-clericalism to other papers such as the *New York Freeman's Journal* (which, like the *Boston Pilot*, had also been named after a Dublin predecessor).

On October 28, 1848, just six weeks after his arrival in the United States, McGee issued the first number of his new paper, the *New York Nation*, which dedicated itself to both "Ireland and her Emigrants." The title had been explicitly copied from the successful Young Ireland organ. McGee's new paper was meant, as he described in the prospectus, to be "an American sequel to the [Dublin] *Nation*, to supply its place as far as possible." "In its principles and conduct," assured McGee, "the new *Nation* will resemble the old as far as it is in our power to imitate so exalted an original." In particular, the New York version would emphasize "that prime object more especially—the combination and elevation of the world-wide [Irish] race." The need to counter the lies of the *London Times* was as important in New York as it had been in Dublin, and the new *Nation* featured a regular column entitled "Fallacies of the British Press." While Irish experience played a pivotal role in shaping the new paper, it is undeniable that McGee's newspaper experience in the United States had also given him an edge. Publishing the new paper in three cities simultaneously, for example, was a savvy maneuver which allowed him to save postage costs by evading heavy levies enforced on newspapers carried more than thirty miles.¹⁵

McGee eagerly entered into reciprocal exchange and subscription agreements with Dublin papers to ensure his columns were filled with the latest news, opinion, and gossip from the old country. In an effort to increase circulation and maintain a public presence in Ireland, he also strove to build a list of subscribers for his paper back home. An advertisement in the inaugural number advertised that agents were wanted "in all Towns and Cities in the [American] Union, the British Provinces and Ireland."¹⁶ Within a couple of months, there were sellers

listed in Dublin, Limerick, Wexford, and Strabane and more would later be added in Navan and Cork. Of course, Irish-Americans could pay for subscriptions for friends and family back home. "Persons in America who wish the Paper sent annually (post paid) to Ireland," he advertised, "can have it done from our Office, by paying \$4 per year, or \$2 per half year—the postage being in every case prepaid at our office." Subscribers in Ireland who wished to save a little money by circumventing their local agents "can do so by remitting us £1 for a year, or 10 shillings for half a year."¹⁷ Even in the United States, circulation and advertising relied on confederate credentials from home. For example, one of the paper's first traveling salesmen in upstate New York was John O'Byrne, whose trustworthiness derived from his being the "late President of the Mitchel [Repeal] Club, Dublin."¹⁸

While working on his new paper in America, McGee kept in contact with his old friends and confederates back home. Charles Gavan Duffy, who revived the *Dublin Nation* in 1849 after his release from prison, was his closest and most important friend. On several occasions, Duffy tried to convince McGee to return to Ireland, offering him a quarter share in the revived paper. Although the threat of arrest had largely subsided, McGee would not be moved. He felt obligated to the poor Irish immigrants in America. "Seven months ago I entered this city with £11 in my purse," he wrote to Duffy. "[S]ince then I received 5,000 dollars, all of which has been sunk, as it came in" into the *Nation*. McGee therefore felt himself "bound to our outcasts." "My little *Nation* in 1850, will give me personal independence," he assured his old friend, which was "all I want or wish for."¹⁹ The two stayed in touch, however, and continued to provide support to each other's newspapers. This reciprocity often took the shape of looking into business problems on behalf of one another. The story of the *Dublin Nation*'s shifty New York agent offers an excellent example.

The habit of using transatlantic agents to sell one's paper was risky. Given the distances, lack of accountability, and time it took for correspondence and packages to travel back and forth, one could lose a fair amount of money before realizing something was wrong. Here, a friend in the business was invaluable. Duffy had entrusted a man named John Hetherington Drum as New York agent for the *Dublin Nation* to create and sustain a market in the United States for the paper, but the deal had gone sour. "After twenty weeks Drum has remitted only £12, meantime I have expended £160 on furnishing him with papers," Duffy complained in a letter to McGee. "I am embarrassed for funds, and this has become intolerable." He needed McGee's help. "Will you have the goodness to see Drum?" pleaded Duffy. "If he does not settle his account promptly I will appoint some other agent. May I ask you in this case to find one for me?" Duffy was frustrated with the United States market. "Hitherto the American agency has been an oppressive drain," he confided. "Ireland is growing poorer and poorer

every day, but she is still honester and more punctual than Irish America.”²⁰ “The American agency needs to be put upon a safe footing, and security given on this side of the ocean for punctual payment,” continued Duffy, otherwise “it would be better never to send a paper across the Atlantic.” By the middle of 1850, the *Dublin Nation* was advertising (in the pages of McGee’s *New York Nation*) that it had a new American agent, Thomas M. Halpin.²¹ Did McGee fire Drum and hire Halpin on Duffy’s behalf? We may never know. The important point to garner from the whole exchange is that the business dealings of Irish and Irish-American newspapers were inextricably linked to each other. The case of the indebted Mr. Drum offers a good example of the role that connections with home played in the Irish-American press.

If ideas and arguments brought from home were important to the rise of McGee’s *New York Nation*, they were also central to its fall in 1850. The separation of Church and State had always played an important—albeit contentious—role in Young Ireland political philosophy and reflected the group’s ambivalent relationship with the Catholic clergy. The outbreak of violence in 1848, however, drew a line between Young Ireland and the Church. Soon after founding the *New York Nation*, McGee reopened old wounds by launching an intemperate attack on the Catholic clergy, blaming it for the ignominious failure of the 1848 uprising. When news of McGee’s attack on the clergy reached Dublin, Charles Gavan Duffy felt compelled to offer advice. “My friend, your anger is misleading you,” he counseled McGee in a letter dated August 1849, “[y]ou do not act wisely in attacking the bishops and priests in that style.” Later in the year, Duffy repeated “you are angry, and therefore unreasonable,” adding that nothing “has been done against you but what was done against the old *Nation*.” Back then, “we minded our work and let it blow by.” McGee should now do the same. “A wise navigator does not preach sermons against the rocks ahead,” counseled the elder editor, “but takes entirely different precautions.”²²

In America, the Catholic hierarchy offered a robust reply to McGee in the pages of the *New York Freeman’s Journal*. It came from the pen of the powerful Bishop J.J. Hughes, the Irish-born religious and moral leader of mid-nineteenth-century Irish America. In a series of letters over several months, Hughes excoriated McGee and his fellow rebels for blaming their failure on the clergy. The priests, wrote Hughes, “would have been faithless to their obligations of religion and of humanity” if they had not attempted to avert the “certain and inevitable consequences of a movement so nobly conceived but so miserably conducted.” Worse than all of this, though, was McGee’s religious infidelity. He belonged, continued Hughes, to “an Irish tribe whose hearts have apostasized from the honoured creed of their country, but whose lips have not yet mustered the bad courage to disavow the faith of their fathers.” The Bishop delivered his death-blow by urging that “every diocese, every parish and every Catholic door should be closed

against the [New York] *Nation*.” McGee continued to resist for as long as he could, but the effect of Hughes’ condemnation was fatal to the newspaper. “The Bishop’s word was law in the [New York] *Nation*’s constituency,” concludes historian Isabel Skelton.²³ Subscriptions and advertisements dwindled to a trickle, and by the middle of 1850, the paper was financially unviable. An old fight from home had been transplanted across the ocean to devastating effect.²⁴

McGee closed the New York *Nation* in June 1850. After briefly considering a return to Ireland, he moved instead to Boston where he attempted to make a living on lecturing, while collecting materials for a book which would later be published as *The History of Irish Settlers in North America* (1852). Encouraged by moral support and financial donations from admirers in the United States, McGee re-entered the arena of journalism later in 1850, founding a new weekly paper in Boston entitled the *American Celt*. Once again, the title indicated McGee’s ideological connections with the old country, where a Celtic racial identity had played a key role in the case for national sovereignty. At the same time, however, the new newspaper represented an about-face in McGee’s socio-political philosophy. The *American Celt*’s editorial line was far more conservative than had been the New York *Nation*’s, and almost immediately it began espousing the importance of the Catholic faith to the health and welfare of Irish immigrants in America. In its prospectus, McGee expressed the wish to “commence on a clean tablet, with fresh pencils” and leave behind the “controversies,” “errors and omissions of the past.”²⁵

Historians have debated the roots of McGee’s shift from radicalism to conservatism, but most agree it was the honest mellowing of a man for whom, aside from a sometimes fraught relationship with the clergy, Catholicism had always been a part of his life. While the change to conservative Catholicism made new friends for McGee, it also deepened the division between himself and the more radical members of the Young Irelanders. Particularly strong criticism came from some of his former Dublin colleagues who had been captured and transported to Van Diemen’s Land in the wake of the 1848 rebellion. In 1852, while McGee was moving the *American Celt* from Boston to Buffalo, one of those former allies, Thomas Francis Meagher, escaped from Tasmania and sailed to New York City, where he was welcomed with open arms by an Irish community dazzled by his celebrity. Like McGee, Meagher would manipulate connections with home to carve a living for himself in the Irish-American immigrant press.

III

Though exiled to the ends of the earth, Thomas Francis Meagher and his fellow transportees remained closely in tune with Irish public

conversation during the course of their imprisonment in Australia. From deep in the southern hemisphere, their voices were heard in Ireland and America through open letters to the editors of various newspapers. Regardless of to whom these letters were originally addressed, their contents were freely copied and published in the columns of other newspapers at home and abroad. If this allowed the Young Irishlanders to speak, they could also hear through the copies of different newspapers that were mailed and smuggled to them by friends, families, and well-wishers around the world. Through this circulatory system of communication and information, the conditions and opinions of Meagher and his friends remained a part of the landscape of contemporary Irish domestic political culture.

Editors and journalists like Charles Gavan Duffy were lynchpins in this global dialogue. Upon re-founding the *Nation* in 1849, Duffy took it upon himself to keep the exiles in Tasmania as well-stocked as possible with newspapers and books from home. In a letter to Meagher sent via a "friendly priest," Duffy reminded his friend that "Three months ago I sent you a file of the *Nation* up to that time. I now send you three complete files of the first year. One for yourself, one for Martin, and one for McManus [fellow prisoners]." Duffy thanked Meagher for "your public letter" to the Dublin *Nation* which had "produced a profound impression." Reading a copy of the newspaper "will shew you this better than any commentary" while simultaneously presenting "the best history of my year's work."²⁶ For Duffy and his friends, newspapers were succinct representations of history in the making.

The moral leader of the exiled prisoners, the stately landlord William Smith O'Brien, served as the key nexus of information for the prisoners and their neighbors in southern Australia. He loved to add to his collection of reading material and told his wife he was happy to share with his friends "for whom I keep a sort of circulating library."²⁷ With such invaluable material, however, the librarian had to be stern. In one of his regular letters to fellow exile Kevin Izod O'Doherty, Smith O'Brien described the arrival of a parcel of Dublin *Nations*. "Of them I send one today," he grumbled, "but I will forward no more until you send back the former numbers which I placed in your hands about six weeks ago." Smith O'Brien was fed up with the O'Doherty. "There are several persons in this neighbourhood who desire to read the *Nation*," he reminded the young doctor, "and if you do not send them back are denied of the opportunity of reading it."²⁸

With the help of an old friend from Ireland along with some American dollars and Australian hospitality, Meagher escaped from Van Diemen's Land in January 1852. After five months on the open sea, he arrived at the New York law offices of his old friends and Young Ireland confederates Richard O'Gorman and John Blake Dillon, who had both escaped imprisonment in 1848. Within a few months, Meagher excitedly wrote back to Duffy in Dublin to tell him that he and his friends

were considering starting a new Irish newspaper in the United States. Could they rely on their old editor for the odd article or letter? The new paper promised to be “one very much based upon the principles of the [Dublin] ‘Nation,’” he told Duffy, though, given its American audience, one “somewhat more fully generalizing the Irish cause.”²⁹

Meagher was disgusted by the narrow-minded Catholicism of the contemporary Irish-American press. “I declare to God!” he fumed, “I have found infinitely more bigotry and intolerance in this country, amongst our countrymen, than ever I was sensible of in Ireland.” He blamed the prejudice on a lack of creditable, Irish nationalist organs. There were “none but these ‘American Catholic papers’ which are worse, every one of them in point of liberality, decency, truth (in many cases, in point of style) than the [Dublin] ‘Pilot’ in the hopeless days of the O’Connellite imposture.” Such rags “circulate freely amongst the Irish—their titles and professions take with the poor fellows and the credulity of our countrymen give them the weight and sanctity of the gospel.” Meagher excluded “not one of these holy journals.” “I include the ‘American Celt’—McGee’s paper—amongst them,” he declared, “indeed, and willing to award it a pre-eminence.”

The years had changed McGee, wrote Meagher. He was a different man from the one who had worked on the Dublin *Nation*. “I have then to warn you,” continued Meagher, “he is not to be relied upon—has no conscience, no goodness, no generosity—is a mere trickster in politics, is treacherous, and selfishness.” McGee “and men like him—the Editors of the [New York] ‘Freeman’s Journal’, ‘Boston Pilot’, ‘Shepherd in the Valley’,” were guilty of “doing incalculable mischief—lowering the character—encouraging the vices, and diseasing the strength of Ireland in this republic.” Meagher and his friends wanted to “avert this evil—to repair the damage—to spread good seed, where weeds and poisoned plants have been thickly set—to build up a great Irish power.” To this end they would stand by “the memory and teaching of Davis,” the late poet and leading ideologue of Young Ireland. Meagher ended the letter by inviting Duffy’s “cordial co-operation.”³⁰ He wanted to stem the tide of American Catholic bigotry with good, hearty Irish republicanism.

The plan with O’Gorman and Dillon failed to materialize, however, probably because the others were successfully engaged in building their legal practices in New York. Meagher kept a relatively low profile for the first year of his life in the United States, but things changed in 1853 with the escape from Van Diemen’s Land and subsequent arrival in America of former Dublin *Nation* editor John Mitchel. In January 1854, Mitchel founded a secular republican weekly in New York entitled the *Citizen* with Meagher as his part-time assistant. Thanks in large part to the celebrity status of its co-founders, the paper’s circulation exploded on the scene at 50,000. Old rivalries from their Young Ireland days were reawakened by the establishment of the new paper.

Within a couple of weeks, James Haughton, a well-respected Quaker abolitionist living in Dublin, wrote an open letter to Meagher. Haughton had always been troubled by the tendency of certain Young Irelanders to equivocate on the subject of American slavery, and he took the new opportunity to publicly call on Meagher and his associates in the United States to come out and flatly declare against the peculiar institution. Keenly aware of his newcomer status in America and unwilling to fan the flames of this contentious subject, Meagher modestly replied in a highly formal open letter to Haughton. He was not yet an American citizen. Therefore, "Mr. Meagher... postpones till then his declaration of opinion regarding African slavery in America, and every other question affecting the joint compact and constitution of the several States."³¹ Meagher was using his in-between status as declared alien to tiptoe around the most difficult debate in American society. The *Citizen* collapsed a year later, largely due to public dissatisfaction over the provocative pro-slavery of John Mitchel's editorials. Meagher, who was by then hardly involved in the paper, returned to practicing law the following year. He was called to the New York bar by special license in September 1855, but a successful American law career never panned out for him.

In 1856 he re-considered the idea of founding a weekly Irish-American journal, and on April 12th the New York *Irish News* made its first appearance on the streets, dedicating its columns to "the Irish at home and abroad."³² Like the *Citizen* before it, the *Irish News* enjoyed a spectacular circulation of 50,000 within a short period of time, largely due to the reputation of its proprietor-editor as an impenitent Irish rebel.³³ The new paper pursued a far less contentious editorial line than had the *Citizen*. Its politics were in line with the New York Democrats, supporting southern states' rights generally while remaining neutral on the problem of slavery. The staff and operations of the *Irish News* were also heavily influenced by Meagher's connections from home. Former Young Irelanders such as John Savage and Richard J. Lalor served as Literary Editor and Business Manager respectively. Meagher's assistant editor was James Roche, who had extensive experience in the Irish newspaper business, having formerly served as editor of the pro-Repeal *Kilkenny Journal*. The new paper also had a Dublin correspondent, in this case Patrick J. Smyth, another Young Ireland rebel who had organized and coordinated Meagher's escape from Van Diemen's Land. Smyth would later run a major Dublin weekly of his own, entitled the *Irishman*.

A few months into the enterprise, Meagher turned again to Ireland for support. This time he called upon his old mentor, William Smith O'Brien, who had returned to Ireland after being pardoned by the British Crown. Meagher explained to O'Brien that he was starting the newspaper not out of any love for politics or public life, but strictly out of "necessity." Lecturing kept him away from his new wife too much

and law was proving unprofitable, so "I decided on the paper as the best project within reach." His goal was to create "a pleasant 'home journal' for our people out here" but one "with a few features of more general interest, to render it welcome to the more literary portion of the American public." O'Brien had recently toured Greece with his son, and Meagher asked him "as a personal favour" to send him for publication "a few of your reminiscences abroad." Such letters from O'Brien "will very, very advantageously assist me," confided Meagher.³⁴ O'Brien agreed to contribute and for a few months, beginning in May 1857, a series of his letters entitled "Personal Recollections: Three Months in Greece" dominated the "Literary Section" of the *Irish News*.

Beyond the indispensable network of selling agents in the United States and Canada, Meagher's new paper also had agents in Ireland. "[We] have regularly mailed several hundred copies to our agent, Mr. Plasto, of 144 Upper Abbey street, Dublin," he assured his readers in the business columns of the paper, "and likewise to our friend Mr. Condon, of Waterford, for sale and distribution as specimens." The business office would also be happy to "regularly send a copy of the *News* to any part of Ireland, on receipt of subscription at the rate of 16 s[hillings] sterling per annum."³⁵ As so often happened in such transatlantic dealings, however, agents fell into arrears. In 1857, Meagher complained that in "justice to ourselves we could not continue to send the *News* to Dublin, to Mr. Plasto, for he did not pay us one penny for all he had. We will endeavor to procure another and it is to be hoped an honest Agent."³⁶ Exchanges with Irish papers were eagerly sought and cheerfully reciprocated, but the *Irish News* was not immune to the recurrent problems with this practice either. "We have to complain of some of our Irish exchanges for making wholesale appropriations of original matter from our columns, without the slightest acknowledgment," wrote Meagher in December 1856. "The *Waterford Chronicle* has been, week after week, with the coolest and most systematic piracy, transferring to its pages The Fortunes of Casement O'Reilly, utterly ignoring the source from which it was derived," he protested. While reluctant to complain "of our old fellow-citizens," the editor nevertheless felt compelled to "expose such premeditated pilfering."³⁷ The exchange of information could sometimes be a double-edged sword.

After three years at the helm, Meagher gave up the editorship of the *Irish News* in 1859 and traveled to Central America where he explored business opportunities in Costa Rica and Panama.³⁸ In early 1861 he returned to the United States and though a pro-southern Democrat, determined to support the Union in the Civil War. In April 1861 he was commissioned captain of a company of Irish Zouaves in the 69th New York Militia. His dashing bravery in the ranks and (more importantly to the Federal government) his ability to recruit large numbers of Irish immigrants, led to his promotion to colonel and, in

February 1862, to Brigadier-General of the famed "Irish Brigade" in the Army of the Potomac. While on the march and in camp, newspapers from Ireland still managed to find their way to him and his soldiers. In an open letter to the editor of the *Dublin Citizen*, Meagher thanked him for having "sent me your paper constantly." The issues had served as both a source of news and as personal "evidences of your remembrance." Camp life made it difficult to stay in touch with events in the United States, let alone Ireland, and yet "Strange to say, however, the *Dublin Citizen* used to make its way to me across the ocean, down to Washington, over the Potomac, into the heart of Virginia. Many a pleasant hour it brought me, in the midst of the cares, worryings, hardships, and hard knocks of a campaign."³⁹ Newspapers sent directly from Ireland comprised a thread in the fabric of Civil War military life.

IV

The Young Irelanders and their various newspapers show the important role that links with Ireland played in the development of the Irish-American press during its birth as a phenomenon in the 1840s and '50s. The practice of establishing exchange lists and reciprocal subscriptions enabled the free transmission of news and opinions between the Irish at home and abroad. Personal connections such as the friendships among Duffy, McGee, Meagher, and O'Brien brought a level of trust and efficiency into business dealings and intellectual interactions that would have otherwise been absent. The habit of naming new newspapers in the United States after old newspapers in Ireland showed that Irish-American owners and editors realized the critical importance of being associated with ideologies and platforms from home. Their readers demanded it.

The unearthing of these links between the nineteenth-century United States and its immigrants' countries of origin will force scholars of antebellum American reading culture to broaden their horizons. First, it is indubitable that the news and opinions that American readers were being exposed to was far more cosmopolitan than previous studies have assumed. Newspapers from all over the world were being regularly imported into the United States where excerpts were gathered, clipped, and re-published week after week by editors of both the immigrant and mainstream popular presses. Second, the experience of the Irish-American press illustrates that immigrant newspapers did not exist in an American bubble. Socio-political and economic conditions in the United States were certainly of critical importance, but there was also a transnational aspect to the story that needs to be considered. In the case studied here, the Irish-American press was part of a wider, global network of communication amongst Irish people at home and abroad.

NOTES

¹ William Leonard Joyce, *Editors and Ethnicity: A History of the Irish-American Press, 1848–1883* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 54.

² Figures on literacy in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland are notoriously difficult to ascertain due to uneven records and regional variation. Most historians agree, however, that in 1841, literacy for the country as a whole stood at a little less than 50%, with residents of the north and east doing better than those in the south and west. See Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 70–71. Conditions were improving rapidly, however, and by 1861 over 60% of the population was literate. See D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2005), 275.

³ Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell, 1830–1847* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 28. For more on the ideological differences between O'Connell and Young Ireland, see Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 22–24.

⁴ *Nation* (Dublin), October 15, 1842.

⁵ Miscellaneous clippings, n.d. [1842] (Thomas Davis papers, Ms. 14056, NLI).

⁶ Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History, 1840–1845* (Dublin: M.H. McGill & Son, 1884), 23.

⁷ Duffy, *Young Ireland*, 145.

⁸ Figuring out accurate population figures for nineteenth-century Ireland is fraught with difficulty, but the general consensus is that the Irish population was approximately 8.4 million in 1841. Population was increasing the fastest in rural areas. See Joe Lee, “On Accuracy of the Pre-Famine Irish Census,” in *Irish Population, Economy and Society: Essays in Honour of the Late K.H. Connell*, eds. J.M. Goldstrom and L.A. Clarkson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 37–56.

⁹ John Blake Dillon to Charles Gavan Duffy, n.d. [early 1843] (Charles Gavan Duffy papers, Ms. 5756, NLI). For Duffy's account of the letter, see Duffy, *Young Ireland*, 70.

¹⁰ Joyce, *Editors and Ethnicity*, 54.

¹¹ Joyce, *Editors and Ethnicity*, 52–54. It is important not to over-simplify the dichotomy between “American-Catholic” and “Irish-Nationalist” newspapers. The line between the two was often ambivalent, and mainstream newspapers like the *Boston Pilot* certainly trod carefully between being Nationalism and Catholicism.

¹² Joyce, *Editors and Ethnicity*, 69.

¹³ *Boston Pilot*, December 3, 1842.

¹⁴ *Nation* (Dublin), October 15, 1842.

¹⁵ Isabel Skelton, *The Life of Thomas D'Arcy McGee* (Gardenvale: Garden City Press, 1925), 162. The three cities were New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

¹⁶ *Nation* (New York), October 28, 1848.

¹⁷ *Nation* (New York), June 9, 1849.

¹⁸ *Nation* (New York), October 28, 1848.

¹⁹ Cited in Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, vol. II (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 5.

²⁰ Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, vol. II, 23.

²¹ *Nation* (New York), June 15, 1850.

²² Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, vol. II, 24.

²³ Skelton, *The Life of Thomas D'Arcy McGee*, 166.

²⁴ For a more detailed account of the battle between McGee and Hughes, see Skelton, *The Life of Thomas D'Arcy McGee*, 162–68, and Josephine Phelan, *The Ardent Exile: The Life and Times of Thomas Darcy McGee* (Toronto: MacMillan Co., 1951), 90–101. The quotes cited above are from those texts.

²⁵ *American Celt*, August 31, 1850.

²⁶ Charles Gavan Duffy to Thomas Francis Meagher, September 13, 1850 (Kevin Izod O'Doherty papers, Pos. 1396, NLI).

²⁷ William Smith O'Brien to Lucy O'Brien, September 29, 1852 (William Smith O'Brien papers, Ms. 8653/28, NLI).

²⁸ William Smith O'Brien to Kevin Izod O'Doherty, December 29, 1852 (William Smith O'Brien papers, Ms. 10,515 (3), NLI).

²⁹ Thomas Francis Meagher to Charles Gavan Duffy, January 17, 1853 (Charles Gavan Duffy papers, Ms. 5757, NLI).

³⁰ Thomas Francis Meagher to Charles Gavan Duffy, January 17, 1853 (Charles Gavan Duffy papers, Ms. 5757, NLI).

³¹ *Citizen*, April 8, 1854.

³² *Irish News*, April 12, 1856.

³³ Rory T. Cornish, "An Irish Republican Abroad: Thomas Francis Meagher in the United States, 1852–6" in *Thomas Francis Meagher: The Making of an Irish American*, eds. John M. Hearne & Rory T. Cornish (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 144.

³⁴ Thomas Francis Meagher to William Smith O'Brien, August 8, 1856 (William Smith O'Brien papers, Ms. 445/2920, NLI).

³⁵ *Irish News*, June 28, 1856.

³⁶ *Irish News*, June 13, 1857.

³⁷ *Irish News*, December 6, 1856.

³⁸ Based on these travels, Meagher published a short series of articles in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. See "Holidays in Costa Rica [I]", Vol. 20, No. 115 (December 1859), pp. 18–38; "Holidays in Costa Rica [II]", Vol. 20, No. 116 (January 1860), pp. 145–64; "Holidays in Costa Rica [III]", Vol. 20, No. 117 (February 1860), pp. 304–25; "The New Route Through Chiriqui", Vol. 22, No. 128 (January 1861), pp. 198–209.

³⁹ "Letters on our National Struggle by Brig.-Gen. Thos. Francis Meagher" in *Pamphlets Issued by the Loyal Publication Society, from Feb. 1, 1863 to Feb. 1, 1864* [no. 38] (New York: Loyal Publication Society, 1864), 1–2.