

‘All the news of interest’: *The Kerryman*, 1904–1988

Mark O’Brien

Like many regional newspapers, *The Kerryman* emerged from the success of a printing business, the Kerry Printing Company, established in 1902 with a modest capital of £500 which allowed for little more than the purchase of a second-hand printing press and the hire of a linotype machine.¹ The company was established by Maurice Griffin, his close friend Thomas Nolan, and the latter’s cousin, Daniel Nolan – and in due course *The Kerryman* made its debut in August 1904. Of the three founding fathers only one had any experience in journalism. For some years Maurice Griffin had been a correspondent in his home town of Dingle for the *Kerry Weekly Reporter*. Having trained as an accountant and re-located to Tralee to take up employment at a building firm, Griffin met Nolan and the two became lifelong friends.² It was Griffin who most influenced the paper’s editorial ethos. He joined the Sinn Féin movement in its original incarnation and supported the ideas of self-sufficiency and native industrialisation as espoused by Arthur Griffith. Indeed, one report in *The Kerryman* from 1906 notes that Tralee’s Sinn Féin society held a meeting chaired by Griffin at the paper’s premises.³ Griffin was elected to Tralee Urban District Council in 1908 and served as *The Kerryman*’s managing director for many years. Complementing Griffin, Thomas Nolan’s skills lay in editorial direction: he was, his obituary noted, ‘widely read, a fluent writer and highly intelligent’.⁴ Both Griffin and Nolan sat on the Kerry County Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association, alongside other prominent persons such as Austin Stack.⁵ The third partner, Daniel Nolan, also trained as an accountant and devoted himself to the commercial side of the house following Griffin’s death in 1928. Nolan also involved himself in the movements associated with the Gaelic Revival: he served as secretary of the Tralee branch of the Gaelic League; and also immersed himself in the life of the town serving as secretary of the Tralee Sports Field Committee from 1903–09.⁶

On its debut, *The Kerryman* entered a crowded field. Among the titles then circulating in the county were the *Kerry Evening Post* (1774–1917), *Kerry Sentinel* (1878–1918), *Kerry Weekly Reporter* (1883–1936), *Killarney Echo* (1899–1920), *Kerry News* (1894–1941), *Kerry*

¹ *Irish Times*, 11 Dec. 1954, p. 2.

² *Kerryman*, 7 Apr. 1928, p. 5.

³ *Kerryman*, 12 May 1906, p. 5.

⁴ *Kerryman*, 8 Apr. 1939, pp 1 & 6.

⁵ *Kerryman*, 7 Oct. 1905, p. 3.

⁶ *Irish Times*, 30 Apr. 1938, p. 8; *Kerryman*, 23 Apr. 1938, p. 6.

Evening Star (1902–1914), and *Kerry People* (1902–1928). Only one of these titles, the *Kerry Evening Post*, represented conservative (unionist) interests: the others represented the worldview of the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁷ *The Kerryman* would outlast them all. Its first edition, with a print run of 1,200 copies and costing one penny, was published on Saturday 20 August 1904 and consisted of ten pages of news and adverts. Unlike the national daily press but similar to some of the more established regional papers, such as *The Anglo-Celt*, *The Connaught Telegraph*, *The Longford Leader*, and *The Southern Star*, it placed news not adverts on its front page. Among its front page stories were reports on emigration, the Tralee Feis, the Cahirciveen Petty Sessions, and the meeting of Tralee and Fenit Pier and Harbour Board, while inside pages carried reports of meetings from around the county, including reports on the Dingle Board of Guardians and Listowel Urban Council. Its adverts were drawn from well-known Tralee businesses including drapery store J. Revington & Sons, food merchants Latchford & Sons, coal merchants McCowen & Sons, and a significant amount of smaller adverts for Dingle businesses, reflecting perhaps, Maurice Griffin’s Dingle origins. It also carried a story in the Irish language, ‘Coiste gan Capall’ (The Headless Coach) with an English translation alongside. Given the proprietors’ interest in the GAA, the first edition was somewhat sparse in relation to sport: it carried a short report of a recent meeting of the Kerry County Board. The first edition also carried a column of notes from the Kerryman’s Association in New York. Headed ‘American Letter’ it declared that ‘a journal run on manly and independent lines [that enunciated] Nationalist principles and policies should certainly be a most important factor in the upbuilding of an Irish Ireland by inculcating among the people a spirit of self-reliance and self-respect’. Such a journal was needed, it continued, given that ‘shoneenism and toadyism’ was rampant in Kerry and was most recently demonstrated ‘during the recent visit of the King of England when the flunkeys of Tralee and Killarney went out of their way to present him with an address of welcome, thus disgracing Irishmen everywhere and bringing the blush of shame to the cheeks of Kerry men all over the world’.⁸

Its first leading article – ‘About Ourselves’ – was somewhat understated. It declared that it would ‘be a straight, independent paper, conducted on sound Catholic and Nationalist lines’ and that it would give ‘expression to what is sound and honest, in public opinion’. It also affirmed that it would ‘devote such energies and ability as we possess to the development of those healthier phases of our National life’ and declared that ‘those young

⁷ For more on the *Kerry Sentinel* see P. Fitzgerald, ‘The keys of the kingdom: the *Kerry Sentinel*, its commercial & political rivals’ in *Journal of the Kerry Historical and Archaeological Society*, 2:15 (2015), pp 103–20.

⁸ *Kerryman*, 20 Aug. 1904, p. 3.

movements which are working in the reconstruction of an Ireland that will be really Irish shall have our best support, and the first claim on our space'.⁹

Edited jointly in its early years by Maurice Griffin and Thomas Nolan, *The Kerryman* devoted considerable space to the county's GAA activities – including Kerry's first All-Ireland football win in 1905.¹⁰ It also devoted significant space to the activities of the local units of the Irish Volunteers, including the fact that the vast majority of members in Kerry sided with Eoin MacNeill rather than John Redmond when the movement split on the issue of whether Irishmen should enlist in the British Army. It reported that, at the meeting of the Tralee Battalion when Redmond's representative, Thomas O'Donnell, MP, showed up uninvited 'only the stern sense of discipline of the corps saved him from being bodily thrown out of the Hall'.¹¹ It opposed Irishmen enlisting during the First World War and, when, in November 1914, fifty Belgian refugees – many of them men of fighting age – arrived in Kerry it declared that it was 'a matter of surprise that Irishmen should be asked to go out and fight for a country which these men have deserted'. For expressing such sentiments, the judicial division of the chief secretary's office noted that the paper 'had been especially and consistently disloyal'.¹²

The newspaper was, however, rather mute in the aftermath of the Easter Rising of 1916. It noted that the absence of any censor in Tralee impacted on the local press and declared that since it could find no authority to review its reports related to 'current political happenings' it had decided to omit these altogether. It did, however, carry the Lord Lieutenant's official statement on the shelling of Dublin's Liberty Hall and a short report on the chief secretary's account of the Rising to the House of Commons.¹³ The subsequent issue, still devoid of a leading article on the rebellion, carried reports of the Rising from the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* and the *Weekly Dispatch* and also published the proclamation of independence.¹⁴ Its first leading article to refer to the Rising was published on 13 May 1916 but even then it confined itself to criticising the Irish Parliamentary Party for taking so long to criticise the actions of the British authorities in Ireland.¹⁵ By this time, the British authorities had rounded up those suspected of sedition – including Maurice Griffin who was arrested on 9 May 1916 and detained first at Dublin's Richmond Barracks and then at Wakefield Prison,

⁹ *Kerryman*, 20 Aug. 1904, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Kerryman* 25 Oct. 1905, p. 5.

¹¹ *Kerryman*, 17 Oct. 1914, p. 4.

¹² *Kerryman*, 4 Jan. 1916, p. 13.

¹³ *Kerryman*, 29 Apr. 1916, pp 1 & 5.

¹⁴ *Kerryman*, 6 May 1916, pp 2 & 5.

¹⁵ *Kerryman*, 13 May 1916, p. 2.

Britain. He was released at the end of May 1916 and in an interview with *The Kerryman* recounted that at the time of his arrest the officer in command had told him that he would be shot dead if any rescue attempt was mounted on his behalf.¹⁶

In late-August 1916 a party of British soldiers served a warrant on the paper that accused it of ‘publishing on August 19 an article calculated to cause disaffection’ and proceeded to remove vital parts of the printing press. The article that caused offence remains a matter of speculation. While the paper’s fiftieth anniversary supplement identified it as a reader’s letter that welcomed Griffin’s release and called for a campaign for others who had been ‘unconstitutionally convicted’, the *Irish Independent*, in its contemporaneous report on the raid, stated that it was prompted by a report on a resolution, passed by the Listowel Board of Guardians, which condemned the execution of Roger Casement two weeks previously.¹⁷ The paper’s editor, Thomas Nolan immediately travelled to Dublin where he sought to lodge a complaint with the wartime press censor, Lord Decies. However, Decies informed him that the raid had nothing to do with his office and re-directed him to the military authorities. While in Dublin, Nolan made arrangements to have *The Kerryman* printed by the Gaelic Press and smuggled to Tralee in the coal bunkers of the Dublin–Tralee train. Thus *The Kerryman* appeared as normal, though in much reduced form, throughout September 1916. In mid-October 1916 the confiscated printing parts were returned by the British military and the paper resumed normal publication.¹⁸

As the country swung behind Sinn Féin in the December 1918 general election, the paper again ceased publication – though for prosaic reasons this time. In late-January 1919 its Linotype machine ceased working: it was late-March 1919 before the paper reappeared, announcing its purchase of a new Model 4 Linotype.¹⁹ It was, perhaps, because of this eight-week interruption that it decided not to publish the Dáil Éireann Loan Prospectus later that year thus avoiding the risk of suppression and further financial pressure. In September 1919 it reported the suppression of the *Kerry News*, *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, and *Killarney Echo* for publishing the prospectus and also noted that these were the only Kerry papers to publish the prospectus.²⁰

Publication was again suspended for two weeks in November 1920 due to the extreme violence that erupted in response to the hanging of Kevin Barry and the death of the Lord

¹⁶ *Kerryman*, 3 June 1916, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Irish Independent*, 20 Aug. 1916, p. 3.

¹⁸ On resumption it published an edition dated 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 Sept. & 7 Oct. 1916. See *Kerryman*, 11 Dec. 1954, pp 2–3 for an account of the surreptitious printing.

¹⁹ *Kerryman*, 25 Jan., 1, 8, 15, 22 Feb., & 1, 8, 15 Mar. 1919, p. 1.

²⁰ *Kerryman*, 27 Sept. 1919, p. 8.

Mayor of Cork Terence MacSwiney. After IRA headquarters issued orders for all units to engage in action, seventeen policemen and military personnel were shot, seven fatally, by Kerry IRA units in the space of twenty-four hours. The reprisals that followed shook the county. Temperance halls and creameries across Kerry were torched while Tralee was put under siege by British forces which ordered the closure of all businesses in the town for seven days. With international press attention beginning to focus on the town, the siege was lifted on the orders of the chief secretary for Ireland, Hamar Greenwood. On its return to publication *The Kerryman* made no reference to the orgy of violence that had prevented its publication. The following year the paper suffered grievously at the hands of crown forces. On 18 April 1921 a notorious Auxiliary officer, Major John MacKinnon, was shot dead by an IRA sniper at Tralee golf links. Later that day crown forces visited *The Kerryman* and demanded that its twice-weekly evening paper, *The Liberator* be printed in thick black-ruled columns as a mark of respect to their dead colleague. The proprietors decided not to publish on that day.²¹ Two days later the military returned and ordered everyone out of the building. Three loud explosions were then heard as the soldiers blew-up the printing press causing £4,000 worth of damage.²²

The Kerryman did not resume publication until August 1923 when it re-appeared as a pro-Treaty paper. As recalled by Thomas Nolan's son Dan, 'the country was on its knees in every respect following the Anglo-Irish struggle and the bitterly contested civil war. My father and his colleagues felt that the only hope was to work the Treaty'.²³ In its leading article it struck a note of optimism as it called on readers to 'complete, not wreck the marvellous work of those countless great heroes of ours who died so willingly so that Ireland might live'.²⁴ Although politically the paper remained a supporter of the treaty, its editorial ethos would be moulded by Con Casey, a new recruit to the reporting staff and an anti-treaty activist. Casey had played an active role in the IRA activities that had resulted in the siege of Tralee, before being captured by government forces and sentenced to death in 1922 – a sentence commuted to ten years' penal servitude.²⁵ He remained active within the IRA until 1926 when he became 'disillusioned' and decided to concentrate instead on 'the cultural side of the revival'. Having secured a job on *The Kerryman*, Casey, as he put it himself, 'kept the flag of Irish culture and nationalism flying in Rock Street'.²⁶

²¹ Launched in July 1914, *The Liberator* was published on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

²² *Irish Independent*, 21 Apr. 1921, p. 5.

²³ *Kerryman*, 11 Jan. 1980, p. 14.

²⁴ *Kerryman*, 13 Aug 1923, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, at p. 377. See Casey's obituary in *Kerryman*, 30 Aug. 1996, p. 32.

The paper's return was unequivocally welcomed. Its initial circulation of 1,500 in August 1923 rose to 3,933 in January 1924 and to 8,286 in December 1924.²⁷ Expansion soon followed: in 1926 it acquired the premises and titles (*Kerry Weekly Reporter*, *Killarney Echo*, and *Kerry News*) of John Quinnell & Sons. It was during this period too that *The Kerryman* played a key role in popularising local history. In September 1926, Commander Donal O'Connell of Beaufort, Killarney wrote a letter to the paper asking readers to send him detailed descriptions of monuments in each townland. Whenever monuments of note were reported to him O'Connell investigated and published his findings in a letter to the paper. Thus followed a publication (*Kerry Archaeology Survey Publication No.1: Letters to The Kerryman*) and the formation of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society.²⁸ However, this period of expansion was followed soon after by the deaths of the paper's three founding fathers. In March 1928 Maurice Giffin died; in April 1938 Thomas Nolan died; and in April 1939 Daniel Nolan died.

As the Second World War loomed the future of the paper rested on the shoulders of Thomas Nolan's son, Dan, who assumed the position of managing director. By 1939 *The Kerryman* consisted of fourteen pages, cost two pence and had a circulation of 18,109 per issue. Though date-lined as a Saturday newspaper it was published on Fridays (it would not correct its date-line until October 1973) and the company also published an evening paper – *Kerry News* – on Mondays and *The Liberator* on Saturdays.²⁹ The war was a trying period for the company. The shortage of newsprint resulted in the cessation of publication of both *The Liberator* (in 1939) and *Kerry News* (in 1941), and the reduction of *The Kerryman* from fourteen pages to six pages per issue between August 1939 and August 1942. In addition it had to operate within the confines of war-time censorship whereby all content was censored to ensure it did not favour any belligerent nation or undermine the state's neutrality. Edited during the war years by Patrick Foley (nephew of Maurice Griffin and better known by his GAA moniker 'P.F.') and then Ted Gallagher from 1944 (a Belfast man who later edited the *Irish news*) the paper had a sometime stormy relationship with the censor.³⁰

For the most part it was innocuous breaches of the regulations that drew a rebuke from the chief press censor, Michael Knightly, a Tralee-born journalist who had worked on the *Kerry Weekly Reporter* and the *Irish Independent*. There was also a family connection to

²⁷ *Irish Times*, 8 Jan. 1925, p. 3.

²⁸ *Irish Times*, 13 July 1939, p. 4; *Kerryman*, 20 May 1967, p. 10.

²⁹ Circulation figure from headed notepaper in National Archives of Ireland (NAI), JUS/93/1/47 (32).

³⁰ For Foley's obituary see *Kerryman*, 12 Nov. 1966, p. 8.

be considered: Knightly's sister Minnie had married Thomas Nolan, so the press censor was an uncle of the paper's managing director, Dan Nolan.³¹

Early in the war, the censor noted the paper's report of the annual Puck Fair festival which declared that 'with the rest of the world in a state of unrest and Europe in a state of chaos; with small countries being wiped out and weak ones being absorbed; with kings disappearing and kingdoms crumbling; with Dictators threatening and Presidents unyielding, King Puck alone stands defiant' but took no action.³² It was a report on the torpedoing of a ship, the *Langlee Ford*, off the Kerry coast and the arrival of survivors at Kerry Head that prompted the first protest. Such material should, the censor declared, have been submitted for prior approval. In response, Nolan stated that *The Kerryman* 'always exercised the most meticulous care in order to comply with the censorship regulations'.³³ In a later letter Nolan noted that because of the paper's compliance with the regulations 'in so far as local affairs are concerned, we have frequently incurred the criticism of our readers on account of omissions of reports of several local happenings, which are well known amongst the general public'.³⁴ Another item that drew the censor's ire was the publication of an aerial photograph of Tralee that accompanied a report on the town's development plan.³⁵ And, in the closing days of the conflict, it earned a final rebuke for its extensive report (under the headline 'Did His Parents Come From Kerry?') on local speculation that the townland of Knockeen, Castleisland, was the birthplace of the father of Lieutenant-General Omar N. Bradley, senior commander of the US Ground Forces in Europe.³⁶

It was, however, matters republican that caused most angst between the paper and the censor. In September 1939 the censor noted the publication of a photograph of the Kerry football team parading around Croke Park behind a banner that stated 'Kerry Protests Against Arrests of Gaels' – a reference to the recent arrest and internment of republicans.³⁷ In November 1942 the censor took exception to the reports of the numerous expressions of sympathy passed by local organisations in response to the execution at Mountjoy Gaol of Kerry IRA Volunteer Maurice O'Neill. How to censure the paper without aggravating local feelings prompted a discussion amongst censorship staff, with one official noting that 'perhaps the most expedient thing would be to do nothing about this'. Ultimately it was

³¹ For more on Knightly see *Irish Independent*, 21 Dec. 1965, p. 15.

³² National Archives, Jus/93/1/47 (32), hereinafter Jus/93; *Kerryman*, 10 Aug. 1940, p. 6.

³³ NAI, Jus/93, letter dated 26 Feb. 1940.

³⁴ Jus/93, letter dated 27 July 1940.

³⁵ Jus/93, letter dated 1 Nov. 1944; *Kerryman*, 28 Oct. 1944, p. 1.

³⁶ Jus/93; *Kerryman*, 7 Apr. 1945, p. 1.

³⁷ Jus/93; *Kerryman* 16 & 30 Sept. 1939, pp 1.

decided to issue a warning by telephone.³⁸ Two years later, the execution of Tralee-born IRA chief-of-staff, Charlie Kerins, on the paper's day of publication resulted in a spat between the paper and the censor's office. A fractious Dáil debate on the eve of the execution (and the day the paper was printed) had resulted in the expulsion from the house of two Kerry TDs – Dan Spring (National Labour) and Patrick Finucane (Farmers's Party).

In a telephone call to the censor's office, the paper's chief sub-editor Ted Gallagher 'complained bitterly about the way they were treated last night over the Dail debate'. As Gallagher saw it, the paper had called the censor's office at 7.40 p.m. for an update on approved reports of the Dáil debate. According to Gallagher, the paper did not go to press until 11.30 p.m. and 'he considered they had not been treated fairly – having regard to the special position of *The Kerryman* and the fact that they had the full report from their Dublin Correspondent. The Dublin papers arriving in Tralee carried the full report – much to their disadvantage'.³⁹ The paper's subsequent letter of protest noted that it had the full report of the contentious Dáil debate from its own Dublin correspondent but that when it rang the censor's office at 7.40 p.m. for the official release it had been given a short dictated statement and informed that if any more of the debate was passed for publication then the censor's office would telephone it through. Having not heard from the censor's office, the paper ran with the official report whereas the national titles carried fuller reports – with more verbatim exchanges – of the debate. As the letter ruefully noted:

As two of the three Deputies suspended were Kerry Deputies, and as the debate arose out of the matter of the execution of Charles Kerins, no other paper in the country was more vitally interested in the story than ourselves, and the fact that we came out of it with nothing more than a bald statement has left us open, in the minds of our readers, to a charge of inefficiency or bias.⁴⁰

For his part, the chief press censor, Michael Knightly noted that he would not 'accept or admit any responsibility for the faux pas which occurred'. As he recalled the sequence of events, he had given the paper the statement at 7.45 p.m. and had offered to telephone any

³⁸ Jus/93, memo dated 26 Nov. 1942; *Kerryman*, 21 Nov. 1942, various pages.

³⁹ Jus/93, memo dated 1 Dec. 1944.

⁴⁰ Jus/93, letter dated 4 Dec. 1944.

further releases through, but had been told that the paper was going straight to press. He would, he concluded, have telephoned if he had not been ‘put off’.⁴¹

Post-war *The Kerryman* went through a succession of editors after Ted Gallagher, who edited the paper between 1944 and 1956, returned to his native Belfast. He was succeeded first by Eoin Neeson (later director of the government information bureau) and then Tom Dunne before stability returned with the appointment of Con Casey who edited the title from 1957 to 1974.⁴² It fell to Dan Nolan, as managing director, to maintain that stability and ensure growth. Nolan was, in modern parlance, an entrepreneur who not only built up the company’s printing business but also contributed significantly to the development of Tralee. Nolan was a key driving force behind the development of the town’s racing park, its sports complex, its annual Christmas shopping festival, and the Rose of Tralee festival. He also expanded *The Kerryman*’s reach into neighbouring counties by publishing Limerick and Cork editions. So successful was the latter that in 1966 Nolan took the decision to establish *The Corkman*. He also established the Anvil Press publishing company, and the *This is Ireland* magazine – an annual holiday guide launched in 1950 and distributed primarily in Britain.⁴³

By the mid-1950s *The Kerryman* consisted of sixteen pages, cost three pence and had a circulation of 27,790 per issue.⁴⁴ In 1953 it published a book – *With the IRA in the Fight for Freedom: 1919 to the Truce* – written by ‘former senior officers of the IRA’.⁴⁵ The following year it serialised the book – against the backdrop of IRA raids on British military bases in Northern Ireland. It was the publication of these articles that then minister for finance Gerard Sweetman probably had in mind when, in a speech to Tralee’s Chamber of Commerce, he noted that ‘those who are in a position to influence public opinion have a specially grave responsibility; that in regard to unlawful armed activities, there should be no ambiguity of thought or attitude, and that no one can have it both ways in this matter’. Showing his steely side Nolan responded that he was ‘conscious of his responsibility and it was with a full sense of it that what had appeared in *The Kerryman* had been published. Since these articles, numerous letters had been received from people of all shades of political opinion’.⁴⁶ A hard-headed businessman, Nolan knew that keeping pace with technological developments was crucial. Addressing the Association of Advertisers in 1965 he noted that the future of

⁴¹ Jus/93, memo dated 7 Dec. 1944.

⁴² For Neeson’s obituary see *Irish Times*, 8 Jan. 2011, p. 12; for Dunne’s obituary see *Kerryman*, 2 June 2000, p. 14.

⁴³ For Nolan’s obituary see *Kerryman*, 15 Dec. 1989, p. 7. See also *Kerryman*, 4 Jan. 1980, pp 13–14.

⁴⁴ Dáil Éireann Debates, vol. 159, cols. 659–60 (24 Mar. 1955).

⁴⁵ *Kerryman*, 25 Apr. 1953, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Irish Times*, 21 Jan. 1955, p. 4.

newspapers lay in colour printing and that, given the large-scale capital investment that was needed, not all regional papers could remain completely in private family ownership.⁴⁷

Indeed, less than seven years later, in September 1972, it was announced that Independent Newspapers had acquired *The Kerryman* for the sum of £378,000.⁴⁸ By then the title, with a circulation of 41,790 copies per issue, was the most successful regional title in the country.⁴⁹ While the change in ownership did not disrupt publication, the subsequent change in ownership of Independent Newspapers did. When, in March 1973, Tony O'Reilly acquired Independent Newspapers from the Murphy family, journalists at the group's Dublin titles held a mandatory meeting that kept titles such as the *Irish Independent* off the streets for five days. In solidarity, journalists at *The Kerryman* also held a mandatory meeting that resulted in the non-appearance of the title for the first time since the war of independence.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the change in ownership permitted greater investment: in 1973 the paper moved to new premises at Clash Industrial Estate on the outskirts of Tralee which allowed for the installation of a new colour printing press. Throughout late-1970s and early-1980s the new plant attracted a significant amount of contract printing, including titles such as *Hot Press* and *In Dublin*.

Shortly after the move, in February 1974, Con Casey retired as editor and was succeeded by Seamus McConville. Born in Navan, McConville began his career at the *Meath Chronicle* before working with the Irish News Agency. He joined the *Kerryman* in 1957 for which he covered the infamous 1958 Moss Moore murder in Reamore that inspired John B. Keane's play *The Field*. Similar to Dan Nolan, McConville played a key role in the development of the Rose of Tralee festival – it was his idea to link the eponymous ballad to the festival. He was also involved in the establishment of Siamsa Tíre, the national folk theatre.⁵¹ McConville served as editor until 1988 though he continued to pen a column 'My Town' right up to his death in 2012.

On his first day in the editor's chair, McConville received a telephone call supposedly from the IRA threatening serious action if the paper published an article written by columnist Con Houlihan that was critical of the Price sisters (Marion and Delores) then on hunger-strike, having been imprisoned for car-bomb offences in London in 1973. As McConville recalled, 'I checked with republican sources to see if the threat was genuine or not and was

⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, 11 Nov. 1965, p. 9.

⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 Sept. 1972, p. 14.

⁴⁹ *Kerryman*, 20 Jan. 1973, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Irish Times*, 14 Mar. 1973, p. 1.

⁵¹ *Irish Times*, 28 Jan. 2012, p. 12. See *Kerryman*, 18 Jan. 2012, pp 14–17 for McConville's obituary.

told that it was. Despite pleas by friends in the republican movement not to publish I decided to stand over the paper's right to publish views whether it agreed with them or not'.⁵² The paper's premises were put under round-the-clock garda protection. On publication day it led with a front page leading article – 'A Matter of Freedom' – in which it observed that the last time it had been so threatened was during the war of independence when 'the newspaper did not offer either the actual support – or the silence – which the British thought their policies deserved'. What the IRA wanted, it concluded, was silence and its motive was 'the same motive which impelled the Tans [and was] just as unsavoury'.⁵³ Houlihan's column – centred on a letter written to the *Irish Independent* by a Tralee-born but London-based nurse, Pauline Carmody, who had treated those injured by the Price bombs – was published on page eight. However, the following week, *The Kerryman* acknowledged that the 'nurse' had no connection with the Tralee address she had used in the letter and that the three London hospitals that had treated the bomb victims had no such nurse on their staffs.⁵⁴

Local politics were equally fraught. During the 1977 general election, sitting Fianna Fáil TD Tom McEllistram broke with his party's view that supporters were free to vote for any of the three party candidates in the Kerry North Constituency when he placed an advert in *The Kerryman* asking the electorate to vote for him alone – with no mention of the other two Fianna Fáil candidates, Kit Ahern and Denis Foley. However, as publication day approached McEllistram had second thoughts and called to the homes of editorial staff to seek – unsuccessfully – the advert's cancellation. On printing day, McEllistram and a posse of supporters descended on the paper to again seek the advert's removal. This time editorial executives agreed to remove the advert but to keep the press running until the new page – minus the advert – had been made up. McEllistram's offer to purchase all copies printed with the advert was rejected.⁵⁵ Demonstrating the adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity, McEllistram topped the poll, with Kit Ahern also being elected. But there were lighter moments too. At a meeting of Kerry County Council, Senator John Blennerhassett, a Fine Gael councillor, produced a whiskey bottle and a glass from his briefcase and poured a sample of Castleisland's water supply which he claimed smelled like a well-known brand of disinfectant. He then invited those present at the meeting to taste the water. When *The*

⁵² *Irish Times*, 27 Sept. 1983, p. 12.

⁵³ *Kerryman*, 8 Feb. 1974, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Kerryman*, 15 Feb. 1974, p. 1.

⁵⁵ *Irish Times*, 16 June 1977, p. 5.

Kerryman's reporter tried it and declared that he could find nothing wrong with it cheers erupted in the chamber!⁵⁶

By this time, a new publication, *Kerry's Eye*, had been established in Tralee by Pádraig Kennelly. Originally a free-sheet, published on Thursdays (a day before the Tralee edition of *The Kerryman*), and with a circulation of 8,000 copies per issue its attempt to capture some of the town's readership and advertising led to some interesting encounters – most especially during the contentious eighth-amendment referendum of 1983. In February that year *The Kerryman* ran a story on how pro-amendment campaigners had criticised Tralee politician and then Labour Party leader and Tánaiste Dick Spring for having expressed unease at the wording of the proposed constitutional amendment. Having failed to elicit a comment from Spring the paper ran the story in its Kerry North edition but for the later, Tralee, edition the paper incorporated into the story a statement from Spring.⁵⁷ There the matter rested until the subsequent edition of *Kerry's Eye* claimed – under a page one headline 'Dick Spring was Badly Framed' – that senior personnel from Independent Newspapers had compelled Seamus McConville to include the Spring statement even if that meant reprinting the Tralee edition in its entirety. McConville issued libel proceedings in the circuit court and was awarded £3,000 in damages.⁵⁸

In the mid-1980s events in Kerry put the county centre stage in terms of news coverage. The interception of the *Marita Ann* gun-running ship and the arrest of Martin Ferris (later a Sinn Féin TD) in 1984, the 1985 Kerry Babies case and the subsequent Tribunal of Inquiry, which heard evidence in Tralee, and reports of moving statues in the village of Asdee that same year prompted much local and national coverage. Seamus McConville's retirement as editor in 1988 cut a long-standing link to the paper's founders and in many ways presaged a new era for the regional press – some titles of which would sell for astronomical sums during the Celtic Tiger years. McConville's successor, Brian Looney, oversaw the transformation of *The Kerryman* into the country's first fully computerised regional title.⁵⁹ And, while in 2006 the migration of the paper's printing to Belfast allowed its rival, *Kerry's Eye*, to claim that it was the only newspaper compiled and printed in Tralee, this was tempered by the fact that *The Kerryman*'s editorial staff had now returned to the town centre ready to face the challenge of publishing a newspaper in the digital era.

⁵⁶ *Irish Times*, 21 Aug. 1980, p. 11.

⁵⁷ *Kerryman*, 11 Feb. 1983, p. 1.

⁵⁸ See *Kerryman*, 22 Apr. 1983, p. 1; *Irish Times*, 27 Jan. 1984, p. 5; *Kerryman*, 3 Feb. 1984, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Later editors included Ger Colleran, Declan Malone, and Kevin Hughes.