



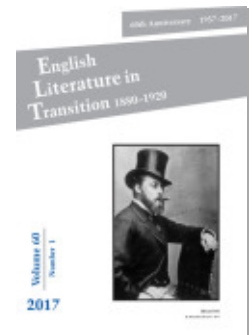
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Irish Women Freelance Writers and the Popular Press: An Army Beyond Literary Circles

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IN MARCH 1905, the *Irish Packet* (a penny-weekly story paper owned by the *Freeman's Journal*) published a short story called "The Lucky Little Leaf" by Haddie McMahon.¹ An entirely generic short romance story, it was also shamrock-themed for the annual St. Patrick's Day double issue of the paper. Stories of this length and type, written by unknown (even anonymous) writers, are recognisable to anyone who researches the popular press of this period. Story papers, women's magazines and even newspapers published them every day or every week—in the small Irish market alone, at least 50,000 words a week of short and serial fiction were being printed by the early twentieth century, along with countless short nonfiction feature articles.² These kinds of stories—generic, derivative, and by unknown writers—made up the bulk of the popular press of the era, and yet they are rarely written about by scholars. This may be due partly to the sheer magnitude of that undertaking, as well as to the repetitive nature of the romance and adventure stories themselves, which at this distance and on that scale make them a daunting prospect for analysis of any kind. The number of authors of whom little or (more frequently) absolutely nothing is known is also a deterrent to analysis. As Sarah Lonsdale has described it, while scholars have "devoted much attention to the emergence both of the new powerful popular papers and their proprietors ... there has been little attention paid to those at the very bottom of the journalistic field, below even editors and news editors: the reporters and freelance writers who contributed millions of words for the consumption of the new readership. This is partly because ... they have been difficult to identify."³ Those difficulties of identification are real, but nevertheless these writers' absence from discussion is a serious omission in our un-

derstanding of how the popular press operated, who wrote for it and what their experiences as authors were.

Increased digitisation of both publications and genealogical records of various kinds means that some of these writers can be identified and their careers at least partially tracked in order to better understand this crucial aspect of mass media production. This article considers the publishing careers of a small number of Irish women who worked as freelance journalists and authors in order to explore both their experiences as professional writers and the industry in which they worked—they have been selected because their work appeared frequently in Irish (and some international) publications of the early twentieth century, and because some of their personal histories can also be identified. They are an illustrative rather than a representative sample of freelance writers of their era, but nevertheless their careers do shed light on this vast but often overlooked aspect of media history, especially that of the increasing numbers of women who sought to earn money from their writing in this period. The sheer number of stories and articles by unknown authors that were published by so many publications in itself suggests that the commercial press was reliant upon them in order to fill its pages each week or month. While high-profile serials by well-known writers were used to promote these papers, it was the “filler” articles and stories that comprised the majority of many publications.

Beginning to understand who wrote them, and under what circumstances is therefore a step towards better understanding the industry’s structures. It is also a step towards understanding the experiences of the countless writers who supplied this vital content for the commercial press. Most scholarly examinations of authors who published short and serial fiction have focused upon those who achieved some degree of critical acclaim, who did not have nonliterary jobs, and who were part of wider literary and artistic communities. By comparison, this article argues that this may not have been at all typical of the majority of magazine authors. Instead, it would appear—based upon the experiences of the authors discussed here—that there was an army of periodical writers drawn from far beyond literary circles, who wrote while also working as typists or teachers, and who remained disconnected from other writers even as they regularly published stories and articles over several decades.

Five of Many

Haddie McMahan, for example, was a twenty-eight-year-old typist living in Dublin when she published "The Lucky Little Leaf." She was from a Church of Ireland family, with whom she lived until her marriage and move to England, from where she continued to publish in both Irish and British magazines.⁴ She was therefore part of the growing number of women in paid employment outside the home, many of whom were moving into clerical work and especially typing. Yet she also chose to write professionally as well, continuing this after marriage, when she had otherwise given up working outside the home. Maud E. Sargent and her younger sister Nellie M. Sargent were from a Church of Ireland family in Cork. At the time of the 1901 census, they were thirty and twenty-four respectively, both unmarried and living with their widowed father in Blackrock. In the census they described their occupations as "literature," and unlike the other women discussed here do not appear to have had other paid work. Maud was still unmarried and living with her father in 1911, and although she did not enter any occupation in that year's census return, she continued to publish articles, stories and poems well into the 1920s, her writing career lasting more than thirty years. Nellie married and moved to England, where she and her husband (an actor, Chauncey Morris) lived in London. She continued to write principally under her maiden name after her marriage, listing her occupation in the 1911 British census as "journalist," and by 1915 was providing the Writers' Club in London as her correspondence address.⁵

Like McMahan, Eleanore G. Norman lived in Dublin and worked as a typist. Her family were also Church of Ireland, and lived first on Herbert Road and then in Ranelagh. At the time of the 1901 census, Norman was thirty-eight and unmarried, living with her parents and younger sister Lily (who was also a typist). No further information about her is available, as she does not appear in the 1911 census. Only a little more is known of M. Evelyn Cuthbert, who was born in 1877 to a Church of Ireland family in Dublin. In 1901, Cuthbert was twenty-four and unmarried. She was living with her parents (her father was an accountant) and siblings in Rathmines, and described herself in the census return as an "authoress and teacher." Her sister was a typist, and her brother was a clerk with the Metropolitan Police. The 1911 census return for her family has some curious anomalies. Her father had died by that date, but her brother had married, and he and his wife were living with their widowed mother (and one servant) in Rathmines. Both

Evelyn's and her sister Irene's names appear on the return, but no other information for them, such as age, occupation, or religion, was completed and their names have been crossed out. This strongly suggests that both women were normally resident at the Rathmines address, but for some reason were not present on census night, so that after a family member initially added their names, they were then removed from the return. Neither sister appears anywhere else in the Irish census, which may simply mean that they were travelling out of the country on that date. However, it is also possible that they were among the women who engaged in a suffragette boycott of the 1911 census by avoiding their homes on census night. Whatever the explanation, no further biographical information for M. Evelyn Cuthbert is available, although she did continue to publish in Irish magazines until at least 1915.⁶

Among them, these five women published more than a hundred short stories, serials, poems, factual articles and even song lyrics over more than thirty years from about 1890.⁷ These appeared in Irish magazines ranging from the penny story papers such as *Ireland's Own* and the *Irish Packet* to major newspapers including the *Irish Times*, the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Cork Examiner*. They also published internationally in journals ranging from the *English Illustrated Magazine* to the *Living Age* and the *Sacred Heart Review*, the latter two published in Boston. One or two of them were successful enough during their careers to have their names used to promote special issues or even new publications, and their continued publication over years or even decades was in itself an achievement in a market saturated with aspiring writers.⁸ None of them achieved particular professional acclaim during their careers, and all of them are completely forgotten now, having become part of the vast hinterland of unknown writers whose work fills the pages of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century popular press.

Economic Structures of the Popular Press

By the end of the nineteenth century, it was estimated that the 1870 Education Act and the resultant rise in literacy had trebled the reading population in Britain.⁹ It is now well established that for the publishing industry this represented an unprecedented opportunity for expansion, and when combined with new models of production and distribution, the results were dramatic, with the production of short and serial fiction as well as nonfiction articles and columns for the

ever-expanding magazine market becoming an even more industrialised process. This was especially true of the “filler” material published in outlets as varied as mass-market story papers, trade journals and regional newspapers. Much of this was provided by the syndication bureaux such as Tillotson’s, who “were bulk buyers of short stories and ‘storyettes’: at Christmas they sent out to newspaper offices a ‘supplementary supply of stories and feature material.’ In 1901, they claimed to syndicate each year 30 full-length serials and more than 300 short stories.”¹⁰ Indeed, the “short story” as an identifiable form has a complex history during this era, because as D’hoker and Eggermont argue, although the “demand for short fiction was to a large extent a demand for popular and formulaic short stories that were published in the numerous weeklies, women’s magazines and newspapers, the short story was—somewhat paradoxically—also hailed as a promising and fashionable artistic genre.”¹¹ To feed that demand across the extraordinarily wide range of publications, writers from right across the spectrum of fiction supplied short and serialised stories, and for a number of them it was extremely profitable. Although the majority of these stories were by minor or even unknown authors, “stars” of popular fiction were also extensively serialised in magazines and newspapers, their names often used in advertising for those issues in an attempt to boost sales. Edgar Wallace, one of the most prolific and commercially successful writers of his generation, was regularly serialised, as were other successful authors such as Richard Marsh and Arnold Bennett.

However, many struggling authors were paid no more than £10 for a 30,000-word story, and this was especially true for the authors (typically female) of “penny novelettes.”¹² The concept of a “professional” writer in the fragmented and chaotic world of *fin-de-siècle* journalism was, as a number of scholars have pointed out, already fraught. As Sarah Lonsdale has described, “the ‘professional man of letters’ who wrote fiction, essays for intellectual periodicals, paragraphs for the daily press and reviewed books for literary journals gradually died out.”¹³ As the mass media grew and was increasingly slanted toward a larger, more socially diverse readership, commercial writing and literary writing became more polarized from each other, and it was difficult if not impossible for a “serious” writer to maintain his or her reputation if he or she also produced copy for the popular press. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, it was noted that earning a living income from writing alone was extremely difficult, and that most “professional” writers were also barristers, clergymen or in possession of a private income, however

small. As Gillian Sutherland has pointed out, this meant that “women faced a particular handicap here because so few other supplementary earning opportunities were open to them,” and she goes on to reference teaching as the most frequent “occupation pursued side-by-side with writing” for women.¹⁴ For much of the nineteenth century of course, teaching was one of the very few nonmanual careers open to women, and female teachers would have been well-placed to pursue professional writing alongside their teaching, given their relatively high levels of education. Of the freelance writers under consideration here, M. Evelyn Cuthbert fit this profile, having described herself in her 1901 census return as an “authoress and teacher.” It is clear from this census entry that Cuthbert regarded herself as a professional writer and was keen to emphasise this. Most of her publications were short stories, initially appearing in the *Weekly Irish Times*, before she became a regular contributor to the very successful *Ireland's Own* story paper.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, other forms of work were becoming increasingly available to middle-class women. One of the most popular of these was typing, a new form of work which was rapidly being adopted by young women, especially those with reasonably high levels of education. As Katherine Mullin has pointed out of this new “army” of women workers, it was work which was widely perceived to be “highly-skilled, requiring intelligence, initiative and acumen.”¹⁵ In Ireland as elsewhere, the number of typists grew rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1901, there were 894 typists recorded in the Irish census, whereas by 1911 there were 2,922, an increase of more than 300 percent. In both years, more than 90 percent were women, and it is also notable that about two-thirds were Protestant.¹⁶ Given that in Ireland religious denomination tended to correlate to social class, which in turn correlated to levels of education, this would suggest that Irish typists, like their British counterparts, were generally from relatively prosperous backgrounds and were moderately well educated. Of the writers considered here, all of whom were from Protestant backgrounds, Eleanore G. Norman and Haddie McMahon were both typists. Only the Sargent sisters are likely to have had a private income (however small) given that they do not appear to have had any employment aside from writing, a fact which in itself probably explains their greater output than the other writers considered here.

One of the reasons for the poor terms which many writers had to accept from their publishers was that they were working in a buyers’

market. Thousands upon thousands of would-be writers sought to place their stories in magazines and newspapers, often with little chance of success. Most of these beginners had no agents or access to any form of professional advice, and so they submitted their stories directly to editors. In Britain, Walter Besant “had hoped that the Society of Authors would be able to provide an advice service for budding authors, but gave up in despair at the low quality of the material received: he estimated that only 3% of manuscripts submitted to publishers was actually publishable.”¹⁷ This was a similar percentage to that complained of by the editor of the Irish story paper *Ireland's Own* in 1912, when he claimed that only one in forty or fifty of the manuscripts he was sent was worthy of publication, due to deficiencies in either legibility, length or to their lack of plot originality.¹⁸ Most of the would-be authors who hopefully submitted stories were entirely unpublished, and the majority would probably remain so. Since the submission of unsolicited manuscripts to magazines and newspapers was sometimes successful, the deluge to editors’ offices continued.

Given the low profit margins of many magazines by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making meagre payments for “filler” material to inexperienced and unrepresented writers would probably have been a central part of their business model—especially for story papers catering to younger and less exacting readers. An even cheaper method of acquiring manuscripts was the short story competition. These were a particularly sophisticated subset of the extremely popular competitions run by many commercial publications at the time, and the first prize always included publication in the magazine in question. For an unpublished writer, this was probably a sufficient prize in itself.¹⁹ Among Irish publications, *Ireland's Own* (begun in 1902) rapidly made the story competition a central feature from its first issues, the format being that readers sent in short stories for publication on the front pages of the magazine, the winner also receiving a one-pound prize. The *Irish Packet*, begun just a year later in 1903 and owned by the *Freemans Journal* newspaper, was under the editorship of Matthias McDonnell Bodkin—himself an author as well as a journalist, lawyer, anti-Parnell MP and eventually a judge. Just a few weeks after the initial issue, Bodkin asserted that “I want short stories and long—well written, lively or pathetic. I want short articles and sketches, on Irish subjects preferred. I want good letters and good jokes (not previously published).”²⁰ Bodkin was making a direct call to readers and freelance writers to submit manuscripts for possible pub-

lication, and like other editors of the time would frequently make such calls and offer advice to would-be writers submitting to his publication.

New Journalism, Editors & Aspiring Writers

The first-ever issue of the *Irish Packet* story paper reprinted a verse which had appeared in British printers' trade journal the *Caxton Magazine and the Press*. Intended as a comic warning for would-be contributors to newspapers and magazines, the verse ran:

There is a man the printer loves, and he is wonderous wise;
whene'er he writes the printer man he dotteth all his i's.
And when he's dotted all of them with carefulness and ease, he
punctuates each paragraph and crosses all his t's.
Upon one side alone he writes, and never rolls his leaves;
and from the man of ink a smile and mark "insert" receives.²¹

This represented, albeit in an unusual form, one of the most consistent forms of interaction between the editors and readers who might also aspire to write—instructions regarding the codes and conventions they needed to follow. These instructions and guidance are themselves an interesting example of the ways in which in the era of New Journalism editors trod a fine line between the increasingly familiar, confidential tone of a conversation between equals and the more patrician tone editors had traditionally adopted. One of the forms this careful balance took was that of frequently repeated assurances from editors that contrary to "popular belief" they were not ogres who enjoyed rejecting would-be contributors' work. The very second issue of the *Irish Packet* contained the following statement from its editor: "There is, I know, a feeling abroad that all Editors take a fiendish delight in the rejection of manuscripts." Just a couple of years later he assured readers that "Editors, believe it, are very human."²² These assurances, while apparently straightforward, actually served to emphasise the power of veto and control which editors exercised over the content of their papers.

That veto and control was most frequently referred to in the regular admonishments to contributors that they must obey the conventions of the trade, such as those outlined in the comic verse cited above. Editors regularly begged would-be authors to write legibly on blank (rather than scrap) paper, write on one side of the paper only, to fold rather than roll their manuscripts, and to submit stories in good time for publication.²³ It was patiently and regularly explained that stories had to be received some time before publication—and especially in the case of seasonal material and special issues, such as the annual Christmas

or St. Patrick's Day numbers, editors had to remind contributors to submit material well in advance. So in October 1906, for example, the editor of *Ireland's Own* announced that he "is now prepared to consider reasonable articles and stories for the Christmas Number of *'Ireland's Own.'*"²⁴ In January 1911, he reminded "my readers who are also contributors" that any material intended for the St. Patrick's Day number should be submitted as soon as possible.²⁵

A relentless seasonality was in fact one of the driving forces of the publishing cycle for the popular press, and an important structuring factor for aspiring writers to understand and act upon. This appears to have begun with Charles Dickens's innovation of special Christmas numbers of *All Year Round* and *Household Words*, in which expanded issues were produced for the holiday season.²⁶ These were often themed around ghost stories, and of course in later decades of the century Dickensian themes of Christmas cheer were themselves also a staple feature of these publications. By the start of the twentieth century, the Christmas double issue of both monthly and weekly periodicals was a fixed pole around which the rest of the publishing year orbited, but it was far from the only seasonal feature. For Irish publications, there was also a St. Patrick's Day special issue, again typically a double issue with appropriately themed stories and articles. But midsummer, Halloween and Easter also offered opportunities for themed content, even when they did not warrant special issues. Editors such as Bodkin reminding would-be contributors to the *Irish Packet* that seasonally-themed work needed to be submitted well in advance of its publication date were therefore outlining one of the most marked features of the popular press.

Meeting the industry's need for seasonally themed material appears to have been the main basis for the careers of several of the writers considered in this discussion. A businesslike understanding of the importance of seasonal topics and a willingness to produce appropriate material in good time for editorial deadlines characterised much of their work, and in some cases that seasonal material constituted a significant proportion of their publications. Haddie McMahon's story "The Lucky Little Leaf," published in the *Irish Packet* in 1905, was a shamrock-themed tale for the magazine's St. Patrick's Day double issue. Similarly, in March 1909 *Ireland's Own* published M. Evelyn Cuthbert's story "St Patrick's Day in the Morning," and another of her tales, entitled "Kitty's Shamrock," appeared in their 1912 St. Patrick's Day issue.²⁷ It was Maud E. Sargent, however, whose publishing ca-

reer was most marked by the production of seasonal material. During the 1890s most of her publications were in the weekly editions of the *Cork Examiner* and the *Irish Times* (weekly editions of newspapers in general often published short fiction and general interest articles), and in 1898 alone she published a short story in the *Weekly Irish Times* in March entitled “The Four Leafed Clover” followed by articles on “The Folklore of Midsummer” in July, “Summer Pastimes of Our Ancestors” in August, “Ancient Harvest Customs” in September, “All Hallow Eve Customs” in October, and both “The Winter Amusements of Our Ancestors” and “Quaint New Year Customs” in December.²⁸ These kinds of articles were the “filler” pieces which bulked out the pages of all the popular press on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. Often culled from encyclopaedias and other reference books, then rewritten for a general readership, they were a staple of the New Journalism style, with their emphasis upon an informative but informal tone. The careers of Mc-Mahon, Cuthbert and Sargent indicate that providing this necessary “filler” copy, written in an appropriate style about seasonal topics (and filed well in advance of printing deadlines), was one of the ways that freelance writers could earn a small but steady income from publications with pages to fill every week or every month.

It is clear from the “advice to authors” provided by editors such as Bodkin that the requirements for long-term planning and an understanding of the rhythms of the printing and publishing industries had to be emphasised and patiently but firmly taught to budding authors. Other advice was offered too, relating to type and quality of material which contributors might hope to get published. The *Irish Packet* occasionally made specific requests for stories, such as Bodkin’s announcement in 1903 that he was “at present prepared to give the most favourable consideration to a stirring serial, for preference a story of Irish life and adventure by an Irish author.”²⁹ But more general advice was also given to readers on how they might expect to get published in other publications as well. The editor of *Ireland’s Own* recommended that when preparing to submit a manuscript to a magazine, contributors should “see that you send the sort of work that the particular magazine publishes.”³⁰ A couple of months later, he reminded authors that editors would look more favourably upon work which was of approximately the same word count as their usual material, so that it would better fit the page layout of the publication. Advising them to do rough estimates of the word counts of their own manuscripts, he added for comparison purposes that each column of *Ireland’s Own* contained ap-

proximately 700 words.³¹ Writers who successfully absorbed this kind of advice were also absorbing an understanding of the mass media industry's complex market segmentation, as well as of the technologically driven requirements of typesetting and printing involved in its production.

Aspiring Irish writers were much more likely to write contemporary romances and "social comedy" stories than to produce historical fiction or sensation thrillers. This was presumably because these genres were slightly easier to produce for writers without detailed historical knowledge or experience of handling complex plots. Also, nearly all of the stories were set in Ireland or among Irish communities in England—suggesting perhaps that not only were their authors writing about what they knew, but also that both they and the editors who published them knew that an Irish setting, Irish characters and Irish concerns were what readers sought from Irish magazines. McMahan, Cuthbert, Norman and both Sargent sisters tended to write these kinds of stories when they wrote fiction. Irish-set sentimental romances of various kinds were the most common genre of fiction for all of them. Most of these were approximately 3,000 words long and were complete short stories, although McMahan did publish a serial romance in *Colleen* magazine in 1909, itself a sign both that she was a fairly confident writer and that the editor considered her to be well known and well liked by Irish readers, since serials were intended to help guarantee sales as readers eager to discover the story's ending returned for each instalment. Aside from this more ambitious tale, her 1912 story for *Ireland's Own*, "The Way of Love," about an Irish journalist living and working in London who is reunited with his sweetheart from home after twenty years of pining for each other, was entirely typical of the kind of short fiction published by lesser-known freelance writers. It is worth recalling that however unoriginal these tales were, they nevertheless required a clear understanding by their authors of the codes and conventions of their genre in order to be successful—indeed, the formulaic nature of the romances written by McMahan and the other women was in itself a demonstration of their professional approach to writing. Along with absorbing those editorial injunctions to submit legible copy on time and of appropriate length, writers such as these who succeeded in being published had also learned the generic conventions of the popular press.

Freelance Writing & Women's Work

Given how difficult it was for most aspiring writers even to get published, let alone to earn a living from their writing, it is worth considering why so many of them continued to bombard editors with articles and manuscripts, and especially why so many women did so. Cynical observers believed that this was because writing was perceived by women to be “easy.” In 1904, for example, the extremely conservative *Society Pictorial and Irish Court Journal* (whose intended readership is evident from its title) published an attack on all working women, whom it described as “bread-snatchers,” but reserved particular derision for women writers and journalists, claiming that “the girl does not exist who thinks she would not make a journalist.... Then the editor, who is to be the victim, is found. He is bombarded with ponderous essays on ‘Pride’ or ‘Truth’ ... he asks for typed ‘copy’ and an illegible scrawl is sent ... he goes to press on Wednesday morning, and the contribution arrives on Wednesday night....”³²

In reality of course, as the examples of McMahon, Norman and Cuthbert show, many of the women who were submitting articles and stories to editors were already employed and often working in literate environments. For example, both McMahon and Norman worked as typists—as did both of their sisters. Cuthbert was a teacher—but her sister was also a typist, and her brother was a clerk, as was McMahon’s brother. In most cases then, these writers already lived and worked in a highly literate (if not literary) environment, and especially in the case of those who worked as typists, they did so under very specific circumstances. Typists, like clerks, were working in offices which required the production of written materials according to specific instructions—in a specific format and in time for specific deadlines. This was a truly industrial production of writing. As such, typists would already have been adept at grasping and following not just the specific instructions for authors outlined by editors such as Bodkin of the *Irish Packet*, but also their underlying principles of professional codes and conventions, industrial time and industrialised production methods. Given that there is evidence that young female typists tended to be fairly well educated, it is perhaps hardly surprising that some of the more successful freelance writers of the period were drawn from their ranks. It is also worth noting that some of their stories were about office life and had clerks and typists as their central characters. In 1908 Norman published “A Typist’s Dilemma” in *Ireland’s Own*. The heroine is Miss Mervyn, a legal typist left alone in her office late at night to complete

some highly confidential client documents. The story centres on her sense of responsibility to protect those documents when a visitor arrives claiming to have permission to see them. The story ends with her employer being told by his client that he “is to be congratulated on his most loyal little typist...!”³³ This depiction of a typist as a courageous and dedicated employee is hardly surprising considering that both the author herself and her sister were themselves typists.

Although Cuthbert worked as a teacher, her sister’s experiences as a typist may well have influenced her story “St Patrick’s Day in the Morning” (published in the St. Patrick’s Day special issue of *Ireland’s Own* in 1909), a romance which told the story of a young Dublin woman who loses her money and is forced to move to London to work as a typist; the experience is presented as drudgery rather than liberation, ending when the man who has loved her all along “rescues” her from office life by proposing marriage.³⁴ Cuthbert also wrote another story, entitled “Love and a Hat,” which was published in the *Drapers’ Assistant* (the journal of the Irish Drapers’ Assistants’ Association, a proto-trade union) the following year; it adopted a similarly unsentimental attitude to the life of a “shop girl,” one of the other celebrated occupations of the New Woman. “Love and a Hat” tells the story of a shop girl who is also rescued from her job by marriage, this time to a wealthy customer.³⁵ Cuthbert’s fiction strongly suggested a harsh reality underlying women’s (often glamorised) work in both offices and shops, thus making an escapist marriage seem more attractive; many of her readers in the *Drapers’ Assistant* and *Ireland’s Own* would have had first-hand experience of such work themselves, and might well have been extremely receptive to the idea of a romantic “rescue” from it.

In 1913, Nellie M. Sargent published one of the more extreme examples of these “rescue” romances in *Ireland’s Own*. “Come Back to Erin” was the tale of Nora Casey, an Irish farmer’s daughter who moves to Liverpool in order to work as a typist in a family-owned business. However, when the owner discovers that his son has been courting Nora, he fires her, angrily telling his son that he should not “get your name coupled with a common, designing Irish girl.” Without a reference, she is unable to secure further office work, and is instead forced to take a much less prestigious job as a live-in barmaid at the White Arab Hotel for a salary of just seven shillings a week. On her first night behind the bar, “the smell of stale liquor and tobacco was overpowering, and ... the men who came in were noisy and joked in a way which, although harmless enough, made the refined Irish girl feel hot and uncomfort-

able." Almost immediately the blamelessly modest Nora attracts the amorous attention of Miller Ebon, a "showily-dressed" black boxer. "She shuddered. She had all the Irish hatred of niggers. The horrible black face, with the cruel eyes, and the great coarse lips disgusted her." Her disgust is not lessened on being told that his previous wife had also been a barmaid, who had died after he had "kicked her downstairs in a drunken fury." Because Ebon is one of the richest men in Liverpool, Nora is told that she must "make herself agreeable," but just as he grabbed her hand in an attempt to kiss it, "before the wretch could realise what was happening he was seized from behind and flung heavily to the floor." Her saviour is her former sweetheart from Ireland, who was visiting Liverpool with the Hibernian Hurling Club and happened to be passing the White Arab Hotel at the vital moment. They return to Ireland together to be married, as her mother comments approvingly that "dear old Ireland is the best place for any colleen to be."³⁶ This story not only used the familiar structure of "rescue" romances for young women in uncongenial employment, but also made considerable use of the sensationalist style popular in "story papers" of the era, many of which employed narratives of violence, sexual titillation and lurid depictions of race and ethnicity. "Come Back to Erin" was a very graphic example of those lurid depictions of race, but was not particularly exceptional. Popular fiction of the early twentieth century regularly deployed overtly racist language and plots, whether in the very successful "imperial adventure" stories usually set in Africa or India, the "Wild West" cowboy stories set on the American frontier, or the genres varying from social comedies to detective stories which incorporated the casual anti-Semitism of the time. Irish story papers such as *Ireland's Own* (the paper in which "Come Back to Erin" appeared) published examples of all of these kinds of racially charged stories, and they were evidently as popular with Irish readers as they were in the English or American publishing markets.

Deeply unsentimental views of the paid work available to women may also help to explain the appeal of writing to many of those who were, like Cuthbert, attempting to be professional authors. Not only would the income it brought in have been appreciated by women in otherwise poorly paid jobs, but for at least some of them there must also have been an aspiration—however unrealistic—to escape from those jobs altogether through their publishing success. The apparent autonomy and pleasant working conditions of an author or journalist would have been especially appealing to women trapped in uncongenial

office or teaching work. As we have seen McMahon continued her writing career after her marriage; it was also one of the few forms of paid employment that could be engaged in discreetly by married women who needed to contribute to their household incomes. Given how many types of work were still effectively closed to women, practical necessity and the need for income wherever it could be sought must have been the most significant factor in many women's decisions to attempt journalism and popular fiction. Nevertheless, being a writer clearly had a particular appeal (to men and women) in the early twentieth century, one which went far beyond its possible financial rewards. This is evident from the sheer number of unsolicited manuscripts hopefully submitted to editors, this excessive supply (often of unpublishable quality) resulting in that buyers' market for all forms of freelance journalism.

What is also evident about the enthusiasm for writing by this time is that it extended very far beyond women brought up in what might have been considered "literary" social circles, or even in those sections of society in which their fathers and brothers would have had a university education and therefore access to a scholarly or literary culture. Their generation of women, born in the 1870s and 1880s, were the ones who first began to gain access (slowly and with great difficulty) to university education, along with some of the traditional professions such as law and medicine. But for the most part, the women who achieved this were from families whose male members already had these educational and professional opportunities. By contrast, the women whose work is considered in this article were from a very different social class. Relatively privileged within broader society, and especially by contrast to the grinding poverty of the Dublin slums, their economic and cultural backgrounds were very modest by comparison to those of most literary writers of the time. The Irish poet and activist Alice Milligan, for example, who co-founded the radical feminist and nationalist *Shan Van Vocht* journal in the 1890s, was the daughter of a banker, writer and antiquary. She studied at King's College London for a year and had early access to political and cultural circles which included Roger Casement and Bulmer Hobson.³⁷ This socio-economic background, along with access to wider cultural networks, would have been fairly typical for "literary" women writers of the era, however marginalised they often were within those networks. By comparison, the women discussed here were the daughters of accountants and middle-ranking bureaucrats, whose male relatives were not university educated, whose brothers were clerks rather than bankers or doctors, and who in sever-

al cases were themselves clerical workers—they would therefore have had little or no opportunity to join Ireland’s intellectual and cultural networks.³⁸ With the exception of Nellie Sargent’s membership of the Writers’ Club after she moved to London, there is no evidence of any of these writers having access to a wider community of writers and journalists—and as women writers without family connections, they would have been doubly excluded from such networks.

Concerning Motivations

Despite this apparent isolation from literary or journalist circles, McMahon, Cuthbert, Norman and the Sargent sisters not only began writing, but continued to do so for several decades in most cases, as did many other freelance writers who were not part of a community of writers. Aside from the (sometimes very small) financial rewards, what could have motivated these women to seek a career as writers? What motivated them sufficiently that they patiently learned the conventions and structures of the very demanding publishing industry? One partial answer might be that it was the publishing industry itself that inspired many readers to attempt careers as writers. New Journalism in general was characterised by a more intimate tone of address to readers, and also by editorial encouragements for readers to “write back” in various ways. Letters to the editor, question-and-answer columns and prize competitions all established a two-way communication between magazine and reader, and the experience of seeing their name in print in the letters or prizes page may well have emboldened some readers to consider contributing more substantial work for publication. McMahon, Norman and Cuthbert were all at some point readers of *Lady of the House*, the principal Irish women’s magazine. This is known because all three of them participated in one of that magazine’s most long-running features, a discussion column entitled “The Women’s Parliament,” in which a topic would be proposed for discussion each month, with selected responses from readers published in the following issue. The “Parliament” column—in its time covering topics as diverse as “Is Independence Good for Women?” “Is Vegetarianism Right?” and “What Is Woman’s Greatest Bar to Progress?”—was one of the magazine’s liveliest features, often attracting significant correspondence. Between 1902 and 1905, McMahon, Cuthbert and Norman all had contributions to “Parliament” debates published in *Lady of the House*, demonstrating that they were very engaged readers as well as writers of magazine copy.³⁹

In addition, women's magazines in the era of New Journalism combined this "encouraging" tone with a growing emphasis upon writers as celebrities, and especially upon women writers. This was partly due to the scale of fame possible for any very successful writer in a mass media age, with enormous print runs of newspapers and magazines as well as cheap mass editions of novels. Women's magazines also included a great many writers among those women interviewed or profiled as a result of having become successful in public life. Margaret Beetham has described the way that this format grew from an older tradition of columns about "notable women."⁴⁰ By the late nineteenth century, however, more dynamic profiles were common as interviews often took place in subjects' homes and were reported with direct speech and often illustrated with photographs. As Fionnuala Dillane argues, "the interview exemplifies the combined features of New Journalism: in its layout it capitalized on advances in illustration techniques ... to personalise further interview pieces; it commonly used headlines and cross-heads to break up the interview into neat parcels for easy consumption; and of course the content itself involves personal conversation, anecdotes, and the cultivation of intimacy."⁴¹

Women writers were one of the principal categories of "notable women" regularly and enthusiastically profiled in women's magazines by the turn of the twentieth century. *Lady of the House* ran interviews with the Irish writers L. T. Meade and Elsa D'Esterre-Keeling during 1892 and a profile of the British writer Edna Lyall's 1893 visit to Ireland to research her Irish-themed novel *Doreen: The Story of A Singer*.⁴² In the case of the female writers profiled, of course women's magazines also published a great deal of their writing too, adding to readers' sense of their public presence. The influence of these early forms of female celebrity, centred especially around writers, artists and performers, can be seen in a survey conducted by *Lady of the House* in 1903, which asked readers to declare their "highest ambition to be as a woman." Of the sixty-five responses they reported on, just under half saw their highest ambition as being wives and mothers. The remainder were divided among a range of ambitions outside the home, including nursing and the very straightforward "making money," but it is striking that of these, some of the most frequently cited were those which reflected this growing category of celebrity artist or performer. Five readers wanted to be writers, seven to be singers and another seven to be musicians.⁴³ It seems likely that one of the reasons for these ambitions was that women writers, performers and musicians were among the

early celebrities created by mass-media interviews, syndicated articles about the performances and activities of “stars,” and the increasing use of celebrity endorsements by the rapidly developing advertising industry. The early twentieth century was a transitional moment in the mass media’s creation and use of celebrities. Where previously royalty and the aristocracy had been almost the only the subjects of panegyric articles describing their lifestyles, activities and dress, by the turn of the century it was becoming increasingly common for actors, singers and writers to be the subjects of similar treatment. As both cinema and advertising developed, this shift towards celebrities drawn from arts and performance would only increase.

In all cases, there was a strong focus upon female celebrities—this had always been true of the coverage of royalty and the aristocracy, where there was a particular emphasis in women’s magazines upon lengthy descriptions of their gowns and hairstyles, and also of their glamorous lifestyles and the interior décor of their homes. As the category of celebrity expanded and shifted to include actresses, singers and writers, women’s magazines maintained a similar emphasis upon profiling or interviewing women celebrities, and advertisers recruited these women to market products to female customers, thereby helping to create an aura of glamour around their lives and work. As Margaret Beetham has pointed out, “women’s magazines and papers routinely used female by-lines and built advertising campaigns around the name of female writers.”⁴⁴ The fact that the same magazines publishing women writers’ work were also publishing interviews with and articles about those writers, as well as their endorsement of products, would all have combined to bring writing—as an apparently attractive and lucrative career—to the attention of women readers. One example of these celebrity women writers (though now almost entirely forgotten) was Henrietta Stannard, who published as John Strange Winter. A prolific author of novels, stories and plays, her initial success was based on a novel entitled *Bootles’ Baby: A Story of the Scarlet Lancers* (1885), which was later turned into both a play and then a film. By the turn of the twentieth century she was also the subject of interviews and profile articles, and was included in Helen C. Black’s 1893 book *Notable Women Authors of the Day*.⁴⁵ She was also the first president of the Writers’ Club (founded in 1892) in London, the same women’s club Nellie Sargent was using as her correspondence address in 1915. By 1907 she was publishing a weekly column in the magazine *Irish Society and Social Review*, entitled “What I Think,” and this was her-

alded by an interview with her in that journal, predictably described by the interviewer as a “long chat over the tea-cups” in her “pleasant flat” in London.⁴⁶ By that year she was also advertising “John Strange Winter’s Hair Food,” which was sold via a company called John Strange Winter Ltd. What had begun as a pen name to disguise her gender had become a brand name which emphasised it, especially as the advertisements included her photograph.⁴⁷ So successful was she that after her death in 1911, her husband (Arthur Stannard) continued to exploit the brand by publishing columns using her name, but entitled “From a Husband’s Chair.”⁴⁸

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The women discussed in this article each had their own personal motivations and experiences of writing which must remain opaque to us at this historical distance, especially as only their basic biographical information is available. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn about the vast and rarely discussed field of freelance writers and journalists whose work filled the majority of early-twentieth-century periodicals and newspapers. Aside from their gender—itsself a reflection of the growing number of women producing commercial writing—the women discussed above were all from almost identical socio-economic backgrounds. All of them were members of the Protestant, urban middle classes, probably educated to a fairly high standard until their midteens, and with fathers and brothers who were white-collar workers. Nevertheless, they were from the lower rungs of this particular socio-economic group—their male relatives did not go to university, and often worked in clerical rather than professional jobs. The Sargent sisters from Cork appear never to have done paid work other than their writing, but McMahan, Norman and Cuthbert all worked outside the home. While some or all of them may have done so because they were among the increasing number of women in that era who wanted to work, it is likely that they also needed the wages they earned. At the time of the 1901 census for example, not only were McMahan and her two adult sisters all working as typists (while their teenage brother was working as an insurance clerk), but they also shared their family home with two boarders. Their home was in the very prosperous middle-class Dublin suburb of Rathmines, but as a household of nine with only one servant, headed by a widow who was taking in boarders and whose adult sons and daughters were all doing clerical work, they were living on the very edges of middle-class status.

This precarious middle-class identity may well have motivated the professional writing not only of these women, but also of many other of the forgotten or anonymous freelance writers (male and female) of the period. Typically educated until their midteens, they would have been highly literate and had a sufficient range of cultural reference to allow the construction of basic plots, understand the conventions of different writing genres, and use libraries and reference sources to produce “copy” for articles. Moreover, those with experience of paid employment (especially clerical work) would also have become accustomed to meeting deadlines, proofreading and correcting text, and writing prose on demand. All of these skills would have assisted them in writing successfully for the commercial press.

This is not to suggest that the women discussed in this article are in any way broadly representative of the literally unfathomable number of freelance writers and journalists working in Ireland or Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. There were so many of those writers that they must have been a varied workforce in terms of demographics, motivations and personal experiences. As was noted at the start of this discussion, this selection of writers is therefore intended to be illustrative rather than representative, and the conclusions which can be drawn based upon their work and biographies are even more so. Nevertheless, it is hoped that their career patterns, when combined with some of their biographical information, shed light upon the ways the popular press of the era filled its weekly and monthly pages, and in particular upon the ways in which the structures and styles of New Journalism may have encouraged women readers to become writers. They might also serve to remind us of how atypical was the experience of writers whose work was either critically acclaimed or commercially profitable.

Notes

1. Haddie McMahan, “The Lucky Little Leaf,” *Irish Packet*, 18 March 1905, 597–99.
2. The fiction published weekly by the story papers *Ireland’s Own*, the *Irish Packet* and the *Irish Emerald* alone would have amounted to at least 50,000 words a week, and weekly editions of newspapers such as the *Irish Times* and the *Cork Examiner* also published stories.
3. Sarah Lonsdale, “Man of Letters, Literary Lady, Journalist or Reporter? Contributors to the new mass press and the evolving role of the writer 1880–1920,” *Media History* (December 2014), 1–2.
4. See <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/> for the Irish census returns for both 1901 and 1911. Born Emily Harriet McMahan in 1877 and brought up in Rathgar in Dublin, she married the Rev-

erend Alfred Pocock in 1907 and moved with him to Britain, where they lived in York, London and eventually Liverpool.

5. See <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/> for the Irish census returns for both 1901 and 1911 and Nellie M. Sargent, "Not Wanted," *Ireland's Own*, 21 July 1915, 2–4, in which Sargent gives her address as the Writers' Club, London.

6. See <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/> for the Irish census returns for both 1901 and 1911, and Catriona Crowe, *Dublin 1911* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2011), 71–76, for a discussion of the suffragist boycott of the census.

7. In all likelihood, their output was considerably more than this, given that many of their most frequent publications were in popular story papers which in many instances (including *Ireland's Own* and the *Irish Packet*) have not been digitized and are therefore difficult to search comprehensively.

8. In 1909 a new women's magazine, the *Colleen*, began with a serial by Haddie McMahon entitled "Love Conquers." Advertisements and reports of the new magazine made significant mention of McMahon's inclusion, making it clear that readers were presumed to know her work. See "The Colleen," *Ireland's Own*, 10 February 1909, 21. No copies of the *Colleen* appear to have survived.

9. Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 205.

10. Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: Social History of the English Novel, 1876–1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), 45.

11. Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, "Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story," *ELT*, 58.3 (2015), 291–312.

12. Keating, *The Haunted Study*, 50.

13. Lonsdale, "Man of Letters, Literary Lady, Journalist or Reporter?" 267.

14. Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 65.

15. Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 35.

16. See <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/> for returns for the Irish census for both 1901 and 1911.

17. Keating, *The Haunted Study*, 51.

18. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 21 February 1912, 21.

19. Stephanie Rains, "Going in for Competitions: active readers and magazine culture, 1900–1910," *Media History*, 21.2 (2015), 138–49. 10.1080/13688804.2014.995611.

20. Matthias McDonnell Bodkin, "A Chat with the Editor. An Aside to Contributors," *Irish Packet*, 31 October 1903, 115.

21. "The Man the Printer Loves," *Irish Packet*, 3 October 1903, 9.

22. "A Chat with the Editor," *Irish Packet*, 10 October 1903 and 9 December 1905, 271.

23. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 21 February 1912, 21.

24. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 3 October 1906, 7.

25. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 11 January 1911, 21.

26. See Nicholas Daly, *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City: Paris, London, New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80–81, for a discussion of the establishment of Christmas as a focal point of the publishing calendar.

27. M. Evelyn Cuthbert, "St Patrick's Day in the Morning," *Ireland's Own*, March (St. Patrick's Day) 1909, 10–11 and also "Kitty's Shamrock," *Ireland's Own*, 20 March 1912, 8–9.

28. Maud E. Sargent, "The Four Leafed Clover," *Weekly Irish Times*, 19 March 1898, 4; "The Folklore of Midsummer," *Weekly Irish Times*, 9 July 1898, 9; "Summer Pastimes of our Ancestors," *Weekly Irish Times*, 27 August 1898, 2; "Ancient Harvest Customs," *Weekly Irish Times*, 17 September 1898, 4; "All Hallow Eve Customs," *Weekly Irish Times*, 29 October 1898, 3; "The Winter Amusements of Our Ancestors," *Weekly Irish Times*, 3 December 1898, 4; and "Quaint New Year Customs," *Weekly Irish Times*, 31 December 1898, 4.

29. Matthias McDonnell Bodkin, "A Chat with the Editor," *Irish Packet*, 21 November 1903, 178.
30. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 28 February 1912, 21.
31. "Our Readers' Page," *Ireland's Own*, 3 April 1912, 21.
32. "The Social Onlooker," *Society Pictorial and Irish Court Journal*, 3 December 1904, 534.
33. Eleanore G. Norman, "A Typist's Dilemma," *Ireland's Own*, 13 May 1908, 8–9.
34. M. Evelyn Cuthbert, "St. Patrick's Day in the Morning," *Ireland's Own*, March (St. Patrick's Day), 1909, 10–11.
35. Evelyn M. Cuthbert, "Love and a Hat," *Drapers' Assistant*, 8.8 (November 1910), 9–11.
36. Nellie M. Sargent, "Come Back to Erin," *Ireland's Own*, 24 September 1913, 2–4.
37. Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012).
38. See R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014) for detailed discussions of the literary and political worlds in Ireland immediately before independence. While socialist political circles drew people from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, the more avant-garde literary and theatrical communities of which W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Alice Milligan were a part tended to be more upper-middle-class, with higher levels of private income and formal education.
39. McMahon's letter to "The Women's Parliament" of *Lady of the House* was published in October 1902, Cuthbert's in June 1903, and Norman's in April 1904.
40. Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Women's Magazine 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), 128.
41. Fionnuala Dillane, "A fair field and no favour': Hulda Friedrichs, the Interview, and the New Woman," in *Women in Journalism at the Fin de Siècle: Making a Name for Herself*, F. Elizabeth Gray, ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 149–50.
42. "Interview with Mrs L T Meade—authoress," *Lady of the House*, May 1892, 2; "Distinguished Irishwomen: Elsa D'Esterre-Keeling," *Lady of the House*, November 1892, 1–2; and "Edna Lyall," *Lady of the House*, May 1893, 6.
43. "What is Your Highest Ambition to Be as a Woman?" *Lady of the House*, March 1903, 27.
44. Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 128.
45. John Strange Winter, *Bootles' Baby: A Story of the Scarlet Lancers* (London: F. Warne & Co., 1885); and Helen C. Black, *Notable Women Authors of the Day: Biographical Sketches* (Glasgow: D. Bryce and Son, 1893).
46. "A Chat with John Strange Winter," *Irish Society and Social Review*, 13 July 1907, 2438.
47. *Irish Society and Social Review*, 16 November 1907, 3031.
48. Arthur Stannard, "From a Husband's Chair," *Irish Society and Social Review*, 3 February 1912, 144.